

# One speech at a time

Every tournament counts  
on the road to the nationals

Story by Anita Martin

The sun glints across a mid-winter campus frost early one Saturday morning. As most students snooze, a deep rumbling echoes through Ohio University's Grover Center.

To the beat of their own stomping feet, the members of the Ohio University Debate and Forensics Team — smartly dressed in polished pumps, fine tweed, silk ties — flap their arms, scat their alphabets and chant strange incantations.

"Whether the weather is cold, or whether the weather is hot, we'll be together, whatever the weather, whether we like it or not," they say, whisper and shout.

This is the team's pre-dawn warm-up for back-to-back tournaments held Jan. 27–28 on the Athens campus, and that tongue twister — well, it's more than just a catchy rhyme.

The amount of time these 11 competitors spend together rivals that of any varsity sports team. They meet at least five days a week, practice roughly two hours a day and travel to competitions more weekends than not. Luckily, they love it.

"If we weren't such an amazing family unit, we might feel like we're missing out on something," says Dani Bernat, a first-year communication studies major. "But forensics is such a social thing. Plus, it's fun to win. Who doesn't like that?"

Winning is exactly what these young orators intend to do.

The 2006–07 academic year represents a revival for Ohio forensics, the dawn of what many see as a second

"golden age" and a throwback to the 1960s and '70s when the team regularly ranked first or second in the National Forensics Association championship. It was Ohio University, after all, that won the very first NFA championship.

Last year, the team qualified for the championship in nine events and placed 35th nationally — up from 86th the year before. At the beginning of this year, the Cassese Director of Forensics, Dan West, raised the bar even higher. This time, he said, they would qualify in 40 events and strive to break into the top 10 nationally.

## Grace under fire

On the morning of Jan. 27, the team members enter the competition with 20 nationally qualifying events — just half of their goal. This guarantees nine of the 11 students will compete at the NFA championship at Berry College in Rome, Ga., in late April.

"I expect the others to qualify today," West says matter-of-factly that morning. He's affable, enthusiastic, and he moves fast, surveying the students and sorting through paperwork as he talks.

As first rounds approach, Ohio's new Walter Hall teems with polished "speechies" from all over the state who review notes, crack jokes and huddle around file bins or laptop computers. Among them, Jesse Branner, a freshman, prepares for her first round: extemporaneous speaking. It's a "limited preparation" event focusing on current events. That means Branner has 30 minutes to

prepare a seven-minute speech on a randomly selected topic. Luckily, she can use files the team has prepped and saved in bins or on their laptops.

"We've all got publications to monitor and print off new articles every day, which we put into these files," she says, gesturing to their file bin. "For example, before Hurricane Katrina hit — oh, excuse me, I have to go. Thanks. I'll talk to you later."

This happens repeatedly during the busy tournament. They fly away mid-sentence, yet always with the same articulate courtesy and warmth shown to judges and fellow competitors. Then they're off to one of 12 different events ranging from oral interpretation (the dramatic portrayal of literary characters, recitations of poetry or even a combination of both) to traditional debate, competed in Lincoln-Douglas style, with a focus on matters of policy.

These students are mostly communication or political science majors, with a few wild cards, such as Dan DiLoreto. He's a senior restaurant, hotel and tourism major and the team veteran. During his first year competing, the year before West came on board, DiLoreto made a memorable debut. He was the only Bobcat to qualify for nationals.

"It was only eighth place, Division IV," he says, "but I had earned it by myself, and I was the only one to earn national points for the team, which felt pretty good."

For this, his last year, DiLoreto regularly competes in two or more events during a single hour-long round.

Sporting a black pin-striped suit and neat ponytail, he hops between two dramatic interpretation duos during the same one-hour round.

## Something to talk about

In one duo, DiLoreto and partner Dan Glaser, a first-year broadcast major, have selected a passage from a documentary called "Combat Diary: the Marines of Lima Company." It was made from video footage taken in Iraq by the 2005 Reserve unit from Columbus.

With only black playbooks as a prop, DiLoreto and Glaser perform excerpts from the documentary. They bounce spirited dialogue off each other and mimic the motions of videotaping, while always facing the audience. The script begins with a conversation that sounds like any college party and ends with 59 Purple Hearts, 23 awarded posthumously. The two must shift seamlessly among multiple characters, tones and emotions.

"It's a controversial issue, the war. But we're just for the troops," DiLoreto says after the round, explaining that the team prides itself on taking risks with unique topics.

As if to prove the point, Branner bounds past on her way to three competitions — all within the same round. "I'm doing an informative speech on a video game called Peace Maker — it's about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; a rhetorical criticism on an Internet film called 'Store Wars' — which is about organic produce; and an impromptu." She doesn't yet know what that one will be about.



Dan DiLoreto

Year: Senior

Major: Restaurant, hotel and tourism

Hometown: Canton, Ohio

Career Goal: Managing a high-end nightclub in L.A. — complete with celebrity VIPs

Forensics Experience: Four years on his high school speech and debate team, three at Ohio University

Favorite Event: "I love after-dinner speaking. It's the most me, because that's where my personal character comes out the most — it's loud and energetic and uninhibited."

Personal Facts: "My interest is the entertainment industry: Broadway, movies, stand-up comedy, just performance in general. I also like jet-skiing and other water sports."



Dani Bernat

Year: Freshman

Major: Communication studies, with a specialization in health communication

Hometown: Youngstown, Ohio

Career Goal: To run the PR and communications department at a large hospital

Forensics Experience: Four years on her high school speech and debate team  
Favorite Event: Program oral interpretation. "The event is part prose, part drama and part poetry, so with every page I get to be a different person."

Personal Facts: "Talk about split personalities: I went to a Catholic high school where I was a part of the social 'A group', because I was a cheerleader, but I was also a speechie and a theater geek." Among her other interests: fashion, shopping and science fiction novels.

\* DON'T COME ON TOO STRONG KEEP IT MELLOW &

While delivering her informative speech, Branner alternates between infectious enthusiasm and a coy, slightly getta-load-of-this delivery. It's a wonder they stay so animated after so much competition. "I guess you could say it's an adrenaline rush," says Glaser, "but really it's just about doing something you love ... and, of course, the drive to win." Whatever's fueling them, it seems to work. By the end of the second day of competition, on Jan. 28, Ohio's forensics team has doubled its nationally qualifying entries, reaching the goal of 40.

**Training for life**

"I always practice my persuasion speech in the shower. Just my persuasion. Every time I shower," says Bernat. She almost seems baffled at the habit herself, which, by now, is involuntary. "Really?" Branner says. (They're sitting in Perks Coffee House on Court Street, taking a rare break from their schoolwork and forensics training.) "My roommates are so tired of hearing my speeches. I practice them in my head on the way to every class." It comes down to commitment, says Glaser. "If you want to be the best, (forensics) has to be your No. 1." And to be the best, they've learned, you have to think and act like a competitor. Practice that speech until you recite it in your sleep. Compete in as many events as you can stand. More than half the team competes in five events or more, a far cry from high school, where just one

per person is allowed. "It's challenging at first," Glaser says, "but it's also like — oh my God, I can do all these events! That's probably why I've done nine this year. I guess I kind of went nuts, but I'm really enjoying it." Glaser has qualified for nationals in eight of those events. That hard work will pay off, in the judges' scores and beyond. These young competitors already have a real-world edge when it comes to confidence in professional interaction, effective communication, mental agility, time-management, teamwork and just being good sports. "To think that — for fun — I go every weekend to speak in front of people and be judged," DiLoreto laughs. "I can tell you that I take criticism a lot better now." Besides, they all find ways to manage their forensics and their studies while having a good time and pursuing other interests. "The team is pretty balanced," DiLoreto says. "Sure we're hardworking, but we understand that you need to keep your grades up, relax and have fun. I know I have a social life."

**Go time**

As the NFA championship approaches, the team members polish up their speeches and experiment with new styles of delivery to reinvent the words they've been reciting compulsively since September. Although they're aiming for the top, their No. 1 priority is simply to outperform their personal best. "If you go to nationals thinking, 'We have to get the



**Dan Glaser**  
**Year:** Freshman  
**Major:** Broadcast journalism  
**Hometown:** Louisville, Ohio  
**Career goal:** News anchor  
**Why he chose Ohio:** "The Scripps program was the driving factor . . . but the forensics program kind of tipped the scales."  
**Favorite event:** Extemporaneous speaking, in which a student speaks persuasively about current events. "It's what I did in high school, so I know it well. Plus it entails politics. I really enjoy analyzing what's going on in the world."  
**Personal Facts:** "I also sing. I'm involved in the Singing Men of Ohio. And I love my major. I like the idea of going out, finding the big picture and really focusing it so you can present the true story. Maybe that's why I like 'extemp.'"



**Building an empire**

"As a coach you provide the vision, but at some point the team has to take ownership of that vision," Dan West says. "These kids have been able to do that. Their team dynamic compares to some of the best I've ever seen." West began competing in forensics at the young age of 13, and he's been coaching since 1988. He even met his wife at a forensics tournament and fell in love with her while watching her give an informative speech. Forensics, quite literally, has defined his life. West was a natural to lead the team as the Cassese Director of Forensics, says John Cassese, BSC '76 and MA '79, who contributed nearly \$250,000 to endow the directorship. "Dan dreams big," says Cassese, a partner with global public relations firm Concentric Communications. "He's got real vision for the program, and he's not afraid to come out and say 'I want to win.'" Cassese credits his experience with Bobcat forensics for his first post-college job as a speechwriter for business executives. "That's why I want to make sure this program continues. I know it was the reason I was able to achieve success in the business world."

trophy,' you're not going to get it," West says. "But if you go thinking, 'I'll do the best I can do in this event, and now I'll do the best in this one,' and you do your best every step of the way, then you have a chance to win." They hope to come in under the radar at nationals, Branner says. "People don't know we're a force to be reckoned with." And three months later, the team that placed 35th last year makes a surprising leap up to 11th in the nation and second within Division II. Glaser, Bernat and Branner finish within the top 10 in four events. As they chase that top 10 win — they were just a few points shy of it this year — the members know they've set themselves up for success. "Our official motto goes 'Forensics ... we're building an empire,' which is a good way to put it, if a bit lofty-sounding," DiLoreto says. "When we were putting our latest trophies in the case someone said we should change it to 'Forensics ... we're steppin' it up, punks!'"

Anita Martin, BSJ '05, is a freelance writer living in Athens. Photography by Rick Fatica, Kim Walker and Michael Kleinfeld.

**ABOVE: Coach Dan West BELOW: Members of the debate and forensics team take a break during practice. They've got plenty to smile about — 11 new students have committed to joining the team next year on its way to the top.**

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