

DISCLAIMER: *The authors and narrator of this material wish to stress that not ever, not once, not no-how, have any of them ever been to a Texas high school debate tournament. None of them have even come close. Any resemblance of the fictional Monteverdi tournament to any real tournament in the Lone Star State is not only purely coincidental but would also be pretty depressing, all things considered. The following material is meant as a gentle satirical poke in the ribs for **all** tournaments, and not any one tournament in particular. In other words, if a certain jovial, fun-loving, devil-may-care Texan coach happens to read this episode, please do not get the wrong idea and hire goons to shoot out our kneecaps. It is not **your** tournament we are talking about. Really. It's all a joke. Truly. We're smiling when we say this! See! [Grin, grin.]*



Series 2

Episode 12

Deep in the Liver of Texas

Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls, and Children of All Ages!
Welcome!

To the Greatest Show on Earth!

Direct from enthralling the crowned heads of royal Europe!

Featuring maniacal acts of derring-do previously undreamed of!

Showcasing fantastic feats of forensic skill previously unheard of!

Demonstrating abominable lacks of organizational skills beyond
human understanding!

Happening right before your very eyes, so close you can almost reach
out and touch them!

In not one, not two, but in three magical rings of incredible
entertainment!
Never before attempted on this or any stage!
The one and only!
The incredible!
The amazing!
The unbelievable!
High school debate tournament registration process!!!!

From 7:43 a.m. to 2:19 p.m., Claudio Monteverdi High School conducted business like any institution of secondary education. Buses rolled in one by one in the early morning, dropping off streams of teenagers in various stages of semi-consciousness while the parking lots filled with cars in various stages of semi-functionality. At 7:43, buzzers sounded throughout the building, followed by the Pledge of Allegiance and the morning announcements, after which another buzzer sounded, and the day was officially begun. Of the 1,849 students in the large continuum of enclosed space that was spread out in fits and starts of centrality and annexes over six acres, exactly 348 learned something useful that day, 432 learned things that were certifiably useless, and the rest almost learned things that may or may not have been useful, except for the 159 who never learned anything and who never wanted to learn anything and were never going to learn anything. Of this 159, 157 would end up in prison (this was Texas, after all), and the other 2 would move to California and create tech startups that would, in one case, ultimately earn millions, while in the other case, it would simply postpone the inevitable arrival of the entrepreneur in a federal prison. In other words, you can take the boy out of Texas but you can't take the Texas out of the boy. On the bright side, being a federal offender, at least he wouldn't have to worry about the death penalty.

Was there a better place on earth to argue juvenile justice than the Lone Star State?

At approximately 2:00 in the afternoon, the buses began lining up in front of the school, and the drivers milled about, stretching their legs, exchanging driver lore and drinking the coffee that would get them through the remainder of the day. At exactly 2:19, the last buzzer of the day sounded. At 2:20, the front door of the building opened and two high school students strolled out. By 2:21, the building had vomited all 1849 of its students, except for those on the debate team. By 2:22, the teachers had evaporated from the premises. By 2:23, the administrators were heading on their happy ways to the private prisons they ran in their spare time to embellish their

salaries. By 2:25, all the buses were gone and, for all intents and purposes, the school day had ended.

The debate day was about to begin.

Call in the roustabouts!

“Names over there,” Hem Viadud ordered. Four Monteverdi roustabouts were carrying a large table into the cafeteria from...somewhere. “That will be table one.”

The roustabouts placed the table as ordered.

There was a banging on the glass door behind him. Viadud turned and saw a sea of faces on the outside of the building.

“Should I let them in?” one of the roustabouts asked, moving toward the door.

“NO!” Viadud barked. “It’s not 2:41 yet. Registration starts at 2:41. Let them wait.”

There was tapping at the glass and more banging, insistent and demanding.

Viadud, and the Monteverdians, ignored it.

Hem Viadud was, as usual for his tournament, dressed in full ringmaster attire, from top hat to knee-high boots, with a long horsewhip in his right hand. His roustabouts were all dressed in official Claudio Monteverdi overalls, each with a name sewn over the left breast. The name in each case was Sanders. All of the roustabouts smelled vaguely of a combination of elephant, sugar and drying mud.

A second table arrived from the same somewhere as the first.

“Judges,” Viadud proclaimed, pointing to a spot to the right of the first table.

“Where do we put this?” the bearers of a third table asked.

Viadud pointed again. “Money. Right here.” The students did as they were ordered. “Where’s Whipsnade?” he demanded.

A student with a pencil-thin mustache, wearing an eyeshade and with the sleeves of his striped shirt rolled up and held in place by satin garters, appeared at Viadud’s side.

“Larson E. Whipsnade reporting for duty,” he announced.

“Get another table, Larson E. You’re going to be handling all the fines.”

Larson E. and Viadud exchanged a knowing look. Fines was where the real money was at tournaments. Fines for name changes. Fines for judge changes. Fines for thinking about name changes or judge changes. For some teams, usually the same ones year after year, the fines could outweigh the registrations fees. Larson E. would have this money pocketed and laundered

before the sun set on their fine Texas institute of learning that evening. Viadud didn't ask too much about the fines, and Larson E. didn't say too much about them. But in a good year—and this was Larson E.'s fourth at the fines table—the money collected could pay for the whole team's trip to Chicago in November. To make this palatable to the teams attending the Monteverdi and paying those fines, Larson E. had prepared a sign a couple of years ago that proclaimed that a portion of the fines went to support debate in emerging nations presently waging civil wars. He had that sign in his briefcase at this very moment, ready to prop it up in front of the bucket he used to store the money. The statement it made was true, and a portion of the fines did go to support debate in emerging nations presently waging civil wars. A very small portion.

Every school needs a Larson E. Whipsnade.

At 2:40 the four tables are lined up, for teams, judges, money and fines. Behind the first three tables, teams of four Monteverdians have piles of paper in front of them, organized alphabetically by school. At the fourth table, Larson E. is practicing dealing not from the bottom of the deck but five cards up from the bottom of the deck, on the firm belief that dealing fifths will eventually have value someday, somewhere, beyond the late-night low stakes poker games that he has so far attended, much to his (alleged) friends' dismay and disadvantage.

Two students attired from head to toe in flesh-colored body suits (no mean feat given that their flesh colors were, on the one hand, Copenhagen pink and on the other, Kenya black), on which had been sewn countless multi-colored shimmering sequins, stood by the entry door, outside of which students and coaches were stacked seven high and an acre in breadth, many of them with their noses pressed up against the glass, not out of interest but because the students behind them were pushing their faces willy nilly against whatever was to hand. Hem Viadud looked at his watch. 2:41. He reached into his belt and extracted the starting pistol.

“And in the center ring...” he announced. He shot the pistol into the air (try getting away with *that* at Manhattan Lodestone!), the two sequined students unlocked the door, and, needless to say, pandemonium ensued as eight hundred people pushed, pulled, crawled, vaulted, dashed, dug and otherwise did their best to get to the tables before anyone else.

They had thirty minutes to register before round one was scheduled to begin. Viadud was planning on going for the record in registration times. Last year he had done it in thirty-seven minutes. Beating that time by seven minutes? Some people claimed it was impossible, like breaking the sound

barrier or running the four minute mile. Little did they know that the sound barrier and the four minute mile had both been breached, unless of course they did know this but they were rather ill adept at coming up with good metaphors for accomplishing the impossible.

Whatever.

By 2:43 there was a line stretching back eleven miles outside the door from the tables, each of which was packed with entrants, except for Whipsnade's, whose business wouldn't open for another minute or two.

Viadud clicked his watch to start the timer.

The record awaited.

You can do the math. 160 varsity LD debaters. 160 junior varsity LD debaters. 160 teams of varsity policy debaters. 120 teams of Public Forum debaters. Plus all their judges and coaches and assistants and sherpas and parents and whomever else they had dragged along with them. If that is not a circus, what is?

By 3:03 registration was two-thirds complete. Most of the line stretching outside the door had disappeared, fitting not comfortably but cozily in the registration vestibule. The piles of forms on the registration desks were down to a reasonable few. The amount of cash, checks, money orders and wampum in front of Larson E. Whipsnade was about as tall as the average sized Golden Retriever. As he had pointed out to coach Viadud at about 2:52, "We're gonna need a bigger bucket."

Viadud had obtained one for him. It was a washtub capable of giving a bath to that average sized Golden Retriever.

Larson E. showed no sign of satisfaction as he collected fines from one team after another. Demonstrating emotion over a school's inability to organize itself successfully would have been poor sportsmanship on his part. The Monteverdi team was famous for never messing up a registration when they traveled to someone else's tournament. With his own squad, Hem Viadud accepted only notarized death certificates as proof of a team member's or judge's inability to attend. Lacking that, they would be there. Period. End of story. So the Montes had no qualms about enforcing fines on others. And felt no need to rub it in. Taking the money was satisfaction enough.

Again, you can do the math. \$20 for a name change. \$30 for a dropped student. \$200 for a dropped judge. One after the other, Larson E. wrote out receipts by hand for each fine levied. No emotion. No gloating. No nothing.

Just show him the money.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls, and Children of All Ages!

I direct your attention to the clock—

3:11.

Two minutes ahead of the half hour.

And only one last team is still at the table, checking their registration.

Hem Viadud is standing behind the coach, looking over his shoulder, breathing down his neck, the ringmaster whip twitching in his right hand.

3:12.

“And here’s the check,” the coach announces, handing his registration fees to the roustabout behind the table.

“Any fines?” Viadud asks.

The roustabout shakes his head.

Ka-SNAP!

The whip is cracked.

Va-BOOM!

The starting pistol is shot into the air.

3:12.57 on the clock.

A new all-time registration record has been set, right here in the center ring. This is the quadruple somersault, the quintuple back flip, the taming of the wild Bengal Tiger and the shot from the cannon to the moon all in one.

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is debate circus history being made before your very eyes.

The crowd roars. The crowd swoons.

Ooooooh. Aaaaaaah. Oooooooh.

Hem Viadud cracks the whip one more time.

The tournament is about to begin.

Will anyone ever beat Monteverdi’s new registration record?

Will Larson E. Whipsnade give any fine money to the poor starving debaters in the Third World?

Will Hem Viadud ever tire of cracking his whip and shooting off his starter pistol?

How surprised will all the Monteverdi students be when they get into college and find out that we had a president called Thomas Jefferson?

Is Texas still the only state in the union that allows capital punishment at the high school level?

You might ask Willy Nelson, you might ask Lyle Lovett, you might even ask Bob Wills, although he and his Texas Playboys have been dead for quite a while now, but it is unlikely that any of them will be able to tell you in our next episode: “We gave you George W. Bush and boy, were we glad to get rid of him, Or, That’s why, perhaps, they all wear chaps...”