The sun glints across a midwinter campus frost early one Saturday morning. As most students snore, 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 — modestly dressed in polished pumps, fine tweed, silk ties — flap their arms, scatter 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 equals 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.

Winning is exactly what these young orators intend, prepare a seven-minute speech on a randomly selected topic. Luckily, she can use files the team has prepared and saved in bins or on their laptops.

“My interest is the entertainment industry: Broadway, movies, stand-up comedy,” says Dan DiLoreto, a senior restaurant, hotel and tourism major, “and that’s where my personal character comes out the most — it’s loud and energetic and uninhibited.”

DiLoreto made a memorable debut. He was the only one competing, the year before West came on board,

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“They’re a family — the best kind of family,” says 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

Farewell Essay: “I love after-dinner speaking. It’s the most fun, because that’s where my personal character comes out the most — it’s loud and energetic and uninhibited.”

“Some of the topics are quite controversial — the war, terrorism,” says DiLoreto. “It’s a controversial issue, the war. But we’re just for argument’s sake. We’re not doing this for a cause.

Sporting a black pin-striped suit and neat ponytail, he hops between two dramatic interpretation duos during the same one-hour round.
While delivering her informative speech, Branner alternates between infectious enthusiasm and a coy, slightly gotta-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 fusing 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 know I

“Extemporaneous speaking, in which a student speaks per-centually about current events. ‘It’s what I did in high school, so I knew 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.”