



*Big-time college debate
is a world unto itself*

Podium Power



by **Scott Grant '92**
Photos by **Jim Ziv**

AT EIGHT IN THE morning on a Saturday when most Wake Forest students have not even begun to stir, sophomores Jordana Sternberg and Marcia Tiersky are 600 miles from Winston-Salem in cold, blustery Evanston, Ill., arguing heatedly with two students from the University of Iowa about whether a Supreme Court decision that permits the use of psychotropic drugs on criminals is an invasion of privacy.

Tiersky stands behind a desk delivering a flurry of words at the pace of an auctioneer. Sternberg and the opposing team square off at adjoining desks, scribbling notes on the flurry of verbiage or hurriedly rooting through crates of evidence as a judge sits before them taking notes on the speaker's flow.

The Wake Forest team wins the debate, but they have only begun a grueling weekend of arguments and cross-examination. Sternberg and Tiersky have three more debates on Saturday, then face more pressure on Sunday when they are bracketed with only tough teams. They just miss Monday's final rounds in the single-elimination tournament, but they are on hand to give sup-

port to the two Wake Forest teams that do advance.

In the final rounds, teams scurry between rooms, lugging their massive crates of evidence. Coaches hunker with teams in the hallways to discuss strategy for the next opponent. The crowds for each round grow bigger, as more teams are eliminated and left to spectate. The tension is heightened as advancing teams get into more complex and heated debates. Each round finds a longer line of judges to distinguish the winners and losers.

This is the world of college debate—an experience foreign to most outsiders; a terrain populated by only a few.

Wake Forest is a superpower in the world of college debate. Although its fortunes rise and fall on a year-to-year basis, the Deacons consistently finish as one of the top 10 squads in the nation.

Three Wake Forest teams received invitations to the National Debate Tournament (NDT) held in April at Miami University of Ohio. This was the first year the NDT allowed any school to enter more than two teams, and only five other schools placed a third team in the tournament. Two Wake Forest teams received first-round bids—two of the 16 bids signifying the top teams in the country entering the tournament.

This past season, Wake Forest's top team of seniors Brian Lane and Mike Ridge won

Junior Rick Fledderman of Downers Grove, Ill., punches home his point in Evanston.

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the esteemed University of Redlands (Calif.) Debate Invitational, placed second at the Dartmouth College tournament and received an NDT first-round bid. The team of juniors Mark Grant and Rick Fledderman received Wake Forest's other first-round NDT bid, with the squad's third bid going to Sternberg and Tiersky, who won the University of South Carolina tournament this season. Other Wake Forest teams, including Grant and senior Gordon Hull, freshmen Adrienne Brovero and Scott O'Donnell, freshmen Brian Flagler and Craig Green, freshmen Stapp Beeton and Matt Rogers and junior Nate French and freshmen Keith Jones, took honors at various tournaments this past season.

"If a program is measured by its full service, then Wake Forest is one of the top programs in the country," says Allan Loudon, communications professor and director of debate at the University. "In terms of professional involvement and competition, we have a top five program."

For Loudon, the crucial aspect of a debate program is its ability to fulfill its educational function. "Without an educational goal, there is something wrong," he says.

To that end, the Wake Forest debate program hosts one of the top high school tournaments in the country, the National Earlybird Tournament, in September and a leading workshop for high school students in the summer. Its Franklin R. Shirley Dixie Classic in November is arguably the best collegiate tournament in the nation and was voted "Best Tournament of the Decade" in a 1989 poll of the nation's debate coaches. And

Wake Forest produces one of the best annual handbooks for the collegiate debate world.

Much as in college athletics, recruiting plays a major part in the competitive strength of a debate squad. The Earlybird and the summer workshop are important in showcasing the program and establishing contacts with promising debaters, but Loudon and debate coach Ross Smith still must put in a lot of time on the phone calling prize prospects. This year's team was assembled from a potpourri of states—New York, Louisiana, Virginia, Massachusetts, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Iowa, Texas, Nebraska, Utah, South Carolina, Alabama, Georgia and North Carolina—demonstrating the geographical lengths Loudon and Smith go in their recruiting.

Many of the debaters acknowledge that the University's excellent debate program was a major factor in their decision to attend Wake Forest. "It is unusual for a northern Jewish girl to attend a university like Wake Forest," says Sternberg, who was a national-class high school debater in Lexington, Mass. "One of my main reasons for coming here is the highly touted debate team."

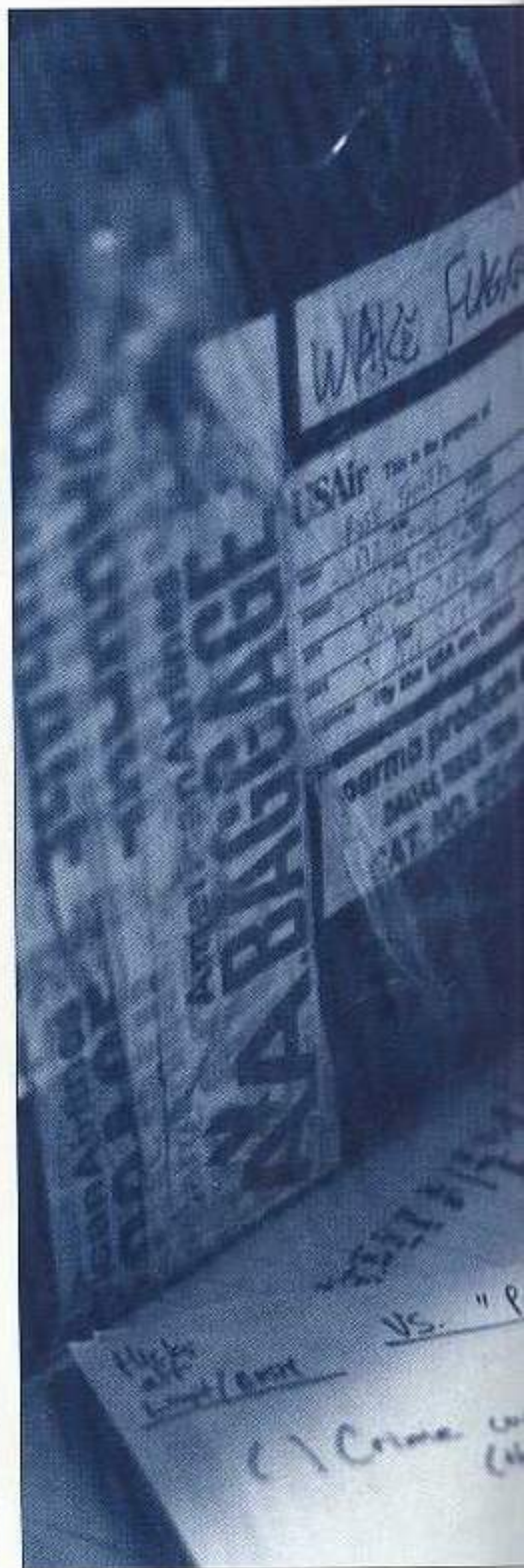
Wake Forest has a storied debate tradition. In the 47 years of NDT debate, it is among the handful of schools that have qualified for the nationals most often. Under Loudon and Smith, Wake Forest has qualified for the last seven NDT finals.

Loudon reckons Wake Forest students have debated since at least 1904—the date engraved on one of the trophies in the team's display case. At first, debates were staged by literary societies and social clubs and were major campus events. Homecoming rallies were held on campus for teams that returned from the nationals in the 1930s.

Wake Forest debate teams were especially strong in the 1950s and 1970s. Loudon became director and coach of debate in 1978, then left in 1982 to complete his Ph.D. degree at the University of Southern California. When he returned three years later, he found the program needed a jolt. He hired Smith, himself a former Wake Forest debater, and together they rejuvenated it.

Wake Forest has excellent assistant coaches—graduate students who debated as undergraduates at various schools and help the team while pursuing graduate studies at Wake Forest. Some of the assistants are former stars on Deacon squads, while others have come from around the country. Marc Rubenstein, an assistant coach this past season, was a member of the 1991 national championship team from the University of Redlands and was named top speaker at the 1990 NDT.

Wake Forest has spawned numerous head debate coaches and directors at other universities, including one of college debate's



more eccentric figures, Bill Shanahan MA '89, currently co-director of debate at the University of Texas. Shanahan, who was a graduate assistant at Wake Forest, bears a striking resemblance to paintings of Jesus and often walks around barefoot at tournaments. He hates rules and manages his squad in an unconventional manner: team members make most decisions by consensus rather than majority vote. Shanahan says

Far left: Sophomore Melissa Butler of Ottumwa, Iowa, listens intently to an opponent. Inset: Sophomores Jordana Sternberg, foreground, and Marcia Tiersky sort through their crates of evidence. Below: Sternberg in action.



public speaking and critical thinking skills. And he says he has been exposed to facts and points of view he may never have encountered in the classroom.

At last fall's Earlybird, Loudon tried to lure Keith Jones, who was running the Student Congress competition, into trying debate. He didn't bite until Loudon called him a few days before a subsequent tournament and asked him to fill in for someone. Jones was given a two-day crash course in debate, competed and, along with his partner, finished 3-3. He was hooked.

Louden says about half the debaters who come to Wake Forest drop off the team before they graduate. Small wonder. Debate makes enormous demands on a student's time. All teams everywhere debate a single issue for the entire year; the issue is announced in July, and most debaters immediately commence research. The week before school starts, Wake Forest's team comes to campus for two days of intensive research-gathering, then spends four days at a mountain retreat discussing theory, planning strategy and reading evidence.

Many debaters routinely put in 20 or 30 hours a week on debate. Serious debaters spend most of their free time on school days and weekends working on their material. Grant says he spends a lot of time on his schoolwork, but even more on debate. "If I wanted to, I could do debate work all the time," says Grant, who figures he spent seven to nine hours a day on debate work, and more on weekends, in the three or four weeks leading up to the NDT finals. "But that is part of the game—figuring out what you can get away with not doing."

The many weekends of travel to various tournaments can lead to many missed classes. Some debaters plan their academic schedules to avoid many Monday or Friday classes.

The intensity of their dedication can seem curious, even strange, to outsiders. Grant says he often finds his mind wandering to possible strategies while studying. On plane trips to tournaments, team members usually spend their time talking strategy or making new T-cards—blocks of information cut and pasted to sheets of paper for use in debate. After long, punishing days of argument at tournaments, the squad will spend the entire evening discussing the next day's strategies. Tiersky says a flight attendant once confiscated her scissors as a possible dangerous weapon.

What drives people to such a demanding

endeavor? Many debaters, like athletes, relish the intense feelings of competition and achievement. "The activity is social in a weird way," says Grant. "You do not get the rush until you have debated other people who have worked on the same issue you have. A lot of debaters have addictive personalities and thrive on pressure."

A casual observer can't help but be stricken by the intensity of the competition. Debaters will fling their hands, gather spittle on their lips, sway back and forth and pound desks with their fists. Beeton has even stood on a table to get his point across.

Beeton points out that besides analytical and argumentative skills, a sure sign of a good debater is the ability to think on one's feet. Small wonder that a lot of debaters pursue law as a career.

Friendships are an important reward in debate. The debate world is its own family. Many debaters at different colleges were teammates or competitors in high school and have developed strong friendships over the years. Sternberg says she has even seen opposing teams tossing a football during a round. "The activity is so intense, you get real close to people," says Grant. "I like the atmosphere: a small group of people getting to know each other."

Louden cites debate's "sense of community" as its compelling characteristic. "It requires a lot of moxie to participate, which means the people are interesting," he says.

Grant thinks debate is apart from any other college experience. "I would have completely different memories of Wake Forest if I did not debate," he says. "It defines who I am." ■

Scott Grant, who was Wake Forest University Magazine's student intern this year, graduated in May with a major in English.



team meetings have been known to run for hours because the squad could not reach consensus on certain issues.

Although most squad members competed in high school and were recruited, a handful have joined the squad with no previous experience. Sophomore Chris Weimkin says Sternberg talked him into it. "It seemed interesting and I liked the people." He says debate has improved his argumentation,