



Episode 77

Here Comes Everybody

Well, maybe not exactly everybody.

But close enough.

The results of the preliminary rounds -- that is, the names of those who have made it into the elimination rounds -- are posted late Saturday night in the four main hotels in which the participants in the tournament have been staying. They are also posted by Mr. Lo Pat on the Manhattan Lodestone web site, for the locals to access from their home computers.

For the record, eleven of the twelve Round Robinskis have broken in LD, once again proving that either their early rounds gave them a leg up on the regulars, or that their exceptional ability did in fact warrant their participation in those early rounds in the first place: the debate, if you'll pardon the expression, is eternal. The lone exception to the Robinski success, on not seeing his name on the list, begins a bitter evening of detailing his claim that he has been unmercifully shafted, although he is not quite sure yet how and by whom.

Other breakers include Chesney Nutmilk from Bisonette Technical, Griot Goldbaum and Jasmine Maru from Nighten Day, Had Fleece from Toulouse-Lautrec, Invoice O'Connor from Veil of Ignorance, Tilde Hyphen-Emdash from Algren-on-the-Beach, and Chip Dwindle from Farnsworth Catholic.

Congratulations, all.

You've got a big day ahead of you tomorrow.

Willkommen, Bienvenue, Welcome

The Sunday morning of the Manhattan Lodestone Original Vaganza dawns clear and bright. The turmoils of the storms of the last two days have subsided, replaced by the calm of a sun that promises a warm October day, perhaps even a taste of Indian Summer.

For the tournament participants, this is the day of the break rounds. Only those who have survived the preliminaries will debate today, and three of them, one LDer and one Policy team, will take significant tin before the sun sets this evening. But anyone who breaks, if they can survive as far as octofinals, will collect a limb of their quest for the Combat of Conquerors in the spring. Different tournaments offer COC limbs at different levels of achievement in both LD and Policy; at the Vaganza, a large, national tournament, the level is most generous, covering the octofinalist competitors in both divisions. Some tournaments give limbs at quarters, some at semis, and a few have their limbs cut off at the finalist level. The COC qualification -- that is, how well you have to do to achieve a limb -- in many cases is the defining element of the caliber of a tournament. In debate terms, COC limbs separate the big tournament fish from the forensics guppies. COCs at octos, as at the Vaganza, is as big as a debate fish can get.

Mr. Lo Pat is well aware of his position in the debate hierarchy. At seven-thirty, half an hour before the first round of the day is scheduled, he is parked directly inside the front door of the Lodestone building, the schematic of the double-octo round in front of him on a small table, next to a neatly stacked pile of ballots. He will personally hand out the assignments and ballots to the judges for this one round. Normally he remains behind the scenes, running the myriad aspects of the weekend in addition to the competition, but for this one piece of the tournament he feels that his personal oversight is required. The reason for this is simple. Not everyone has broken into the elimination rounds, but regardless of this, every judge is required to honor one judging assignment past their own team's participation in the tournament. Even if your kids are out, you are still in, one mo' time. In order to fill all the judging slots, which are now three for each round, everybody has to show up who is supposed to show up. Everyone knows who is still in, but the judging assignments are only made known this morning. Conceivably, a judge, let's say a coach whose team is no longer in the event, might not show up this morning. Why bother, if the personal commitment is no longer there? Which is why Mr. Lo Pat himself sits behind the door. Woe to the judge, especially a coach, who is scheduled but does not show! There is no penalty, other than the wrath of Mr. Lo Pat. But that wrath is unavoidable, eternal, and deadly. Few judges, including coaches who may wish to be invited back to the Vaganza next year, or hired college students expecting to pick up a check on their way out tonight, would think even for a moment about not showing up this morning.

And they do show up. And Mr. Lo Pat smiles at all of them and hands them their ballots and checks their names off his list.

Once again divinity has done its job, and the double-octo rounds can begin on time, as they have consistently for the last seventeen years.

Which is how Mr. Lo Pat got to be a god in the first place.

In Debate There are no Mortal Sins

"You're a-gonna what?" the old woman asks.

"I'm going to a debate tournament."

"On a Sunday?" Ham Senior asks over the top of his coffee mug. His eyes are barely open, and in his early morning dishevelment he is wearing only his striped terry cloth bathrobe, half undone, exposing his unappetizing hairy chest.

"It's a big tournament in the city," Ham Junior explains. "Really good rounds. A lot of people are going to go and watch them and try to learn something."

"Since when did you ever want to go anywhere to learn anything?" his father asks.

"Leave him alone," Grandma Buglaroni says. She is standing at the stove, stirring a pot of oatmeal. "He's a good-a debater. He's a winner. With a trophy. If he wants-a to go watch, what you call them, a-rounds, he should-a go watch 'em."

"And miss church?"

"Like-a you ever care if you miss-a church, Mr. Big Time Catholic all of a sudden."

"I go to church, Ma," Ham Senior says.

"You'll-a go to church when they put-a extra cement under the ceiling so it-a doesn't collapse on-a you when you go in. Mr. Big Time Catholic."

"I go most of the time." As he lights a cigarette, he turns to his son. "And besides, I'm not the point here. You're the point. And you're going to go to church."

"I gotta leave in about five minutes. I'm getting picked up. I won't have time."

"Who's picking you up?"

"Disney Davidson."

"Oh, good," his father says. "That clears that up." He blows a thin stream of smoke out of his nostrils. "Who the hell is Disney Davidson?"

"He's a Nighten Day graduate. An old-time debater. He's driving me to the train station."

"How come you're not taking the bus with the rest of the team?"

"The first round was at eight o'clock. They, like, left at six-thirty this morning."

"You want-a some oatmeal?" Grandma Buglaroni asks, holding up the pot.

"I just have time for toast."

She shakes her head, then walks over to the table, spooning some of the gluey gray glop into the empty bowl in front of her son-in-law.

"I don't want any oatmeal this morning either," Ham Senior mumbles.

"Shut up," Grandma Buglaroni replies. "Eat."

Ham Senior crushes his cigarette into the ashtray next to his coffee mug. "You know I don't like oatmeal--"

A car horn honks outside the kitchen window.

"Gotta run," Buglaroni says, jumping up and grabbing his backpack. He manages to plant a kiss on his grandmother's cheek before he disappears out the door.

"I can't believe you don't care if he misses church," Ham Senior says.

The old woman stands over him, the oatmeal pot in one hand, a wooden spoon in the other. "Shut up. Eat."

Ham Senior shuts up and eats.

Take a Train, Take a Boat, Take a Plane, Ride a Goat

Elimination rounds at the Original Vaganza attract every interested observer who can in any way, shape or form get there for the festivities. The reason for this is simple: this is the best conglomeration of debaters gathered in the Northeast from around the country until King Ivy at the end of the season. There is both educational and, for those who find it so, entertainment value, in watching these final rounds, both in Policy and in LD.

Veil of Ignorance, with its juggernaut Policy team, ships a full busload of students down on Sunday morning, from novices through top varsity. Two Veil Policy teams have broken, in addition to Invoice in LD. For the first time in recent memory, the Veil bus is divided. Lisa Torte and Invoice O'Connor are sitting together in the front seat. There is an empty seat behind them, and another across from them. Then the Policy kids take up every other seat. No one planned it this way; it just happened.

Nighten Day manages to field enough interested parties to wrangle a small van-bus. In addition to Tarnish Jutmoll and his two breakers, Jasmine and Griot, he is transporting Camelia Maru and the Tarleton twins. He also understands from Disney Davidson that Disney and Buglaroni will be taking the train down and meeting them at Lodestone for a ride home.

Amnea and Chesney Nutmilk drive down in Amnea's yellow Volvo, with Worm Padrewski asleep in the back seat. Gloria Fudless and Binko are making their own arrangements, but Binko has sword to Amnea that they will be there.

Teams that stayed in the local hotels have only to roll out of bed and into Lodestone a block or two away. The nicest thing about a Manhattan tournament is that there is no dearth of hotel rooms; the nastiest thing about a Manhattan tournament is that there is no such thing as a cheap hotel room. More than a few of the participants at the Vaganza travel outside their local area only once a year, exhausting their limited funds quickly at this one blow-out event.

At the Plaza Hotel, the question of funds is not so prominent. Hans Castorp's and Clavdia Chauchet's suites are being paid for by their studio.

Jon Marcellus, aka Binko, picks up Gloria Fudless at her house at eight a.m. It is the earliest either of them have been awake on a Sunday morning in the last decade. Binko's Harley roars through Gloria's peaceful neighborhood of boxy raised-ranch houses with their air of post-war suburban-expansion-forever futility, scraping to a skidding halt in her gravel driveway. Gloria, completely dressed in black leather, is out of her front door before Binko can point his bike out toward the road again. They are gone before anyone else in the predominately Baptist neighborhood realizes why their sabbath has been so rudely disturbed.

On the train from points north to Manhattan, Disney Davidson and Hamlet P. Buglaroni sit together in silence. Buglaroni stares unreceptively out the window, the sights passing him by without making any impression on his consciousness. It would surprise both his father and his grandmother to know that he is thinking about church. He is remembering when he was a kid, and every Sunday Grandma Buglaroni cleaned him up and put a clip-on tie around his neck and the two of them would walk up the aisle right to the front pew. And they would pray and listen to the priests give their sermons, and maybe they would stop on the way home at the bakery and pick up some fresh rolls or a cake or a long loaf of Italian bread still warm from the oven. He believed everything the priests told him about God and the Church back then; he had no reason to doubt any of it. The thing is, even though he doesn't believe all of it anymore, he still believes a healthy portion of it. And maybe now he and his grandmother only go to church together when her health is up to it, and often he says he's going alone to vigil masses on Saturday evenings but he only walks as far as halfway to the church, stopping instead at one of his friends' houses to shoot the breeze and play video games or something. But he wonders if he's making a mistake. Does growing up somehow mean growing out of religion? It doesn't make sense, but it seems to happen to a lot of people.

Disney Davidson has other thoughts to ponder. He has a copy of Miss Lonelyhearts open on his lap, but he is not turning the pages. He is remembering back to his on-line chat with Gloria Fudless, the mysterious girl from the Northeastern Debate League whom he has not been able to get out of his mind. He doesn't know why, but her image has haunted him for days now. He knows that she has a boyfriend, but he doesn't care. He has to get to know her, to talk to her face-to-face. But he can't know that, well, as much as he may want to be with a girl, no matter how well he can write little comments in a chat room or by e-mail, he always gets tongue-tied when she's right in front of him. He doesn't know why or how, but he feels that dealing with girls is a skill that he has never learned, and worse, if he doesn't learn it soon, it may be too late. Which, in a perverse way, is why he decided to grab on to Buglaroni today. Disney's thinking is simple. Disney may not exactly be a lady's man, but he instinctively recognizes that compared to Buglaroni, he's Casanova, Cary Grant, Leo DiCaprio and Wilt Chamberlain combined, and that's just for starters. If he can keep Buglaroni close by, he can use the novice as a prism through which his own light can be extracted and focussed more clearly. In other words, he is going to try to make himself look good by standing next to somebody who looks bad. It won't hurt Buglaroni, and it may help him, so what's the harm?

And thus train, plane, bus, monorail, mule, jetski, pony cart, jalopy, cable car, funicular, hoverboard, shanks mare, etc., all converge on the Manhattan Lodestone OriginalVaganza Sunday elimination rounds. It will no doubt be a day to remember.

Who will win the OriginalVaganza?

What will it profit Buglaroni if he gains the whole world but suffers the loss of his immortal soul?

Will Disney get lucky with Gloria?

Is Hillary C gone yet?

The Vaganza comes to a crashing continuation in our next episode: "Flotilla: A group of ships, or Florence the Hun?"