



Episode 81

Smoke 'Em if You Got 'Em

Ref #80 The elimination rounds at a forensics tournament move with a deliberate speed quite unlike the preliminary rounds, which never seem to adhere to any preplanned schedule. Elimination rounds tend to start on time, with very short breaks in between, marching inexorably to their culmination in the awards ceremony. For some, elimination rounds are the most exciting of a tournament because of their sheer combativeness, when they or their teammates or friends are still in there fighting for survival, or because their involvement in the activity is so intense that watching any elimination round is a chance to get a line on the competition, to see and hear how the successful participants are getting the job done, and to see if there is something to learn for one's own bag of tricks. This is true regardless of the activity; elimination rounds of Dramatic Interpretation or Extemporaneous Speaking or Policy or Lincoln-Douglas or literally any forensics event bring together the top people at a tournament, demonstrating the skills that brought them to the top. Often participants in an event are chauvinistic about their own activity at the expense of other forensics activities, and there is no question that the skills involved in winning a final round of Policy are seriously different from the skills involved in winning a final round of Oral Interpretation of Poetry, but underneath, neither is harder, nor more important, nor certainly any better than the other. They are just different. Being good at any of them requires hard work, and hard work is rewarded by getting good at it. And when you're not working yourself, watching others work is also valuable, especially if those others are good workers themselves. Hence the attraction of elimination rounds. For most people.

There are, on the other hand, some forensicians whose commitment or even interest in their activity does not drive them to excel. They are in it because they are enrolled in a

class and must fulfill some marginal competitive requirement, or because they were lured by any activity that took them away from their endlessly bickering families for weekends at a time, or because their friend Eustace talked them into it and they had nothing better to do except watch Teletubby reruns so they figured what the hell. Or maybe their personal skills and talents would make them suited to Policy while the only activity their school offers is Prose/Poetry, or vice versa. This is unfortunate, but true; no Oral Interp judge wants to hear "The Raven" done at national-level Policy speed (although there is one school of Speechie thought that simply says that no Oral Interp judge ever wants to hear "The Raven" again, period). For whatever reason, these are the forensicians who are not to be found eagerly sitting in the audience during the elimination rounds. They are much more likely to be in the cafeteria complaining about the poor level of judging at this tournament, the poor level of the competition, the poor level of the food, the poor level of the desks, or the poor level of the wallpaper, all of which conspired to keep them out of the elimination rounds while lesser, undeserving mortals snuck in through blind insensitivity to these negative factors.

At the Manhattan Lodestone, which severely limits the number of entrants from any one team, and which attracts a national level of participation including top debaters in both Policy and LD from around the country, there are few of the latter sort of forensicians. The people who come to the Lodestone come to win, to watch and to learn. Which is why so many of the local schools are there on Sunday, even though their kids are not participating. It is an opportunity to see the best and the brightest, and it is an opportunity they grab eagerly.

It is early afternoon, and the semifinal LD round has just ended, when Amnea Nutmilk and Tarnish Jutmoll come out the front door of the building. The final round is scheduled in forty-five minutes, and they are grabbing this last opportunity to take a quick break. The Manhattan weather has gotten even nicer, almost summery. Binko and Disney are leaning against a wall, and the two coaches join them.

"You two look like the breath of Spring," Amnea says pleasantly.

"It's too nice a day to be cooped up in a hot debate round," Binko replies. He reaches into his pocket and extracts a pack of cigarettes. He offers them to Amnea, who takes one. Tarnish Jutmoll almost recoils when Binko next offers him the pack; Disney simply shakes his head.

"Did you enjoy the round?" Amnea asks Binko, after he lights her cigarette.

"Excellent," he replies. "Griot's on your team, isn't he, Mr. Jutmoll?"

"Yes."

"He was really good in there."

"Did you think he won?"

Binko hesitates. "Not really." He turns to Amnea. "What about you, Mrs. N.?"

"I think McGrew took it pretty solidly."

"Me too," Jutmoll agrees.

For a few minutes they discuss the fine points of the round they have just seen, evaluating precisely why they agree that Griot Goldbaum, whose trip to semis at the Lodestone is a major accomplishment sealing even further his position as a Master of the Debate Universe, was beaten by a Round Robinski named Dan McGrew, who many feel is one of the top five debaters in the country. McGrew came in second in the Round Robin, and is at the moment doing whatever it is that finalists do while they're waiting for their last round of the tournament.

While the foursome is talking, Gloria Fudless and Hamlet P. Buglaroni return to the building from their stroll in the city. They are holding hands, laughing, almost bouncing as they walk. They wave to the group as they pass through the doors, lost in their own private universe.

"Did I just see what I think I saw?" Binko asks of no one in particular.

Disney's jaw is resting uncomfortably on the top of his chest.

"I didn't think I'd ever see Buglaroni with a girl," Jutmoll mutters. He quickly tries to amend that uncoachlike statement. "Not that I mean, I mean--" He stops. He doesn't know what he means.

"I didn't think I'd ever see Gloria with a boy," Amnea replies. "At least, not that kind of boy. He... he doesn't look like her type, if you know what I mean."

"I don't think he is her type," Binko agrees. "And I don't think her boyfriend is going to think so either."

"That's right," Amnea says. "I do recall that she has some sort of boyfriend, doesn't she?"

Binko nods. "The Bark Santorelli sort. A mean customer if there ever was one. A senior. He's not going to be too happy about this."

Tarnish Jutmoll smiles. "Love comes unexpectedly," he says, exchanging a surreptitious glance with Amnea Nutmilk.

"I'm going back inside," she says to Binko. "See you at the final round?"

"Definitely."

"You're getting into this debate thing, Mr. Marcellus."

"Oh, yes, Mrs. N. Definitely."

"Good. I'm glad." She tosses away her cigarette, and she and Jutmoll reenter the building.

As soon as they are out of earshot, Disney Davidson utters the odd expletive.

"What?" Binko asks.

"I can't believe it. Buglaroni?"

Binko nods. "He's not exactly a matinee idol, I'll agree with you there."

"What does she see in him?"

"She's been going with Bark for about a million years. Buglaroni is like the anti-Bark. Maybe that's the attraction."

"I thought-- Damn!"

Binko raises an eyebrow, beginning to understand. "You thought you and Gloria? Ah. Not a good idea, Disney. Definitely not a good idea."

Disney looks at him angrily. "Why not?"

"One word answer. Bark."

"Bark."

"Bark. Trust me on this, Disney. Find your romance elsewhere." Binko lights a second cigarette. "I mean, not that I blame you or anything. Debate is okay, which really surprises me. I was thinking, you know, nerds from hell, but I'd do it enough to spruce up the old resume for the college applications, but I was wrong. I'm enjoying it. At least, so far, it's good for the brain, which I don't mind, and it's also good for the social life, if you know what I mean."

"There is no social life in debate," Disney says. "Or more to the point, if you're in debate, it is your entire social life."

"You don't see the trees for the forest, my friend."

"What?"

"Or maybe you don't see these trees because of that tree."

"What are you talking about?"

"The girls. The women. You've got some real babes around here."

"Like the one Buglaroni just snared."

"Gloria, sure. And there's others. Like those Maru sisters..."

"Jasmine and her sister?"

"They're cute."

"You're nuts."

"You don't think they're cute?"

"Yeah, well, they're good-looking, I guess. But they're like, well, at least Jasmine is. I mean, straight-arrow, work all day, work all night." He pauses to consider something. "I do think Griot has the hots for her, though, Jasmine that is, come to think of it."

"What about the other one? The younger one. Camelia."

"I really don't know her. She's a freshman. Remember, I don't go there anymore."

Binko nods. "Having a serious girlfriend would not be a bad idea."

"For your college application?"

Binko shrugs. "Whatever. Want to go back in? The final round will be starting soon."

"I'll probably have to judge it. Let's stay out here as long as we can. It may be the last summer we'll see for the next six months."

"You got it."

The two of them lean back against the wall, enjoying the warm sun beating down on their faces. They are probably right, and it probably is the last summer they'll see for the next six months.

The Rough Guide to Forensics

It is assumed by many people, incorrectly, that forensics is a fairly antiseptic activity, and that its hyper-hormonal participants -- the teen-aged students, not the coaches -- somehow manage to put their glands aside during weekend after weekend of clean, intellectual competition.

It is also assumed by many people, incorrectly, that gravity is merely an option, that Richard Nixon had a secret plan to end the war, and that there are only three Christopher Reeve Superman movies.

In other words, many people can be wrong.

It is not easy finding a place to be alone at a debate tournament, but the determined student, or more to the point, the determined pair of students, can find one sooner or later. Maybe it's a stairwell no one uses in the rear of the building, or a teacher's office inadvertently left unlocked, or the back of the stage when the auditorium is empty. At Manhattan Lodestone it's the band room, a haphazard conglomeration of sousaphones and marching drums and piccolos and glockenspiels and a couple of out-of-tune pianos and -- wonder of wonders -- a most unexpected if beat-up couch.

"Mmmmm," he says.

"Mmmmm," she replies.

"Mmmmm," he agrees wholeheartedly.

Their conversation goes on like this for some time. They get progressively more rumped, and the thoughts that go through Buglaroni's mind are a mixture of complex tactics and the simplest of strategies. He is new to this business, and he doesn't wish to demonstrate that newness, but on the other hand, his newness keeps him from getting too creative. Kissing is good, kissing is okay, more different kinds of kissing than he ever knew existed, but hands are something else altogether, and he feels that if he does anything unexpected with his hands Gloria will jump off the couch, bean him with a tenor saxophone, and leave his life completely. Her hands remain mostly behind his neck, in his hair a little bit, never below his shoulders. He establishes that shoulders must be the

hand boundary, at least for today.

Occasionally he gives himself up into the moment, but most of the time he is analyzing every move, both the ones he is making and the ones he is not making. There are many more of the latter than the former. Making out is not an easy matter, especially for a neophyte.

Especially when the neophyte has to go to the bathroom.

It isn't something you want to say. You don't wish to push the girl away in her feverish passion and whisper the sweet nothing to her that you have to visit Mrs. Murphy, or whatever words you use to euphemize the activity with. On the other hand, when you've got to go, you've got to go.

Buglaroni pulls away. "I gotta go," he says. He is slightly out of breath.

Gloria looks at him, not understanding. "Go where?"

"Go. You know. Go."

Now she understands. "Oh."

"I'll be back."

"I'll be here."

Buglaroni pops up and darts out the door. He is in the basement, and the corridor is deserted in both directions. He flips a mental coin and turns left. He estimates that he walks about three miles before finally finding a men's room.

"Whew!" His sense of relief is palpable. Too many Mountain Dew's. Whew.

When he is finished, he stands in front of the mirror and regards his reflection. He appears no different than the last time he looked at himself, but he feels that something has changed. He has become more attractive somehow. If Gloria is attracted to him, he must be attractive.

He runs his fingers through his hair, and decides that maybe he should wash his face. As he turns on the water, he is startled to hear a flush from one of the stalls behind him. He had thought he was alone down here.

He shrugs. So someone else is using the bathroom. It's a free country, isn't it?

He bends down over the sink and splashes water on his face. When he straightens, there

is a man with long hair and a baseball cap staring at his reflection.

"Oh my God," the man says with more than a hint of a German accent. "Oh my Gott!"

Buglaroni says nothing.

"You're him!" the man says. "You're the one I've been looking for."

The man is standing between Buglaroni and the door. There is no other way out of the room.

The man puts his hand on Buglaroni's arm. "Can you come with me?"

Buglaroni remains speechless. He has heard stories of strange goings-on in public lavatories, and his father has vaguely mentioned that he shouldn't say hello to anyone hanging around a mens' room, but he has personally never been accosted before, and it is hard for him to accept that it is happening now.

"Come, please. I want to show you to someone." The man tugs on his arm.

"I'm not that kind of boy," Buglaroni finally manages to mutter.

"What?"

"I said, I don't do that kind of thing."

The man looks annoyed. "Why not? I can make you a star."

"I don't want to be a star. I have a girlfriend."

"So she can come to Hollywood with you. Come. Please."

The man is forcing Buglaroni out the door now, and since their direction is more rather than less private, Buglaroni allows himself to be forced.

"Clavdia! Where are you?" the man calls out.

A large woman in a shapeless dress comes around the corner. She stops when she sees Buglaroni. "Oh my God," she says.

"I told you," the man says to Buglaroni. "You're it. You're him."

"I'm who?"

"I want you in my motion picture. You are perfect. You look perfect." The man lets go of Buglaroni's arm. "Can you act?"

"I don't know. I've never tried."

"We will test you." He turns to the woman. "We will test him. This week. You'll set it up."

"I'll set it up," the woman agrees.

The man suddenly breaks into a little jig, like a prospector who has just discovered gold in this thar hill.

"I gotta go," Buglaroni says. The other kind of go. An image of Gloria waiting for him is passing through his mind.

"Let me just get some information from you," the woman says, pulling a Filofax book from her purse.

Hans Castorp has found his movie star. Hamlet P. Buglaroni. The same Hamlet P. Buglaroni who was up until a few minutes ago lying on a couch in the band room making out with Gloria Fudless, Bisonette Technical's punk answer to the Grim Reaper.

Buglaroni? As the next Leonardo DiCaprio? The next Matt Damon? The next Paulie Shore?

There's something about Buglaroni?

Welcome to the Bahamas.

Will Binko connect with Camelia Maru?

Will Bark genially accept Gloria's relationship with Buglaroni?

Is Buglaroni really going to Hollywood with Hans and Clavdia?

Is to Knol you to love you?

As if you'll find it in our next episode: "Isthmus: Thin piece of land, or original name for Kwanzaa?"