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**Subject: Of "National Championships," College Debates,
Amateur Competition, and Alliance Bowls**

So you want debate stories? This one isn't so funny, but it might do you - or someone you know - a little good. At least, as Brother Sly said, it can do you no harm.

One of the positive things I noticed in watching the 1997 NDT final round tape was that each of the debaters had the time before his substantive speech to say words of thanks to those who had helped and supported him. That wasn't the style in 1969, so - Coach, Paul, Tom, Dave(x3), Lee(x2) Steve, Mike, Skippo, Russ(x2) and certain women whose names I choose to protect... This is for you.

Every word of what you are about to read is true. Maybe I'm just writing to myself; maybe not.

I debated in college at the University of Houston from 1966-1970. By accident more than anything else, I debated only 6 rounds in junior division before being kicked up to the majors. I won more than 20 tournaments. As those of you who follow debate history know, David Seikel and I finished 2nd at NDT, and were in the final round of every tournament we attended (9 firsts, 4 seconds). During my senior year I debated with both Tom Goodnight (now at Northwestern) and Paul Colby (still in an altered state). Although I couldn't match the record I had with Seikel, we cleared at every tournament we attended, and we won Texas, Georgetown, Northwestern, and Heart of America. I also won Top Speaker at NDT, where Paul and I ripped through the prelims to come out number one seed. We finished third, losing to Kansas, the ultimate NATIONAL CHAMPION. Not a bad record, right? But within seconds after being knocked out of NDT, through and including the end of 1995 (a quarter of a century), I thought of myself as a total piece of shit; a loser, a choke-artist, and an abject failure. I've made several half-hearted suicide attempts, and I've hurt people more times than I can ever make up for.

Debate didn't force that on me. Ultimately, it may have saved my life. But my abuse of debate was as damaging as any kind of abuse of alcohol and/or drugs, and/or tobacco.

Just a brief (yeah, right) explanation of my pre-collegiate background. I attended two different high schools, Houston Jesuit (fros

and soph) and Westbury H.S.(junior/senior). Like every good little Texas boy, I began playing organized football in the 4th grade, and I played baseball during the Summers to stay in shape for football. When I had to leave Jesuit (for reasons too insignificant to explain), I discovered that I could not participate in any team sports at Westbury, because of the "transfer rule" - a device to prohibit illegal football recruiting in junior and senior high school, I swear to God.

The only extracurricular activity open to me was speech/debate. I did some oratory, extemp, DI and HI my junior year. In late November of my senior year, I was leaned on to debate with an experienced senior whose partner had flaked out on her.

What was memorable to me about debate in high school was not my won-loss record - we did okay - a couple of firsts, three thirds, and the rest quarters or octa's; it was that I fell hopelessly in love with my partner. I proposed. She accepted. And I spent the entire Summer of 1966 planning to go to college with her, start a career (journalism), get married, start a family - I was white bread and Susie Creamcheese all the way.

Then - to put it mildly - she pulled the plug on me. She went away to Spring Hill College in Mobile, Alabama, and slowly but surely cut me out of her life, piece by devastated piece.

So it was that I arrived at that Mecca of higher learning, the University of Houston. It was not only my father's alma mater, it was his obsession. As a member of the Texas Legislature he had authored, sponsored, and jockeyed through the bill that made UH a state-supported school. My first conscious memory is being carried by my father out of a UH-Baylor football game in Waco. I went to every UH home football game between 1960-65, and most of the home basketball games. And my father expected me to follow his example by doing everything I could to make UH "respectable."

When I first wandered onto the Houston campus in the Fall of 1966 I was barely 18, and totally clueless. Having been "dumped" by the only girl I had ever loved, and thought I ever would love, my moods varied from severely depressed to completely suicidal. I didn't know a soul on campus, and had made no plans at all for the year.

After stumbling through the first couple of weeks of school, I saw Paul Colby, who I had met at a previous high school speech tournament. Paul suggested I come to a meeting of the debate squad. I did, and within less than a week I was hooked.

Everything became clear - I was going to make UH respectable and make my girl come back by winning a NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP; okay, it was debate, not football, but it was a NATIONAL

CHAMPIONSHIP just the same, and the only NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP Houston had ever won was in golf, of all things.

Bill English frequently used the term "debate bum" to describe people on the squad who had no life but debate. Looking back, I think a more appropriate term was "debate addict" or "debate junkie," but whatever you call it, it was pathological.

I stopped going to class almost completely. If I wasn't researching, I was bullshitting with the other debaters, especially the juniors and seniors. If anything needed doing, I volunteered - I was a suck-up and a "go-fer" before the terms had been invented. Debate had become my fraternity, my major, and my only social outlet.

The cycle (no pun intended) grew worse with each semester. When Russell McMains and I won the "Texas State College Debate Championship" in the last tournament of my freshman year (the title was far more impressive than the competition), and our picture was in the papers - both campus and city, it was a rush like nothing I had ever experienced.

At least I had enough common sense to go to Summer School to bolster my miserable GPA, but I did that only to stay academically eligible to debate. When my sophomore year began, so did the mania. I was on the "B" team, just behind Seikel and Ware, and I knew that if I played my cards right, the NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP would be within my grasp.

I started to smoke, then chain-smoke. English had reel-to-reel tapes of old NDT final rounds that I listened to over and over. If I wasn't debating, I was researching. If I wasn't researching, I was hanging out at the new debate squad room. My class schedule was structured to be made up of: courses related to the topic (so I could bluff my way through the papers and essays) every speech course that was performance-oriented instead of scholarly, and English (the subject, not the coach) courses I could slide by on with cram sessions and Cliff's notes. Unfortunately, I had to take some hard science and math classes, in which my grades were miserable.

McMains and I won six local/regional tournaments, and we made a respectable showing on the West Coast swing, at Northwestern, and at the Tournament of Champions. By the middle of that year, I had taken my first drink (I told you I was white bread) and by the time the year was over my routine was evenly divided among research, hanging out in the squad room, getting drunk, and listening to Revolver and Sgt. Pepper over and over again, all the time thinking of the NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP. Little things, like getting my education were passing me by, but what did I care? I was going to win the NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP.

The 1968-69 topic had not been out for more than 12 hours before Seikel and I were in full gear. Nothing I have done as an attorney even comes close to the work I did that August-September. My diet consisted of cigarettes and gallons of coffee, punctuated occasionally by junk food. Given the nature of the topic, I loaded my class schedule with political science courses related to the Presidency and foreign policy. Those nagging little courses - astronomy, geology, physics - dragged down my GPA but never deterred me from my mission.

And when Seikel and I set foot on the plane to Boston, I was wired. There wasn't an iota of fear within me, even though I knew I was going out to take on the best the East Coast had to offer. They didn't know me, but I was ready to take names and kick ass.

We didn't win MIT, but we should have. We rationalized the loss to Harvard in the final round by blaming the judging pool - I don't think there was another school from District III at the tournament.

Then we rattled off five tournament wins in a row. It was intoxicating - we were "legends." Wearing black suits, black gloves, and carrying large black leather ox-boxes, we moved from round to round with the swagger that comes from being on a roll. We were also becoming the target of every good team and every good coach in the country, as well as the object of a lot of hatred, but we didn't care. Bring 'em on.

Then came the West Coast swing. The first tournament was UCLA and we LOST in the final round, 4-3. Once more Seikel attributed the loss to "homer" judging (we lost to Southworth), but I was starting to feel something else... the nagging realization that we could lose.

Now think about this... We had been to 7 tournaments, and won five. We were in Westwood on a beautiful New Year's Eve night, and there was a terrific party going on. Did I have a good time? Bullshit. I roamed around for about an hour, then went back to the room and started going over the ballots and my flowsheet.

I spent New Year's Day, 1969, re-writing our case (in the "questions" format Unger had used at the 1965 NDT) and occasionally looking up at a bowl game. The libraries and bookstores weren't open, but I found a pretty good newstand that was, so I started cutting every newspaper and magazine article I could find.

Then I started getting my fixes again; we won Redlands with a 12-0 record, then Northwestern, dropped to Oberlin in the finals at Harvard, then bounced back with nice wins at Dartmouth and Heart of America.

There were no "at-larges" then. Either you qualified at your "district tournament," or you went home. There was no shortage of people

in District III who would have gladly gone 1-7 if they could have beaten us, as well as a lot of alienated judges who thought we had gotten too big for our britches. But we survived.

Seikel was convinced, both by the Heart of America "curse," and by the fact that we had come so far, that we were jinxed before going to Nationals. I was having none of that. Limiting myself to no more than 5 hours of sleep per 24, I meticulously went over every team, every judge, every argument.

Then there I was at NDT, competing for the NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP. Even though we were number one on everybody's hit list, we had a solid 6-2 record in prelims, including a win over Harvard. Seikel was Top Speaker, I was 9th, and we had avoided the "curse" of being top-seeded.

No offense to the teams we debated, but we rolled through octa's and quarters. In the semis, we hit the excellent UCLA team we had dropped to in prelims. They had a new, improved, affirmative case, but I had my best round of the tournament, if not the year. We cruised, 4-1.

And there it was - the NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP round; the trophies and watches on the table, all eyes on us, including those of our coaches, English and Ware, as well as those of a beautiful debater from Baylor who had been playing hot and cold with me for over a year.

WE GOT BEAT. I have a lot of stories (some humorous) about the round, as laster because a squad cliché, we SUCKED GAS. Worse still, after I heard the first affirmative, I believed in my heart we were going to lose, although I fought like hell against it. They were Harvard - we were some chickenshit school from nowhere; Lewis, was, as usual, eloquent; Harvard had shifted back from the case they ran at Dartmouth and Heart to the CIA case, which deep inside, I agreed with. I fought like hell, and I put out everything I had, and David was David, but the NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP was going to Harvard, and UH was just another flash in the pan.

It is, perhaps, indicative of something that I can only clearly remember five debates from that season: the four final rounds we lost, and the final round of Heart of America. All that I knew was that when the chips were down, Harvard had the right stuff, and Houston was garbage.

For the rest of that Spring and Summer, whenever I could get the house to myself, I drank, usually as much as a half gallon of bourbon per weekend, and I listened to nothing but Led Zeppelin and other dark groups. I started using drugs (to protect myself, I decline to state whether they were legal or illegal). I entered into a series of relationships with girls in which I followed a standard m.o.: persuade them I was truly in love with

them, and then cut them off for no reason. My principal recreation was committing random acts of vandalism against the property of people I had never met. In short, I was a useless, self-pitying, repulsive parasite.

With 20-20 hindsight, I now suspect that English and Colby and Goodnight did not fully understand what I was doing to myself - and them. First, I told them (sincerely, for once) that I didn't want to debate anymore. Then I agreed to debate, but I didn't give it any effort. I let others do the research and carry the load. In fact, given the disparity between my work in the Summer of '68 and my work in the Summer of '69, I'm surprised I won any debates at all during the Fall Semester.

UCLA returned intact that year, and Canisius, Harvard and BC came roaring out of the East, and USC, LMU, Kansas, Oberlin, and Northwestern were all loaded for bear.

I went to MIT with Tom Goodnight that year, debated like crap, and got blown out in the quarters by Canisius - for which Tom unfairly got the blame. Colby and I were put together, he carried me through a couple of tournaments, and then out of guilt and embarrassment, I started back on the trail for the NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP. By the time the regular season was over, the juices were flowing again, the mania was back, and we had as good a chance at the NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP as anybody else. It was a horserace. I was liked the gambler who know that the machine is going to hit big with just one more pull.

I don't know if I really deserved to be Top Speaker at NDT that year; I suspect some of the judges might have nudged me a point or two out of sympathy, but Paul and I debated the best we could until...we lost. The main thing I remember about the aftermath of the announcement of the decision is that it was the only debate my mother and father had ever come to see me in. My mother didn't know how to react. I don't know who started it, but my father and I couldn't look at each other. No one said a word. Once again, I had failed the University of Houston, only this time it did it right on the UH campus in front of all my friends, family and teammates. A black minister had listened to almost all of our rounds. Paul and I to this day have no idea who he was. As I slogged up the slanted auditorium floor, he hugged me, tears running down his face, and said, "Why did this happen? You were speaking the truth." Not being in the mood to explain the rules of debate, I just shook my head, smiled and hugged him back.

Nobody keeps statistics on these things, but Colby, I, Killenbeck & Brown of BC, and Goss & Wagner of Canisius drank the bar at the Astroworld Hotel dry that night. I had never liked Goss before, but I found that we were two-of-a-kind. He was just as driven, manic, insecure and bitter as I was. The only difference between us was two speaker points and the fact that he went to a college where roll was taken in every class.

We spent the Summer together at the UH Institute, drinking like fish, convincing ourselves that we had been screwed, and that life was stacked against "ordinary" guys like us. We even went all the way to Chicago to a thing called the National Professional Debate Tournament (where our coach was a guy named Ken Strange) solely to prove we were NATIONAL CHAMPIONS and to humiliate two of the coaches who had voted against us at NDT. We won the tournament, received \$2,500 apiece, and declared ourselves vindicated and revenged.

Problem was, we convinced everybody but ourselves. After the Summer of 1970, everything I did was motivated, either in whole or in part, to prove that I really should have won the NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP. I didn't marry a woman I loved; I married a woman whom I liked and respected, but who was also a coach who thought I had deserved to win the NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP. I didn't coach debaters; I debated by proxy. I didn't try cases for my clients alone; I was trying to show everyone in the legal community that even though I graduated from a mediocre University with mediocre grades, and even though I went to a law school which, though ABA accredited, was hardly prestigious - I was really a NATIONAL CHAMPION who could kick their asses.

But, for a long time, I was such a good debater I convinced everyone, including myself, that I was doing just fine - that lots of people live in four years of celibacy during marriage, then have affairs, then get divorced; that lots of coaches are "hands-on," and dictatorial, and throw things; and that I could do everything involving litigation better than everyone else, because I should have been the NATIONAL CHAMPION.

So why am I still alive? Why am I now happy? Luck - or grace - it amounts to the same thing. I met, fell in love with, and married the debate coach of a rival school. She was never a whiz-bang success on the debate circuit, but she knew all of my logical fallacies, and couldn't have cared less about NDT 1969, 1970 or 2001. She made me straighten up. Many of the other people I grew to know and love through debate helped me through the long, hard struggle against anger and debate addiction. They got me to get help - both professional and otherwise. But I still won't let myself get back onto the litigation treadmill, because I know, as sure as the sunrise is an optical illusion, that if I let myself go, I'll be after that NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP.

If I am informed correctly (and I hope by all that's holy, I am not), David Goss wasn't so lucky. After finishing law school and a few years in the trial arena, he killed himself.

So what's the point?

(1) What you learn from debate is highly powerful; used properly it will serve you; used improperly, it will destroy you. Make sure you have a process for making regular reality checks.

(2) Why do we have to have a NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP in college debate? Yes, I know I'm not credible because I didn't win NDT or CEDA or whatever (and also because I'm an admitted fruitcake), but who truly benefits from a NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP? Isn't it just one team? And given the type-A personalities in debate, doesn't that create the risk of more Millers and more Goss's? So many of you are not favorably disposed to the length of the season anyway, why not chop off the last 6 weeks? Have a schedule of tournaments just like they do in professional golf and professional tennis, and when the season's over, people can look back on their accomplishments rather than despising themselves for not winning the NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP.

(3) In college competition generally, we are dealing with very young people - including many of the young coaches - who work like demons and are then asked to judge rivals and potential adversaries. Technically, they are "adults." But read this EDEBATE list carefully - do you see any signs of stress, anger, frustration or other hurtful emotions? If so, why put the burden of reaching/defending "Number 1" or a "NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP" on these people - and yourselves?

(4) Why did I mention the "Alliance Bowls?" Because what they are doing to college football is what exists in college debate. It used to be that a trip to a bowl game could mean a "disputed" or "divided" NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP. Yeah... so? Now, who cares who goes to any bowl except the 1-2 match-up? These kids - and they are kids - can salve themselves by going pro and setting their sights on the SUPER BOWL, which is held every twelve months. Once the curtain rings down on a senior at CEDA Nationals and/or NDT, however, the debater is stuck with the result for life - and maybe death.

Just my opinion - I could be wrong... MHM