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Hooked on Tuna

Catching up with UVM's big fish in the world of competitive debate

STORY:

Cathy Resmer



Photo: Matthew Thorsen

When the University of Vermont debate team won the national collegiate championships in 1950, its members paraded around town in a fire engine, and the mayor of Burlington gave them the key to the city.

It's difficult to imagine anyone making such a fuss over debaters these days. The act of arguing a point clearly and persuasively and responding to a cross-examination by one's ideological opponent has all but disappeared from American pop culture. Even our politicians have essentially stopped debating — can you imagine George W. Bush and John Kerry engaging in an unmoderated, 90-minute back-and-forth about foreign policy? It's no wonder that debate programs at most colleges live under the constant threat of budget cuts.

But competitive public disagreement still thrives at Groovy UV — 30 to 40 debaters join the team each year. They haven't won the national title since 1950, but plenty of plates and plaques line the walls of the team's trophy room in its Main Street campus building. The school is such a powerhouse that if you Google the word "debate," the UVM website is the first two of 17 million matches.

The program owes its good fortune to two men: Edwin Lawrence, who in the 1960s established the rare position of an endowed professorship of forensics at the University, and the man who's held that post since 1982 — Alfred "Tuna" Snider, one of the world's most widely recognized debate coaches and scholars.

In Snider's 30 years as a debate coach — he taught at several colleges before coming to UVM — he's written several textbooks, edited critical journals and traveled the globe teaching seminars on debate. He even coined, in his doctoral dissertation, the theory behind the academic sport's dominant paradigm, likening it to a game.

But debate is more than just a game to the 53-year-old Snider — it's a vehicle for social change. When he talks he sounds more like a prophet than a college professor. "I have an agenda," he admits frankly during an interview in his Clark Street apartment in Burlington. "My agenda is to fight back the darkness by trying to bring the light of human reason. I want to replace weapons with words. I want every citizen to be a debater."

That's a heavy mission, but the iconoclastic Snider also likes to have fun. His apartment is full of goofy stuff — a jar of rubber bugs, several Jesus action figures, posters of the British sci-fi show "Dr. Who." When your nickname is Tuna, you can't be serious all the time.

The ichthyologic moniker is a remnant of his junior high debating days, when someone thought he resembled a now-forgotten mobster. He doesn't mind. "As a communications scholar, I know that the name is not the thing," Snider says. "No, I don't feel I have to be dolphin-safe or come in a can." He's also no doubt aware that the name lends him an air of mystery, makes him larger than life.

Not that he needs help. Gray-bearded and heavysset, he's a big guy — "five-foot-11 and three-quarters inches," he notes precisely. A New York Times article about his summer debate camp once branded him a Santa Claus look-alike, but temperamentally he's more akin to one of the elves — a brilliant, eccentric, impossibly energetic elf.

Snider is almost always in motion; even when he's sitting his feet are constantly tapping. And he doesn't seem to spend much time sitting. Last year, he spent a whopping 133 days on the road engaging in debate-related activities. He may exceed that this year. In addition to the 12 to 15 debate tournaments he attends with his UVM crew, he also directed the national high school championships in Salt Lake City this summer. This fall he heads to Afghanistan, Istanbul and Slovenia to lead international conferences and teach debate seminars.

"I like to take debate where it's not," Snider explains. "Yeah, I've lectured at Oxford and Cambridge, but I don't really feel they need me to tell them that debate's cool and they should do it. They're all set. But I do like to go to Serbia, Chile and Mongolia. My favorite countries are dictatorships in the process of falling, or where they recently got out of a long period of authoritarian rule, to try to help introduce a culture of creative disagreement."

Ironically, that same culture can be a tough sell to American college students. Being on the debate team eats up a lot of free time — the season starts in September and ends in early April. During that time, debaters can expect to spend anywhere from five to 20 hours a week researching and honing their skills in various types of debate, including "policy" and "parliamentary." And that doesn't include traveling to four or five tournaments a semester and actually debating. Snider's students also host several public debates throughout the school year, and produce a television show called "Flashpoint" that airs three times a week on Channel 15.

But Snider doesn't have trouble finding students willing to do the work, and he seems to relish recruitment. Unlike many coaches, he doesn't lure top high school debaters to his program with the promise of scholarships — there aren't any. Instead, he seeks out novices to fill the ranks of his 28- to 40-person team.

To find them, Snider preaches the gospel of debate like a fiery evangelist. In a video called "Why Debate?" available as a download from the UVM website, he warns his listeners about the perils of the "pathetic intellectual landscape of modern America." Standing before a podium on a blackened stage, he urges young people to learn to challenge the "experts."

"The experts want to make decisions for you," he proclaims. "They will not make them in your interest. They're going to make it in their interest, or the interest of their masters. You know it. You can't rely on them. You have to think for yourself."

That philosophy worked for Snider — growing up in suburban Los Angeles he wasn't exactly a model student. "I really liked knowledge, and I liked learning, but I didn't like school," he confesses cheerfully. "I was a very serious discipline problem."

He discovered debate more or less by accident during eighth grade. Forced to choose an activity for his last class of the day — and having been kicked out of chorus — he picked debate. He competed in high school and college, placing third in the 1972 National Debate Tournament while attending Brown University.

It basically saved his butt. He keeps a framed letter from one of his advisors, who describes Snider's academic career as characterized by "unrelieved mediocrity." But debating got him into Emerson, where he was awarded an M.S. in Rhetoric and Public Address. It also took him to the University of Kansas, where he earned his Ph.D. in Communication Studies.

Besides the Brown missive, the mantle in his office holds countless trophies and plaques naming him "Coach of the Year." Nearby is a set of Mongolian drinking horns, his collection of plastic snowglobes and a watch from the prime minister of South Korea.

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A gifted public speaker, Snider uses his come-from-behind story to connect with his students. He also uses music. A former DJ on WRUV and organizer of the Vermont Reggae Fest, he teaches a popular seminar called "The Rhetoric of Reggae," and often turns to song to punctuate his points.

Take the 2003 issue of the journal *Contemporary Argumentation and Debate* — the bulk of which is devoted to a 20th-anniversary interrogation of Snider's gaming paradigm. The editors invited him to pen a retrospective, which he titled "Gamemaster: Is It You?" The essay opens with a quote from the song "Gamemaster" by an artist called Lost Tribe. The epigraph begins, "Embracing the goddess energy within yourselves / Will bring all of you to a new understanding and valuing of life..."

"I try to name all my things after song titles whenever possible," Snider explains. He just finished a book on argumentation called *Voices from the Sky*, after a song by The Moody Blues.

Snider's idiosyncrasies and his passion for debate make him more than just a good teacher. Many of his former students — including his own daughter — are currently coaching debate. And many of them say "Dr. Tuna" changed their lives. Lisa Heller, who graduated in 1994, has coached debate at Bates College and Brown University, and now teaches at Cape Cod Community College. "The debate team is one of the things that most profoundly shaped my UVM experience," Heller says. "It's basically unwittingly shaped my career, and Tuna's a big part of that."

Jillian Marty, who graduated last May, will coach debate as a grad assistant at the University of Alabama this fall. She has similar praise for Snider. "If I didn't know Tuna," says the four-term president of UVM's debate squad, "I'd probably be in New York City, still going to community college, being a part-time student, not doing much with my life."

Snider's enthusiasm for his work is on display one recent Sunday at UVM's Royall Tyler Theatre. The building holds the headquarters for the World Debate Institute, a program Snider founded in 1984. It's a month-long debate summer camp with sessions for high schoolers, college students, teachers and international students.

The building is buzzing with college kids from all over the country who have come to learn about policy debate. It's a form many debaters refer to as "mental chess" because of its emphasis on speed and strategy. In it, teams of two argue over a resolution, using file folders full of published articles as their evidence. To say the rounds are fast and furious is an understatement: Competitors speak up to 400 words a minute.

In a classroom tucked inside the theater's entrance, four young men engage in a practice round over the resolution they'll argue for the next 11 months: The United States should adopt an energy policy substantially reducing nongovernmental fossil-fuel use in the U.S.

Arguing the affirmative is a laid-back, bearded white guy from Southeast Louisiana State, wearing jeans and a green T-shirt; his debate partner, Thierry Turenne, is a black, mustachioed fourth-year student from Pace University in New York City. Turenne is sporting a do-rag, dog tags, cargo pants and Timberland boots.

Before the round, he praises Snider. "He's funny," says Turenne, who's attended the WDI since his sophomore year in high school. "He's a really cool guy."

Their opponents are two kids from Kansas City Community College, both dressed in jeans and T-shirts. One of them, a beefy redhead, looks like a corn-fed linebacker. His speedy, high-pitched opening statement calls to mind a Midwestern livestock auctioneer.

While he's speaking, Snider enters the room. The debater plows on. Snider smiles proudly, gives him a thumbs-up, and dances on his toes, swaying to the sound of the debater's voice as if instinctively moved by its hypnotic, intellectually charged rhythm. It's music to his ears.



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