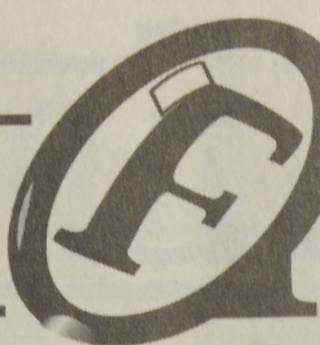


THE BRUNS



FEATURES PAGE

Inside the strange and heady world of debating

Like rock stars, there's a lot you don't know about debating teams...

by Anna King

VANCOUVER (CUP)—Rahim Moloo and Kevin Massie, senior members of the University of British Columbia (UBC) debate team, have been wearing their best suits on Sundays a lot lately. This is a very big deal. In the world of university debate tournaments, Friday is casual wear, Saturday is business casual and Sunday, if you're still in the tournament, is the day you put on your best suit.

"There's a special feeling Sunday morning if you're dressing up," Kevin told me recently, although he likes to play the rogue and sometimes doesn't wear a suit at all. He wears a dress shirt and his lucky Simple brand sneakers he's had since grade ten, which gets him odd looks at the prestigious debate tournaments he's been to recently, tournaments like the McGill Winter Carnival in Montreal and the World University Debate Championships in South Africa.

Rahim, a first-year law student with a voice like a deep river, prefers pinstriped shirts and cashmere scarves. Both are among the most talked-about veterans in a world-wide subculture that I, until about a month ago, didn't know existed.

Kevin's got a name in debate circles for a few reasons. He's one of the country's deepest university debaters—"deep" in debate language meaning smart, philosophical and/or experienced. He has won top speaker at three tournaments this year, he was last year's Canadian University Society for Intercollegial Debate (CUSID) president, and—most notably—he's a bit of an ass.

Having fun with it

Kevin likes to debate offensive propositions for fun, like "Child labour is justified," or "Teachers should be able to beat and/or sleep with their students." And he likes to insult his opponents in as crude a manner as he can get away with, which is taken as the mark of a great debater by some and of a jackass by others. Kevin seems to savour his reputation as a troublemaker.

"Once in a while, at tournaments, when I introduce myself to somebody for the first time, they turn around and walk away, because they've heard so much about me," he told me once, grinning. He says he only makes off-colour jokes or argues offensive cases if he knows everyone present realises he's joking, which he claims is the prerogative of the senior debater.

"You have to be a somebody to run cases like that," he said, "you have to have been around for a while."

Although not many people know it, UBC debaters have been around for quite a while. No one's exactly sure when the team started, but Mike Kotrly, the team's president, thinks it was in 1908 or so. The team has been getting serious in the last few years; they practice twice a week and have about 50 members. This year Kevin and Rahim, debating as a team, and Mike and Rahim, in an individual public speaking competition, 'broke' to quarter finals ('breaking' meaning they got to put on their good suits on Sunday) at the World Championships in South Africa, a move Mike says means the debate world will remember the name UBC for a long time.

Reputation is paramount in debate, and news travels fast. Hard-core debaters—maybe a third of the UBC team—check the CUSID website a few times a day for stats on who beat who at what tournament, or to contribute to the ongoing message board wars over bylaws or judging rules or style issues. I recently overheard a heated discussion over whether CUSID should adopt World Championships style and make judging panels rule by consensus. These are the kind of conversations debaters live for. Debaters love debating, it's true, but even more they love talking about debating. Who's broken at which tournament, which cases are considered 'tight' (a case that's so one-sided there's no real room to argue against it), which cases are overly 'opp heavy' (too easy for the opposition team), which styles are better (the Americans have a completely different, utterly ridiculous style, Rahim once told me).

"Yeah, we're total nerds," Mike said the day I met him, "but we love it."



It's a Sunday, and veteran debaters Mike Saposnik and Rahim Moloo are wearing their best suits.

I recently watched one of the many weekend-long debate tournaments in the North American circuit, the Pacific Cup Debating Championships, which the UBC team hosts. Thirty-eight teams from across Canada and the States competed in what is regarded as a more relaxed, fun-filled tournament than some of the others. That means no one will leave the room crying, ideally, and joke rounds aren't frowned upon.

Kevin isn't debating this time, he told me, because it doesn't look good if the host team sweeps the tournament, and, he said a little sheepishly, he'd probably be the one sweeping. He's the chief adjudicator instead, a position of substantial prestige. Rahim, however, is debating; his long-time partner Mike Saposnik flew in from Queen's University in Kingston the night before, which makes them a hybrid team (yet another topic of contention). I wait for Mike and Rahim to show up on Friday, while Kevin yaks on his cell phone.

"Where the fuck are you, Rahim? The newspaper is looking for you! Nah, just joking, man."

Rahim arrives dressed impeccably and introduces me to Mike, a polite pre-med-turned-political science student who wears khakis, a collared shirt under a trim navy sweater and, oddly, hiking boots. Debaters are arriving from all sides, many who obviously know each other and some who don't but are talking a mile a minute nonetheless. The only people not talking loudly are the judges, those sitting wide-eyed on a bench against the wall, roommates or girlfriends coerced into the job by very persuasive debaters. Rahim is talking with another veteran, Rahool, about their girlfriends, both of whom aren't debaters but have learned plenty about the game.

"Sometimes we're talking about something, like, personal," Rahool says, "and my girlfriend says, 'Don't even think about making that into a case.' Then she says, 'Anyway, it's too opp-heavy.'"

Getting ready

We make it to the lecture hall where the tournament organisers thrill the crowd with a homemade video featuring veteran debaters singing "Oklahoma" (the tournament's theme is musicals). Master Adjudicator Kevin then lays out the basic tournament rules. Western Canadian tournaments, he explains, generally run "squirrelable" resolutions.

After hanging around with the debate team for the past few weeks, I actually know what this means. Fifteen minutes before each round of debate, the tournament directors will announce the "resolution," or topic, for debate. Teams are paired up against each other, allocated to different rooms, and, as rounds mimic a parliamentary debate, designated as either the 'government' or 'opposition' side. The government team then has fifteen minutes to prepare a 'case,' which is a narrower version of the initial resolution. 'Squirrelable' resolutions are wildly vague, and can be narrowed down into virtually anything so long as some attempt at a link to the resolution is made. The first resolution I ever heard was: "We're living in the ghetto in Soweto." It turned into a case on whether gay students at Berkeley University should be allowed a specially designated residence.

Earlier, Kevin explained that 'canning' cases, or having them

prepared long in advance, while technically illegal, is accepted in practice everywhere as a way of making teams engage in a deeper level of debate. His case binder has over 100 prepared cases, he told me, and he knows them so well he can recite the points and the opps in his sleep.

Kevin continues laying down the law.

"Truisms, statements that are factually correct, like 'Humans are carbon-based life forms,' and tautologies, that use circular logic, are absolutely prohibited," he admonishes. Later, he tells me there is an unofficial list of cases that are so contentious and done to death that if you try to run them people will walk out of the room: abortion, capital punishment, euthanasia, hate crimes, anything to do with Hitler. The list can be challenged if you've got an innovative spin (I once heard "This house supports televising Timothy McVeigh's execution" floating around) or you can be funny about it, so long as you're not so offensive that you disgrace your entire school, but again, you'd better "be somebody" to do that.

Kevin explains the scoring to the judges, which is technically out of 50, but in practice runs between 35

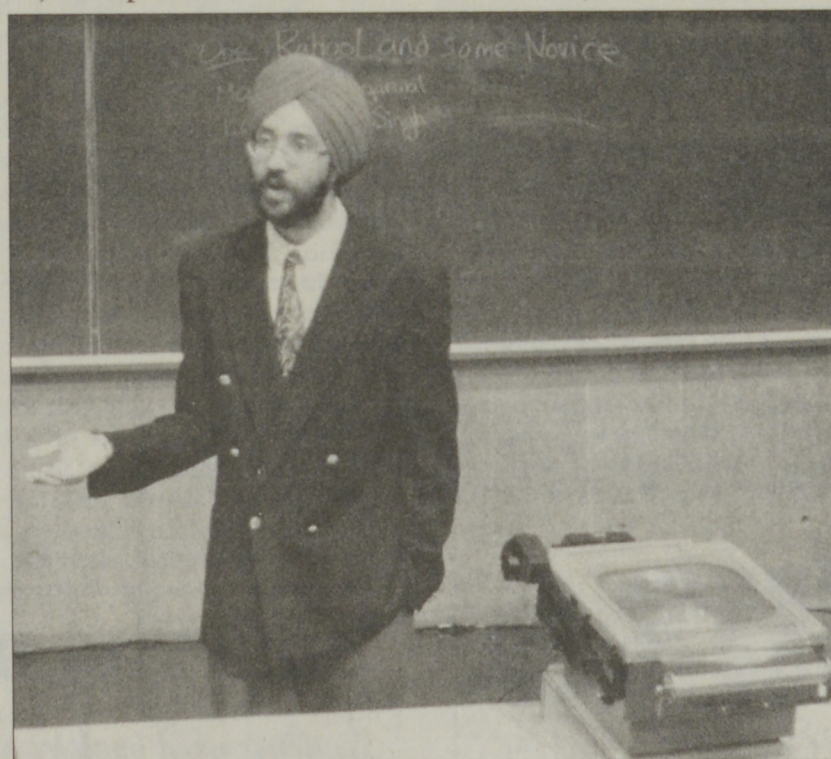
mile a minute and scribbling things down on a clipboard.

"It's that you're involved while the actual game is being played," Rahim says. "And the selection process is important. You get chosen to represent your country. You're not hired." Mike is pacing around the room to look for whiteboard markers.

"It all really just comes down to one point," he says. "You're part of the team. It's just one huge point. I'm going next door to try and find markers."

There are five minutes to go. Rahim is writing furiously, and draws four columns on the page, one for each speaker, in order of their presentation: the PM (Prime Minister, on the government team), the MO (Member of the Opposition), the MC (Minister of the Crown, government) and the LO (Leader of the Opposition). He draws an extra column for the PMR (Prime Minister's Rebuttal), the government's last ditch three-minute speech at the end.

Mike is back, without markers. He's stressed, maybe because he doesn't like sports cases or maybe because it's the first round of the tournament or maybe because it's the debaters' way to be stressed.



Ajit Singh is both respected and feared in debating circles.

and 44.

"A 35 is reserved for when you want to physically beat the person," Kevin says. "A 42 is so good it makes you cry. A 43—don't do it. There's no one here who can justify getting a 43." He looks at a tall blonde debater in the front row. "Greg, that means you too."

The first resolution and the list of teams set against each other are put up on a board and Mike and Rahim rush off to prep a case, having come down as a government team. We head to a room upstairs.

"I've got this great case," Mike says. "It's a time place set. You're The New York Times. The case is, 'This house would tell you not to report on the Raelians.'"

"Yeah, but here's the opp," says Rahim. "We publish the story and say there's no proof. That way you can say you are educating the vulnerable." "I admit, it's somewhat tight," Mike says.

"Somewhat? No, no, here's a better case," Rahim says. "The case is 'Coaches should get medals at the Olympics.' It's wide open."

We arrive at the room. Mike is panting.

"What's the purpose of a medal?" he asks. "That's key." But Rahim isn't really listening to him; he's talking a

The round goes well. Rahim and Mike are polished, poised. Rahim focuses his intense and spectacled gaze directly at the judge and speaks faster than I thought was possible, pointing emphatically with his right hand, lifting his eyebrows for emphasis. He's the sports junkie, and brings up an example from the Russian hockey team where a coach took a medal away from a backup goalie who never got off the bench. The opposition team is a little rough around the edges, but no novices. The MO has a nasal, professorial manner, and uses words like "panoply," but blunders by insisting that recognising coaches is the same as recognising players' parents, to which both Rahim and Mike leap to their feet, right hands outstretched, left hands behind their heads, as is the custom for a Point of Information.

"I will not take your questions at this time," says the MO. "So sit down and stop wrinkling your pants." The LO is wild-eyed and verging on frantic, and Bring In Da Noize, Bring In Da Funk (that's our team—it's a little-known musical, apparently) walks away fairly confident that they've dropped the opposition into the gutter.

We meet up with a glut of debaters on the stairs, and they instantly start quizzing us.

"We said we wouldn't back-tab this tournament!" Mike says to Rahim, grinning. Back-tabbing is an addiction for debaters. It means trying to figure out where you're ranked and who won the previous round based on who you and everyone else is matched up against in the next round. It's madness. It's an obsession. By Saturday afternoon, it will have every single debater locked in its steely grip.

I watch a novice round between Desiree, a soft-spoken anthropology student from UBC, and her partner Ryan against a flashy government team on the topic of privatising prisons. When the flouncy PM says "They didn't clash with my first point at all" (meaning they didn't address it), Desiree shouts out in her usually demure voice, "You probably weren't listening!" I stifle laughter.

Drinking and arguing

Friday night, I head to a nearby bar with the debaters and sit at the loudest bar table of my life. The best way to get to know debaters, I figure out after making small talk for half an hour, is to argue with them. I throw myself into a discussion about whether attempted murder should have the same punishment as murder and surface 20 minutes later, shaken, exhilarated and soundly defeated. I make a brief appearance in a UBC teaching assistants' strike argument (too tight, I decide), and then suddenly find myself spearheading a bias in journalism round, which rapidly spirals out of my hands, since most of my companions read three newspapers and at least as many websites a day and know recent issues of the debater's bible, The Economist, by heart. (One debater told me his goal in life is to get an obituary in The Economist.)

After a few beers, a girl named Ashley spills out a bunch of reasons why she loves debate: "I can get my pretentious, petty side out," "It helps me get focused," "It fills the void where my acting career was," "It gives me an edge," "It's the only place guys really let me talk politics." Meanwhile, Kevin tells war stories in the corner about the round where he dropped his nemesis, Scott Thurlow, at the McGill Winter Carnival.

I ask him what his favorite case of all time is.

"Probably the one where Rob Silver and Jamie Springer ran 'This house would blow up the Temple Mount,'" Kevin grins.

"What about the ficus plant case, man?" someone says, and everyone laughs. The ficus plant case is famous. It's based on a New Jersey congressional election where Michael Moore ran a ficus plant, a knee-high shrub, against Congressman Frelinghuysen, a Republican. Somehow Moore got the plant a voter registration card, and since technically 'Ficus' was over the age of 25, born on American soil and a registered voter, he was a completely legal candidate. Eventually the state ruled votes cast for Ficus were spoiled ballots, but Kevin's case is they should re-count the ballots and, if Ficus wins, Ficus should be sent to congress.

"I've never lost that case," Kevin told me. "I never lose the case that orange juice makes you gay either."

The next two days rush by. I don't

make it to the morning rounds on Saturday, but Rahim gets me up to speed when I arrive.

"We think we're undefeated," he says excitedly. "I got mad at an MC—yelled a bit. It was great." He and Mike are scanning their casebooks for something interesting, new and, hopefully, deep. Rahim convinces Mike to go with a case arguing that the category "race" on the federal census is not legitimate. First, though, they're up against a veteran government team, and Mike is worried.

"Greg's going to pull sports on me, man."

Mike's only partly right. The government case is an interesting one: "You're Mr Williamson, an excellent black rugby player in South Africa a year after Apartheid has ended. The national rugby team, which used to ban black players, is now asking you to be on the team. Do it."

Greg Allen, the government's PM, is very good.

"Jackie Robinson happened 15 years before the civil rights movement," he says. Mike is whimpering "I got nothing!" and sucking hard on a mini apple juice box. Rahim and the government MC have strong but scattered speeches and then Mike gets up.

"What no one has talked about yet, Madam Speaker, is how accepting the position would impose a political role on Mr Williamson he never asked for. And what will happen on the team? Will the players pass him the ball? And if Mr Williamson is truly supposed to represent how things have changed, why is he the only black player being asked? Short of doing an interpretive dance, I don't know what Greg in his PMR can possibly do to explain these issues."

After, Rahim slaps hands with Mike. "This guy gave the deepest speech, man!" Mike exhales. "Yeah. It all depends where the judge places the burden." Mike heads for a bench where he passes out for half an hour. In the washroom, I hear a girl crying and being comforted by a friend in the stall next to me, embarrassed about a round.

The final day

Suddenly, it's Sunday and Bring in Da Noize, Bring in Da Funk has broken into the quarter and semifinals. I miss the morning rounds again, but watch the novice finals while Mike and Rahim madly prepare a final case. The novice round is a riot.

"This house would force North America to adopt a world standard Scrabble dictionary." Kevin and Mike Kotrly groan and shake their heads. Only one novice team is funny and, predictably, they win. In front of a much larger crowd, the Sunday rounds are more like performances, and comedy is often what saves or sinks a team.

The championship round, between Rahim and Mike Saposnik and Rahool Agarwal and Ajit Singh, is impressively deep. Rahim runs the case that prisoners should have the right to vote and throws in a little Rawls, a little social contract, and a little gentle mockery. Rahool's MO is as polished as a river stone, and Mike, although he spent the day racing around like a ten-year-old, is suddenly dissecting the issue with a craftsman's precision.

"There's no option of changing the system if you're outside the system, if everyone who smokes pot and gets caught can't vote on whether pot should be legal." Ajit, who won the public speaking rounds at Worlds and who is feared and respected in debate circles, speaks eloquently, but something's lacking.

As the judges file away to vote, I place my bets: Mike and Rahim, first place, Greg, best speaker, Mike, second best speaker. I turn out to be right except that Mike, suddenly turning pink, wins best speaker along with sharing top team. Carolyn, one of the weekend organisers, hands out plaques, photos are snapped, and debaters crowd around the top teams to offer praise and begin what will inevitably be a lengthy post-round discussion about the merits of each team's argument, the biases of the judges, the style of the round, whether the case should be taken to Nationals, and every other related topic possibly conceived of.

In the 1989 debate film Listen to Me, the team's coach tells star debater and loverboy Kirk Cameron, "Debate, as practiced here, is rougher than football, meaner than ice hockey." That may be going a bit far. Debaters aren't that tough, they just like to talk. And talk. And talk.