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Review: 'Debate Team' a feast of ruthlessness

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David Wiegand, Chronicle Staff Writer

Saturday, July 18, 2009

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Debate Team: Edited and directed by B. Douglas Robbins, produced by Robbins and Joseph W. Walling. 5:30 p.m. Sunday, KQED.

IMAGES



Green Lamp Pictures

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Back in high school, debate teams may have ranked just above audiovisual clubs in the social pecking order, but Bay Area filmmaker B. Douglas Robbins takes us inside the kill-or-be-killed world of obsessive arguers at a college level to suggest that these nerdy young men and women will either take over the world some day, or represent it in court.

"Debate Team," a Truly CA documentary airing Sunday on KQED, focuses on the 2005 national debate tournament in which the UC Berkeley team of

Stacey Nathan and Craig Wickersham came from behind to beat Dartmouth in the finals at UC San Francisco.

That's no mean feat, considering that some 180 teams were competing, but the film is much more than a "Bad News Bears" of the debate world: It's an often compelling, and even scary, look at people who spend hours and hours without sleep or showers, researching topics and amassing files of data which are culled down to debate length through a process called "cutting cards."

If you think a debate is a staid, gentlemanly (or gentlewomanly) event where each side quietly offers either an affirmative or contrary argument, Robbins and his subjects are here to show you otherwise. The goal of presenting a good debate is to pack as many arguments into a six-minute period as possible, to give your opponents so much to chew on that they choke. To do that, debaters stand in over-lit meeting rooms and rattle off their positions like tobacco auctioneers, gasping every few hundred words for breath. "Sometimes you just have to deal with drool and spit," one debater offers.

And sometimes, you have to deal with a degree of depression and personality disorder - one debater insists unconvincingly that the practice is not nihilistic. "You never hear the possibility of human extinction discussed so much as in debates," another debater concedes. Topics usually range from world political crises, to global warming, to the depletion of fossil fuels.

While it's fascinating hearing today's herd of debaters, we also get incredible and rather sad insight from Michael Miller, one of the most victorious debaters ever, who racked up win after win after win, only to see it all end when he lost the nationals in 1969. He had no plan for his life after that tournament and 40 years later, he's still wounded by the loss.

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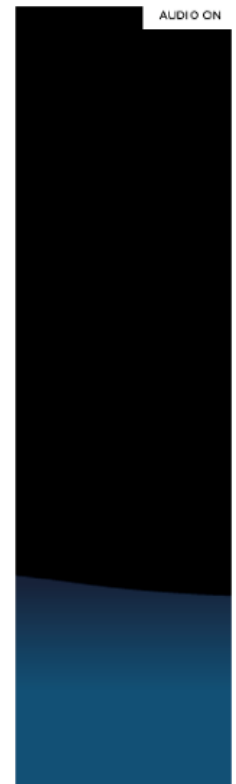
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Debaters are ruthless strategists, who must be willing to "kill the puppy," in debate parlance - to unnerve their opponents at every opportunity. They have to think on their feet and be prepared for anything from the other side.

"Debate is primarily about psychology," offers a seasoned debate coach, but the fascinating aspect of Robbins' film is what we learn about the psychology of the debaters themselves. One kid tells us he tried and failed at every sport imaginable in high school, only to find his niche in debating. One of the most intriguing characters is Aaron Hardy, a debater from Michigan State University who was formerly known as Mountain Man because of his beard, long hair and aversion to soap and water. Listening to him talk, you almost think he'd literally kill a puppy to win. And when his side loses, the intensity of his unspoken rage is downright frightening.

Robbins has done a terrific job detailing a world that seems almost entirely disconnected from the rest of us. The editing of the film makes it a bit challenging here and there as Robbins skips back and forth from the 2005 finals in San Francisco, to earlier tournaments. You may have some difficulty remembering who's who at various points, as well, because the fast-talking heads aren't always identified. Given how many of them we hear from, it probably would be helpful to ID them more frequently.

That said, "Debate Team" is a surprisingly comprehensive look into a world where winning is really the only thing, for better or worse.

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E-mail David Wiegand at dwiegand@sfnchronicle.com.

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That said, "Debate Team" is a surprisingly comprehensive look into a world where winning is really the only thing, for better or worse.

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So why are we surprised when we see all the ruthless, inconsiderate, self-centered egomaniacs impacting everyone else's life. Winning is everything, community is nothing. Be that City Hall, the spectacle of a mayor, the Supervisors zoo or everyday life where people argue over parking spots, cheat, steal and lie to, well, win. At least win in their own perspective.

The fact that the community looses (please go ahead and call me a socialist, communist, liberal idiot, whatever you feel like) plays no role whatsoever. I want to win, I want to quickly make the left turn even though it is not my turn yet, and even though I might kill someone. Bad luck for them, good for me because, guess what, I won.

My stomach just won over the content therein after reading the article....

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