

STUDENT VIEWS

THE SCARS OF WINNING

by Dan Shalmon

A morning at the St. Mark's debate tournament:

6:15 a.m.

This the wake up call you requested for six fitee.....

SLAM

6:25 a.m.

Ah, the alarm clock, the ever-effective back-up system.

SLAM

6:27 a.m.

After approximately 34 unsuccessful attempts to find the snooze button on the Courtyard Marriott clock radio, I managed to get enough energy to sit up in bed and turn the lights on. I noticed that the pizza boxes, Mountain Dew case, laptop chords, and the six incredibly inhospitable layers of plasticky sheet on the bed and I, have somehow contorted ourselves into a position roughly equivalent to a cross between Kama Sutra and Hatha Yoga.

6:30 a.m.

I extricate myself from my physical predicament and realize that it is roughly 27° in our room. But, it could be worse; yesterday morning we woke up to a balmy 94°. As you may or may not know, it is the strict policy of the Glenbrook North Debate Society to only stay in those hotels whose thermostats run on the *freeze* or *fry* system.

My partner has not yet noticed the frigid temperature as he is covered by a make shift blanket made up of our Clinton accordions, Federalism 2AC block, a printer cable, and a pink highlighter.

6:45 a.m.

I step into the special edition hot-water resistant shower - another strictly enforced GBN policy - and I get that feeling again. I almost always get it around 6:45 in the morning at St. Mark's. It's that "what the hell am I doing here" and "why can't I just sleep 15 minutes more," feeling. Although they have managed to deliver several hundred small bottles of completely

useless toiletry and cosmetic products, apparently I have neglected to specifically mandate that the hotel supply us with fresh towels. Around the time I find myself trying to use the least disgusting one on the floor to remove the bitingly cold shower water, I am pretty well on my way to asking, why on earth I do such awful things to myself.

I guess that's my question for you then. Why are we here? Why do we do the incredible things we do for an activity that is so absurd? I mean, in reality, what we do and say really is ludicrous. The Clinton disad is perhaps the greatest string of argumentative lies ever promulgated to reasonably intelligent human beings on a large scale. Affirmatives are usually blatant oversimplifications and masterpieces of obfuscation - frankly, I don't even think we have a Forest Fire policy in Russia. Consult the Congress about the Kurile Island Dispute during the Kosovo Crises - or the NATO alliance about library censorship - these are self-evidently idiotic ideas; and yet every single one is a pet position for the Glenbrook North Debate team. As our assistant the Acolyte likes to say; It's all about smoke and mirrors, smoke and mirrors. And yet, we spend hours and hours and hours refining, preparing, thinking about these exaggerations, oversimplifications and out and out lies. And once all that has been done, all the work and forethought and patience gets spewed out at a beyond comprehensible rate of speed. We sacrifice our family lives, our social lives, our grades, our time, our energy and our hearts to this ridiculous activity.

W h y ?

A big part of the reason is the enjoyment of the activity itself - the act of debating. Competing against people of the caliber in this room (and outside it) is a wonderful experience. There's nothing you can do in a fleece vest and tie that will give you a bigger adrenaline rush than full-out intellectual war in a hotel ballroom at 9 in the morning. Perhaps it is the thrill we get from uncovering a great argument, a burning desire to learn more, read more, know more. Maybe it's because it lets adolescents,

whose opinions are typically given short shrift, have a medium for expressing themselves, or because it gives us a new and challenging arena in which to excel, or provides us with an escape, a power trip or a security blanket.

Debate requires such superhuman dedication to succeed competitively that in order to justify itself, debate (and success in debate) must be tied to things deep inside us. The need to learn, the need to be great, the drive to succeed - these are all things that have profound effects on us; they sit in places close to our hearts - and so we have little choice but to believe that these deeply seated needs can be at least somewhat fulfilled with success in debate - however we define it. Whatever the reason, it drives us to do some pretty wild stuff.

For example, we refuse to accept anything short of absolute triumph. Last year, when Glenbrook South took second at the Glenbrook Round Robin, Mr. Matt Whipple, the director of debate at GBS, sat next to his top team as they stared dejectedly into their water glasses. I was sitting nearby making a valiant attempt to double Todd's dejection being that coming in fourth should generate twice as much frustration as coming in second. So I hope he doesn't mind me quoting what he said to Todd as he patted him on the shoulder. He said: "Todd, you need to chill out", (clearly the truth, Todd really did need to chill out). "Ten years from now, no one will remember if you came in second, or first or last - I promise. But they will remember whether they had fun debating you, if they thought you were a good friend, if they were impressed by you as a person. So stop worrying about it."

Our absolute dedication to victory really is sort of silly once you think about it. Because as great as it is to win St. Mark's or the Glenbrooks or the TOC, the big plaque you get is a piece of wood with plastic and metal glued on. It's a piece of wood - a nice expensive piece of wood, but a piece of wood nonetheless - and once you get it - your problems, your flaws, your foibles and your troubles remain unchanged. Winning a tournament doesn't change anything about you except your trophy collection.

But aren't there intangible, personal benefits to achievement? Perhaps. But winning, in many ways, is a road without end - the end is an illusion - with every victory, we raise the bar higher and higher. Victory is in reality a treadmill - there are always more files to be written, more updates to be cut, another elim to win. We tend to think that once we reach the next level, we will have finally accomplished something. But a treadmill that gives false hope is a very dangerous thing.

It is dangerous because these purported benefits of success shift our attention away from things that really do deserve our supreme efforts, our utmost attention. Things that really do matter in the grand scheme on things; like human beings.

The summer before my junior year, my best friend told me something that I promised myself I would repeat today. She said: "You know, every year, they have a senior give a speech at St. Mark's. And the person always talks about their friends. Next year when you give that speech you're going to break the tradition. You aren't going to talk about your friends, you're going to talk about how great it is to win.

I guess that gives you a pretty good idea of the kind of person I was at the time. Things are different now. The day that wonderful girl died, I knew I had to prove her wrong.

A little achievement can be a painful thing. Last year at this tournament, I was completely obsessed with victory. So obsessed that every time she asked me to visit her, I told her I would drop by, and even though it was only a short walk, I never went because I had to have absolutely positively up to the minute Mid-Term Election updates. On Sunday, Loe Hornbuckle and Adam Savoie unintentionally did me an incredible favor. They beat me on a 5 - 0 in semis - and they didn't even run Mid Terms. I got to spend almost four hours with Julia Burke watching the finals and the Novice Hoe-Down, a last little chunk of time with my best friend in the world. I got my last chance to see the wonderful way she lit up a room, how she looked as she tossed her blonde hair back and laughed her soul-warming laugh. I got to make fun of her knees, and feel the incredible bond I shared with her one last time. And that is something I would trade any debate round, any tournament, and any trophy in existence to experience again.

While I was writing this speech, a great debater and an equally excellent friend

who won this tournament last year told me: "Even though we won St. Mark's last year, I still have a lot of regrets... little things... it was the last time I saw Julia and I wish I could have talked to her some more...I've got really good memories of St. Mark's. But I don't actually remember that much about debating in the final round besides Loe making a fool of himself. I do have a great image of you and Julia sitting on the ground down to our right, wearing your matching sweatervests and smiling."

The people in debate and the value of the experience itself are indescribably precious.

Debate is a wonderful activity with powerful potential to help us learn and grow. But sometimes, the fanatical dedication with which we approach it ends up undermining its most awesome benefits. Not because success in and of itself is evil, not because competition itself is flawed, but because we elevate it above everything else; like the people in this activity who touch our lives or the value of a good joke now and then to lighten up the finals of a major national tournament. Debate victories are great feats - it takes a lot to win a tournament. But after the initial shock of defeat is past, very few people look back on their debate career and say: Gee, I wish had cut one more *Lexis* search. They do regret not spending enough time on the things that really mattered. And I do wish that I had spent one more hour with Julia - and maybe cut one less search.

Competitive success does not solve our problems or make us better people - and however good it may feel to finally win the big one, that feeling pales in comparison to what it feels like to have found a truly great friend. We sometimes lose sight of the purely intellectual benefits, the wonderful ways in which this activity changes our hearts and our minds because we are so focused on winning - and that's a shame, because friendship and growth are the ultimate accomplishments.

This is the last St. Mark's of the 20th Century. In all likelihood, the debaters of the 21st will look back at us and laugh at our primitive attempts at argumentation - the Clinton disad in particular. No matter how spectacular the last three elimination rounds of this tournament are, they will not reign supreme for very long in the collective memory of the debate community. And chances are, no one will remember who went

for what in the block - or what the decision in quarters was - and although they might dimly recall the name of the school that wins, they will never really be able to put a person to the team code.

But today the best debaters in the country have an opportunity - the last chance in this century to take a step back and think about the basic reasons we bother with this activity in the first place. We have a choice; we can accept the supremacy of achievement at all costs and continue to value the win above all else - or we can decide that perhaps the greatest benefits of debate cannot be represented by a piece of wood and plastic. I don't think that we should give up the competition; or that debaters should turn into the Care Bears and hug each other at the end of every cross examination. I also don't think that every debater in this room is dead set on grabbing the golden ring at the expense of his or her friends - nor am I (hypocritically) attacking the value of an intense work ethic. But I do think that as a community we have, by and large, oversold victory and undersold real accomplishment - we sometimes choose the next step on the treadmill over a chance to touch the lives of amazing people who may be stripped from our grasp at any moment. For me it took the loss of an extraordinary friend to realize how truly silly it is to allow competition to undermine friendship - not a day goes by that I don't feel the scars of winning. I think that maybe, just maybe, we would be better off if we recognized that while debate itself is a rather ludicrous and unimportant activity in the grand scheme of things, the people in debate, and the value of the experience itself are indescribably precious... The 21st century will probably not remember great debaters, but it just might remember great people.

(This speech was delivered by Dan Shalmon of Glenbrook North High School at the 1999 St. Mark's tournament. Dan and partner Shawn Powers won the National Debate Championship in 1999)