STUDENT LIFE

Debate Goes Varsity

An academic team with needs like those of varsity athletics finds a new “home.”

By Kathleen McGarvey

It’s arguable that no University group is more steeped in history than the Debate Union.

“There’s a joke that the debate team was founded in the morning, and then the University was founded in the afternoon—so the debate team has existed a morning longer than the University,” says Brady Fletcher ’08 (MA), director of forensics.

Whatever its origin, the team has existed in many forms—sometimes competing intramurally, sometimes intercollegiately; sometimes taking on other teams one on one; or, as today, competing in tournaments. But recently, it’s made an unusual change, moving under the aegis of the Department of Athletics and Recreation.

It sounds peculiar, on its face. But the move makes sense, says George VanderZwaag, who, with the team’s move in 2014, became director of athletics and academic teams.

“We’re not saying debate is part of athletics. It’s not. But it’s part of my portfolio,” VanderZwaag says.

The move, he recalls, started with a basic question posed by Richard Feldman, dean of the College: “Is there more that we could do for teams that compete intercollegiately, but whom we don’t think of in the same way that we do varsity teams?”

There are two worlds within athletics: varsity and club sports. While clubs’ funding comes largely from students paying dues and performing other kinds of fund raising, varsity teams receive extensive support from the Department of Athletics and Recreation.

“We fund their travel, we pay for their equipment, we provide facility access and other things that are critical to their functioning,” VanderZwaag says. “We hire professional coaches, we supervise those coaches, and we set standards for their performance. Our goal is to provide programs and facilities of a high quality that are attractive to the very best students around the country.”

While other academic teams operate as club sports do, the Debate Union—like varsity sports teams—receives funding from the College budget, has professional coaches, and travels extensively.

“We were really running debate as a varsity program without the kind of oversight that we’d normally provide for varsity programs,” says VanderZwaag.

“In its own way, [debate] is a competition,” says Arthur Miller ’56, ’08 (Honorary), a stalwart alumnus of the team. “It’s a mental competition. It’s you against an opponent, and it’s judged, so you can make the argument that that’s where it belongs.”

Fletcher, who became coach last year but who has a long history with the team, says the new arrangement is working well.

“The new relationship has served what we do in a really constructive way,” he says. This year, the team is taking 18 trips to compete in 20 competitions. “It’s a big operation,” he says. “And now we have great support staff and infrastructure in athletics. This is what they do. They book travel, they find creative solutions, and they troubleshoot when problems come up—all of the logistical things that previously we just had to deal with on our own.”

Miriam Kohn ’17, a linguistics major from Portland, Oregon, is the team’s vice
STUDENT SUPPORT

Devoted to Debate

Arthur Miller ’56, ’08 (Honorary) describes his undergraduate self as a “shrinking violet, sort of a social misfit.”

He hasn’t done much shrinking in a while. A professor of law for 55 years, Miller has argued several times before the United States Supreme Court, as well as in every U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. For two decades, he was the on-air legal editor for ABC’s Good Morning America and for nearly a decade hosted Miller’s Court, a mock-trial program.

“My whole life is speech,” he says. He gives the credit to his time on Rochester’s debate team. “It was transformative,” he says. “It changed my life.” From an introvert, he became someone “having at least the capacity to be extroverted in the context of debate.”

It was Martin Messinger ’49 who helped him discover “this other personality.” Messinger himself took up debate in an effort to aid friend Clark Barrett ’50.

Barrett’s father was a prominent attorney in Buffalo. Messinger remembers, and he wanted his son to follow him into practicing law.

“But Clark had a stutter, and he came to me and said, ‘I have to learn to deal with my stutter—and if we had a debate team, I could get the practice I need.’”

And so they revived Rochester’s team—and sparked Messinger’s interest in debating. It’s never waned.

After Messinger graduated and began work at Merrill Lynch, he came back to campus as the debate coach. Miller was one of his first two debaters.

Today, Messinger and Miller are still building the program, through a fund that Messinger created and Miller has since matched. The fund now stands at $1.5 million.

In addition to debate, Messinger, a life trustee, has supported programs and initiatives across the University. Miller, who holds the title of University Professor at New York University School of Law, annually hosts a public affairs forum called “Miller’s Court” during Mellora Weekend. He also established an endowed professorship in history.

Barrett died in 2004.

As a coach Messinger emphasized that the team needed to be competitive, but still open to everyone. He worked with a wide cross-section of students, representing diverse personalities and ambitions. But they found commonality in debate: “We were filling needs in a lot of different ways,” he says.

The team has stayed true to its roots, Messinger says, and he takes particular satisfaction today in the large number of international students who are involved.

“Language is not a barrier when you make it not a barrier,” he says.

Skillful speaking is an inner strength to be marshalled and used “in whatever setting you’re in,” says Miller. Debaters learn to organize their thoughts, present them persuasively, and be unafraid to do so in a public arena. “It’s recognizing there’s something in being two people, a private person and a public person,” he says.

But debate teaches more than just speaking. To respond effectively to another’s argument requires absorbing it and using it in later portions of the dialogue.

“That’s true of teaching, and appellate advocacy, and it’s sure as hell true of debate,” says Miller. “You’ve got to learn to speak, but you’ve also got to be able to listen.”

—Kathleen McGarvey