Sam Cook, Steven Hullum Rank Second Nationally in Parliamentary Debate

IT’S NOT UP FOR DEBATE—The University of Texas at Tyler has two of the best intellectual competitors in the nation.

Juniors Steven Hullum and Sam Cook took the UT Tyler debate team to new heights at the 2015 National Parliamentary Tournament of Excellence in March. Sophomores at the time, the duo placed second out of more than 250 collegiate teams in the nation, the university’s highest rank ever.

“They are wildly smart,” said assistant professor and debate coach Matthew Gayetsky, director of forensics. Gayetsky has coached the team for about a year, continuing UT Tyler’s longtime debate success.

The squad as a whole ranked eighth in the country at the end of last season.

“Sam and Steven address anything their opponent throws at them,” Gayetsky said. They’re adaptable to any situation and very sophisticated at identifying significant weaknesses in their opponents’ arguments. They can exploit those weaknesses immediately.”

In fact, everything the team does must be immediate. In debate, time is of the essence. With only 20 minutes to prepare their arguments after learning the debate topic, called a resolution, participants don’t even have time to write out full words and sentences in their notes. They aren’t allowed to bring any pre-printed or electronic notes to the tournament, so they use shorthand to jot down all the points they want to bring up.

The debate itself is only 40 minutes, and each speaker must deliver his speech as fast as possible to include all the team’s arguments. The more supporting statements a team makes, the more pressure the opponent feels to answer and rebut each argument.

“It’s nerve-wracking, an adrenaline rush,” said Hullum, who finds debate to be a worthwhile channel to indulge his competitive nature. “There’s no time between speeches. You immediately begin refuting what the affirming team says, and you’re talking very fast. One slip-up, one false move and you could lose the debate. It’s very intense competition.”

That’s especially true when the opposing team takes a standpoint that the twosome isn’t expecting. The UT Tyler team sometimes must refocus its arguments mid-debate to ensure its stance still makes sense.

“THEY ARE WILDLY SMART,” — UT TYLER DEBATE COACH MATTHEW GAYETSKY

Steven Hullum (left) and Sam Cook are pictured in the sweaters they wore at this year’s national tournament, where they placed second out of more than 250 teams.
The top 64 teams participate in debates around the world. From the science of global warming, to freedom of speech laws, to tax policies, to animal rights, to geopolitics and more—any social, political, cultural, racial, religious or other relevant issue is fair game.

Because the entire world of news is a lot to keep up with, one strategy Hullum and Cook use is to focus on a particular class of arguments, which can be manipulated to successfully address nearly unlimited topics in debate. For example, if the debaters have in-depth knowledge about the economy, the team can bring up points about economic issues that support their position for almost any resolution.

RISING TO THE TOP

To be invited to the NPTE, a team must accrue enough points, which it earns for debate rankings throughout the season. Most teams that qualify for the NPTE make it to the quarterfinals or better in all the debates they attend season-long. Only the top 64 teams out of more than 250 nationwide are invited to the tournament.

Hullum likens the debate season to NCAA basketball season. All collegiate teams participate in debates around the U.S. throughout the academic year, earning points for performance. The top 64 teams head to the NPTE, where they compete in preliminary rounds, narrowing the field to 32 through double elimination.

The teams are then ranked, and the highest-ranked competitors face the lower-ranked challengers until only eight teams remain. Then the fierce competition continues in the quarterfinals (like the Elite Eight), semifinals (Final Four), and then the final round (national championship) to crown the winner.

The sophomore-sophomore team competed for the championship against an exceptional senior-senior team from Southern Illinois University. Though they lost in the final round, Hullum and Cook took second place overall, UT Tyler’s best finish to date.

The two competitors complement each other well, and they rely on each other’s strengths to develop well-rounded arguments.

Hullum, a political science major, brings a substantive perspective to the team’s arguments, while social sciences major Cook offers more abstract, critical reasoning. For example, one of the resolutions the team debated at the tournament was that the United States should militarily intervene in Syria. As the negative team, Hullum and Cook argued against the resolution. One of Hullum’s points was that Russia would retaliate if the U.S. sent troops to Syria. Cook’s contribution was that foreign U.S. action leads to war, which is morally bad because it causes senseless death.

Before debating for UT Tyler, the two competed at rival high schools. “We’ve debated against each other since we were juniors in high school,” Cook said. “Steven always wanted to do a different kind of argument than I did. When we became partners in college, we got better at arguments that each other liked to go for. He knows me pretty well because we’ve been friends for so long, so we keep each other on track.”

Not only do they work well together, they help make sure the entire team can be successful at debates.

“Teaching the freshmen and helping them win is better for UT Tyler overall,” Hullum said. “I’ll convey to them the topics they’ll encounter most often, or I’ll suggest articles for them to read. When they’re doing drills, I’ll watch and critique them on how they can do better.”

They also learn from their own mistakes, which makes them so difficult to beat in tournaments, Gayetsky said. After losing in the final round, Cook returned to Tyler and voluntarily presented his arguments again, in a mock debate for his coach. He had nothing to gain, but he hates to lose, Gayetsky said, so he gave the argument again until he got it right. The students and their coach believe their hard work will pay off again this academic year.

“We set our goals high because of how last year went,” Cook said. “Neither Steven nor I will be satisfied with less than we did last year.”

Gayetsky agreed: “If we’re not in the final round, I’ll be surprised.”

And what does Hullum expect?

“The national championship,” he said. “We finished second at the most difficult tournament, and we know what we have to do to never lose on that topic again.”