

Say What? Meet the walking, talking argument for Denver's Urban Debate League

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- Anthony Camera



Opponents pick their words carefully against the Manual High School debate team.

[Denver Urban Debate League](#), [Manual High School](#), [Theron Harrison](#), [Teague Harrison](#), [Melanie Asmar](#)

Theron Harrison is frenetic today. Pacing back and forth in mismatched stocking feet — one black sock, one white — he glides on tiptoe across the wood floor in the neat living room of his family's house in northeast Park Hill, thumping a mini-football against the wall as he dictates notes to his sister, Teague. He's wearing a baggy T-shirt that features two big, shiny gold handguns and the words "Just Me and My Bitches" across the chest.

"We gotta step it up," says the seventeen-year-old matter-of-factly. "I want to, at least, be in New York debating on day two. If you're debating on day two, that means you're getting a trophy. And if you're getting a trophy in New York, then you might be getting a scholarship, you know what I'm saying?"

Teague, who is sixteen, listens as she types on her Toshiba laptop, which is balanced on the orange crate the two use to lug around their thick folders of dense debate paperwork. A pair of headphones hangs around her neck, softly playing a Korean pop song. It's Sunday afternoon, and she and her brother are making a list of goals.

Know all of our affirmatives.

Have a defined and clear-cut negative strategy.

Win all of our rounds.

Win the tournament.

The Harrisons are the odds-on favorites to win the Denver Urban Debate League City Championship this weekend. If they do, they'll get an all-expenses-paid trip to the Urban Debate National Championship in New York City next month. Teague and Theron have been hot all year, winning every tournament except for the last one in February, which they had to sit out. Theron, a smart student, was ineligible to compete because of a failing grade in first-period chemistry — a result of his inability to show up to class on time.

Now, with the city championship just three weeks away, he's picking up the rapid-fire pace of preparation that has hurtled him and his sister to the top of the league.

This year's debate topic, or resolution, is intense, and debaters must argue both sides: whether the U.S. should substantially reduce its military presence in one of the following six countries — South Korea, Japan, Afghanistan, Kuwait, Iraq or Turkey.

As Theron talks strategy with Teague, it's almost possible to see his thoughts tripping over one another in order to make it to his mouth.

"Everything we do at this tournament, we're going to do at nationals," he says, ping-ponging between the front door and the entrance to the kitchen. He tosses the football and catches it. He opens the fridge, closes it and turns around. "This is practice for how things are going to go down in New York."

For Manual High School in Five Points, the 2010-2011 debate season began at 4 p.m. on August 25, the fifth day of the new school year, at an L-shaped table in the school's stuffy second-floor library. Eighteen teenagers, many still wearing the polo shirts with a blue "M" embroidered on the breast that make up the school's uniform, sat at the table drinking lemon-lime soda out of Styrofoam cups and sucking orange cheese powder from cheddar-flavored chips off their fingertips.

"We are stuck right now," said debate team coach Charlie Smith, a ninth-grade geography teacher at Manual, home of the Thunderbolts. "We need a bigger team."

Manual has been part of the Denver Urban Debate League since it started three years ago. The idea behind it is to bring an intensely intellectual activity usually reserved for affluent, white suburban high schools to inner-city schools like Manual, where 93 percent of the 349 students are black or Latino, 90 percent receive free or reduced-price lunch (an indicator of poverty) and where, statistically, the chances they'll graduate and go to college prepared for academic rigor are slimmer.

The league is part of a national movement that has roots in Atlanta, home to college-debate powerhouse Emory University. In 1985, Emory helped found the Atlanta Urban Debate League in partnership with the city's public schools. Other cities followed suit, and in 1997, philanthropist George Soros donated seed money for more leagues.

That funding dried up in 2002, and the National Association for Urban Debate Leagues, a nonprofit based in Chicago, was formed to continue the work. By then, there were fourteen urban debate leagues in cities such as Baltimore, Los Angeles and Washington, D.C. Now there are nineteen, including Denver's.

Two local attorneys, Roberto Corrada and Rico Munn, were the founders of the Denver league. Both former debaters, they knew the power it held.

"I'm from a pretty lower-middle-class family," says Corrada, now a law professor at the University of Denver. "The only way for me to go straight to college and handle that debt was to get some sort of scholarship. Debate allowed me to do that."

Several top debate colleges, such as Emory, the University of Kansas and Northwestern University in Illinois, offer substantial debate-related scholarships, and most universities consider debate a plus when doling out generic financial aid.

"This is about getting kids into college," says Munn, former executive director of the Colorado Department of Higher Education.

That's why Urban Debate Leagues focus on policy debate, regarded as the most difficult and intimidating type of competitive debate. Policy debate has a culture and a lingo all its own. And since time is of the essence during a debate round, everything is abbreviated, sometimes with only one letter. "T" stands for "topicality." There's also "aff," "neg," "cross-ex," and "heg," short for "hegemony," a key concept in debate.

In a policy debate round, there are two teams with two debaters each. One team is affirmative and the other is negative. The affirmative team, or "aff," must present evidence that supports the resolution — in this case, for example, that the U.S. should decrease its military presence in Iraq. The job of the negative team, or "neg," is to prove that doing so would be a bad idea. Over the course of a tournament, each team will argue both sides, so they must practice both negative and affirmative cases. Preparation is critical, because it's not announced which side the debaters are on until a few minutes before the round starts.

A round is made up of eight "speeches" — four affirmative and four negative. The first four can only be eight minutes long; in between, there are three minutes of "cross-examination," or "cross-ex" time, in which the opposing team asks questions of the speaker. The last four speeches are five minutes long, and there is no cross-ex between them. Each team also gets eight minutes of prep time to use throughout the round to brainstorm ideas or write their next speeches. Only one person speaks at a time. The first affirmative speaker lays out the team's plan, then the first negative speaker attacks it. The second affirmative speaker offers more evidence as to why it's good. The second negative speaker follows with evidence as to why it's not.

The evidence is what counts most. The debaters gather most of their evidence from the Internet and package it together in what are known as "cards." One card may quote several sources on why it's a good idea to pull troops out of South Korea — because it's too expensive to keep them

there, or because if we stay, we could get sucked into a nuclear war with aggressive North Korea. The sources tend to be dry and wonky, not the kind of stuff high-schoolers would read in their spare time: an article by a senior fellow at the Cato Institute; a paper by a government professor at Texas A & M University; news reports by the BBC; speeches by Henry Kissinger. More advanced debaters like to frame their arguments by quoting philosophers such as Michel Foucault.

Every round lasts an hour or two, and the winner is decided by a judge who weighs both sides' evidence, evaluates the way it was presented and subjectively chooses whichever team made the best case. The overall winner of the tournament is decided by elimination. Each team of two students debates at least five rounds. The four teams with the best scores go on to the semi-finals, an accomplishment known as "breaking." The winners of those rounds then debate each other to determine the first-place team.

"People think they can walk in off the street and say, 'I can watch a debate, I can judge a debate,' and that's not quite true," says Munn. "There's a significant learning curve. That first year, no coaches had any policy debate experience and no kids did. A lot of it was getting kids and coaches to have positive experiences early on and to see the potential."

That was true of Smith. A civil-rights-minded thirty-year-old who grew up in rural North Carolina, he came to teaching by way of AmeriCorps, where he discovered a knack for connecting with teenagers while working at a youth sports program. He was hired at Manual in 2008, his first teaching job, and was tapped by the then-principal to coach the debate team. "It totally fulfills my mission as an educator," Smith says, "and that's to create critically thinking, productive members of our society." But, he admits, he was clueless as to the details. "I didn't know anything about debate."

He started by looking for students who liked to argue. "The biggest thing that my kids responded to was the fact that an adult would have to listen to them for an hour and a half, for a whole round," Smith says. He ended up with about fifteen students. Manual was one of six schools in the league that year, and although the team as a whole won the inaugural DUDL tournament, they lost every subsequent tournament. A duo from West High took first place and traveled to the national championship in Chicago.

Since then, the league has grown to include ten schools and about 150 students. But it's always hunting for more.

Which is why Smith gathered this group together in the Manual library last August. And despite debate's nerdy stereotype, Manual's team has credibility. Trophies are abundant in debate — there are awards for the top eight two-person teams at each tournament, in addition to medals for speaking style and judges' choice — and Manual has an entire glass case in the foyer devoted to the debate team's gold. "It's probably been the most successful extracurricular activity we've had here," says Manual principal Joe Sandoval. Plus, several boys confess, debate is a good way to meet girls.

"We need the brightest minds at Manual," Smith told the students.

Several of them were in the room already — like eighteen-year-old Jessica Keys, a loud senior who favors wearing bows in her dreadlocks and was on track to graduate early. Or sixteen-year-old Scarlett Chavez, a petite sophomore whose politeness belies the fact that she can command the attention of an auditorium full of her rambunctious peers when she wants to. Or sophomore Kendale Bryant-Townsell, who at sixteen has plenty of swagger — and a detailed plan to earn his MBA and start his own aerospace-engineering business.

And the Harrison siblings.

Teague and Theron came to Manual as freshmen three years ago from Omar D. Blair Charter School in Green Valley Ranch. Blair was the third middle school that Teague had attended. For Theron, who repeated eighth grade in order to have, as his mother, Cordellia, says, "another year to mature," it was the fourth. "Theron is not a traditional learner; he never has been," she explains. "Once he has it, homework does him no good. He's not going to do it."

"That's the story of my life," Theron interjects, popping out of his chair in the family kitchen. "I still go through that. My homework isn't that great. My classwork is okay. But I'm always, always, always in the top 5 percent of the test scores."

Teague, on the other hand, "tends to play the game better," Cordellia says. Introspective and self-motivated, she has turned boredom into opportunity. She's one of only two juniors in the entire school taking advantage of a program that allows her to take classes at Community College of Denver; she's currently studying English and psychology.

"My grades are pretty much always wonderful," Teague says.

In many ways, brother and sister are opposites. Theron is social; comfortable in his own skin, he's able to relate easily to both adults and peers. At debate tournaments, he blends in to the raucous scene, scarfing food, making jokes and flirting. At home, Theron says, "I'm either texting or asleep." On a recent weekend, he spent several hours playing online video games against his friends.

Teague, meanwhile, prefers to be by herself at tournaments, listening to music on her headphones or drawing in Microsoft Paint. On her own time, she reads and writes in her journal. She has an encyclopedic knowledge of the Harry Potter series and plans to one day live in South Korea. "The way it's advanced technologically over the last fifty years has been astounding," she explains. "As a country, they have an impeccable work ethic. And the guys are really hot." Especially, she says, a South Korean rapper with a Justin Bieber haircut named G-Dragon.

But the Harrisons also have several important things in common, not the least of which is their parents — and in particular, their mother, who is dedicated to making sure her kids have the same opportunities as other, wealthier kids. That's part of the reason she sent Teague and Theron to Manual, a school that, despite recent struggles, boasts an impressive list of graduates. Former Denver mayor Wellington Webb graduated from Manual, as did writer Ted Conover and

National Public Radio correspondent Scott Horsley. Another alum is Rob Stein, who was brought in as principal in 2007 to resurrect Manual after the district shut it down because of poor performance. (Stein is no longer at the school.)

"I felt like if that school could get back to that place, I wanted my kids there," says Cordellia, a schoolteacher herself who taught kindergarten and first grade for Denver Public Schools but was laid off last year. "And I knew that because they were reopening it, they were going to pour a lot of money into it."

Manual is also home to Colorado Youth at Risk, a program that connects students with adult mentors. Both Teague and Theron participate. Theron's mentor is an attorney. Teague's mentor is a professor at the University of Colorado Denver.

"They're networking," Cordellia says. "And this is what you see in wealthier families — the networking starts in high school. There's going to be a select few kids from their graduating class that are going to make it. I want my kids to be a part of that."

That's also the reason she pushed them to debate, as she had done in high school and college in Kansas. "I really was a tiger mom about debate," says Cordellia. "I'm like, here's an opportunity. I'm not going to let you miss it."

At first, Teague and Theron were skeptical. "I thought it was for nerds, really and truthfully, so I didn't want to do it," Theron says.

And it showed. Regis University debate coach Rob Margesson, who volunteers with DUDL and encourages his college debaters to do the same, recalls that two years ago, Theron was "a complete wild child. I got many, many phone calls from Charlie at the very beginning of, 'I've got this kid and he won't listen, and he won't make the grades, but I know he's really smart. What do you do?'"

Theron's answer was to quit. He left the team in the second semester of his freshman year.

Teague, who was also a freshman that year, stuck with it, but she wasn't enthusiastic. "The first year, it wasn't really organized and we didn't really know what we were doing," she says. But Teague was interested enough to attend a prestigious debate camp that summer at the University of Wyoming. The three-week camp draws top high-school debaters — many of them on track to attend Harvard and Princeton — from all over the country. Cordellia taught summer school to pay the tuition.

Teague rejoined the team at Manual the fall of her sophomore year but didn't enjoy it, partly because her debate partner was lackluster. After the first semester, she quit to focus more on her schoolwork and her position as editor of the school magazine.

Right after Teague quit, Theron rejoined. He didn't have a partner, so he debated solo, which in debate lingo is called "going maverick." But he did so poorly at his first tournament back that he quit again. His mom pushed him to rejoin, and he ended up partnering with Kahdijah James, an

honor roll student with so much poise, it's hard to believe she's just sixteen. As partners, though, Theron says, "we were terrible." Kahdijah didn't cope well with Theron's domineering style; he once made her cry at a tournament.

At the city championship last year, Theron and Kahdijah won three rounds and lost three — far short of earning a bid to the national championships. Even so, Theron caught the attention of league volunteers, who could see his talent. "Theron is one of the reasons I got hooked on this league right at the very start," says Alan Zimmerman, an IT manager at Qwest who debated in college and now volunteers as a judge at tournaments. "It was obvious that he was brilliant, obvious that he was trying really hard and enjoying this.

"Debate might have been the only thing keeping him in school," he adds.

At the awards banquet after the city championship last year, Theron learned he was one of two Denver students who won a scholarship to go the same debate camp his sister attended the year before. To win it, he'd written an essay explaining that this year, he wanted to be a leader on Manual's debate team.

That scholarship changed things. "I couldn't quit after that," Theron says.

Manual's coach, Smith, also won a scholarship, as did another Manual debater, Ronnie Lovato. "I knew right away that Theron and Ronnie would be the only minorities at debate camp," Smith says. "Right before we left, I told them, 'I don't know what it's going to be like for you, but you can take and use the fact that you're different as an asset or as something that hinders you. And I want you to play it as an asset.'"

The first day, Theron walked into the room wearing a Lakers jersey, sunglasses and a baseball cap, Smith recalls. He sat in the center of the front row, his back to rows of wealthy students with Mac laptops. Theron only had pen and paper. "He just blew up at debate camp," Smith says. The other students "challenged his intellect. I don't think his intellect was often challenged at Manual — not the way it was there."

"I was intimidated," Theron admits. His partner at camp, he says, "knew infinitely more than me. He worked with me a lot." And Theron soaked it all in. The kid who often missed the first bell at school made it to his lab sessions by 8 a.m. every morning and was at the hour-long optional sessions that started at 11:30 every night. The other debaters called him "Captain."

"He became a leader," Smith says.

Just past 5 p.m. on a fall Monday, the team is practicing, and Theron is in charge.

"Ten seconds, guys!" he calls out above the cacophony of voices bouncing around the room, which is empty save for the dozen debaters speed-reading through their cards. The team has been

practicing every Monday and Wednesday from 5 to 7 p.m. in the library, which doesn't have a librarian this year.

The practices have the feel of a family gathering — that is, a family that regularly gathers to discuss nuclear proliferation and the merits of military spending. Cordellia is always there, the only parent with debate experience, guiding them in the finer points of argumentation. The other debaters call her "Mom" as often as they call her "Ms. Harrison." Pat Coan, a retired federal judge and Scarlett's mentor through Colorado Youth at Risk, also volunteers, bringing the kids healthy after-school snacks — one day, it was individual servings of grapes in Ziploc bags, another it was homemade lemon squares — and working one-on-one with students who need extra help.

Smith is the conductor, overseeing it all. He doesn't run practice like a drill sergeant, but he's no pushover, either. When the kids get too giddy, too jokey, too hyper, he tells them to knock it off. Last year, Jessica nicknamed him "Demon Fluff." "He's fluffy and he's a demon," she explains. Smith shrugs and smiles; it could be worse.

This afternoon, the team is starting by doing the aforementioned drills, reading through their evidence out loud for ten minutes and then doing it again, backward.

Smith is busy with paperwork, so Theron is running the stopwatch, prodding his teammates to stay on task. He doesn't shout or talk down to them; instead, he levels with them. When a few debaters begin to mumble as their ten minutes wind down, he looks up from his own reading and says, almost incredulously, "I didn't say stop."

Already the team has dwindled from that first meeting in August. In order to compete, debaters must maintain C's or better in all of their classes. It's proving to be a significant hurdle for some. At the last tournament, only six debaters were eligible to compete. Having fewer debaters is hurting Manual's ability to win team awards at tournaments. They keep losing to schools with bigger teams, like their chief rivals, Martin Luther King Jr. Early College. Theron isn't happy about it.

"We should've won," he tells his teammates. "This team has a lot of potential, and there's a lot of love in this room. So let's be at practice and let's take it serious." For the moment, no one is goofing off. Everyone is listening. "It can't just be a couple of us. It takes a team. Can we get a 'T-Bolts' or something?"

Smith raises his eyebrows, impressed, then leads the team in their signature, booming cheer. "T! *BOLTS!*"

One of the most amazing things about urban debate, supporters say, is how far students progress in the course of the six-month tournament season, which spans from October to March. It's the stuff of *Stand and Deliver*. It's proof that if you set expectations high, students will exceed them. It's cheesy, and while some students resent that their accomplishments are seen as unexpected —

"Even though we're urban and we may not have fifty laptops and all the money in the bank, we're just as smart as other people," says Manual senior debater Rashauna Tunson — it's impossible to deny that the students' growth from fall to spring is awe-inspiring.

The first tournament of the year takes place on a Saturday in October at Manual. Most students are nervous. One vomits. The rest mumble through their speeches, stopping and starting and stuttering. They mispronounce the names of countries and mangle difficult words. Kim Jong Il becomes "Kim Jong Two." Seoul comes out as "Sow-ool." It's obvious that many of them don't understand the complicated politics behind the arguments they're trying so hard to seem confident in making.

Amid the uncertainty, Teague and Theron stand out.

Now juniors, it's the first time they've debated together since they were freshmen. For their affirmative, they choose an edgy case: that the U.S. should withdraw all troops from its base in Okinawa, Japan, because soldiers are raping Okinawan women.

Their second round of the day takes place in an English classroom. The judge, an attorney named Breena Meng, folds herself into a student desk near the back. Teague, Theron and their opponents, two girls from the Denver School of Science and Technology, sit up front, facing her. Teague speaks first. Standing behind the upturned crate that serves as a podium, she lays out the case in a loud voice brimming with self-assuredness, a voice the outwardly quiet teenager doesn't use much outside of debate.

"The U.S. should respect the wishes of Okinawans!" she booms, citing a report that 52 percent want the troops gone. The other team shoots back with an argument that "the opposition to the base is not that intense" and that removing an entire military base because of rape would be "extreme."

In the first cross-examination, Theron attacks. "What are more important issues than rape?" he demands. "Name three."

When the girls counter that pulling troops out of Japan could set off a nuclear war with North Korea, Theron makes clear that he's not having it. "So you can rape someone, but as long as you're protecting them, that's all right?" he asks. His tone is dubious and his eyes are on the judge.

When he's not speaking, he's moving. Throughout the round, Theron frantically scribbles notes, shuffles his and Teague's cards and whispers strategy in his sister's ear. Sometimes when she's speaking, he jumps out of his seat like someone's lit it on fire. He wants to say something to her, to direct her to make a certain argument or stay away from another, but doing so is forbidden. Even so, Theron stretches that rule as far as he can, passing her his scribbled notes, shaking his head to signal yes or no, and motioning for her to speak faster when he feels she's running out of time.

Theron speaks last. That's his and his sister's strategy: Teague, the more even-keeled of the two, meticulously sets up their plan, explaining the nuts and bolts to the judge. Theron, the passionate leader, then steps in and clinches it with technical analysis and emotional reasoning.

"We outline a specific problem — they don't!" he tells the judge. His voice is strong, and in a situation where time is everything, his words spill out like a waterfall. Theron continues: Their threat of nuclear war isn't backed by any evidence, he says, while our claim of rape is. There was one instance, he adds, where six soldiers gang-raped an Okinawan woman but were never convicted of it. "There's still rape happening," he says, "so we have to withdraw!"

The judge votes for Teague and Theron. "I am so impressed," she tells them. "You had no summer rust." It's their first win of the season; they lost their first round to a formidable team, Bethany and Amber, from MLK.

After that, Teague and Theron make it their goal to never lose to that pair again — and they don't. In fact, they don't lose much at all. At the second tournament, held at Thomas Jefferson High School in November, they win all of their rounds and take first place in the finals. At the third tournament, held at West in December, they win four rounds and lose one (to another team from MLK) but go on to win in the finals. At the following tournament, at MLK in January, they're undefeated. Again they take home first-place trophies, which they display in a tall wood-and-glass case in their living room.

Their success is due in part to the affirmative case they debut at the second tournament. The case is far more sophisticated than anything the other students are arguing. It starts by asking the judge to throw out their own notions of good and bad and instead evaluate the round based on deontology, a philosophical theory that says actions should be judged based on the wrongness and rightness of the actions themselves and not on the consequences of those actions. Or, as Teague once explained it in a round, "Killing somebody who is disliked by the public at large is still wrong because it's killing somebody, which is a violation of human rights."

It's a theory usually relegated to master's theses — and one that most teenagers have never heard of, which works to Teague and Theron's advantage. "What does deontology mean?" is the most common cross-ex question their opponents ask them, often adding, "In your own words!" in an attempt to trip them up. It never works.

But even if Teague and Theron's opponents understand the concept — and can pronounce it; many call it "de-on-whatever" — they often have no idea how to attack it. Should they offer their own philosophical theory? Or try to convince the judge that deontology is bogus? Many simply end up arguing that invoking deontology is unfair. "It's like you're ready to play a football game and then they say, 'No, it's baseball,'" a debater named Marilyn once told a judge.

Theron learned about deontology at debate camp. After the first tournament, he and Teague began applying it to their Okinawa argument. They didn't predict that the case would do so well, but it has — even in the more competitive statewide league in which most metro-area high schools, such as Cherry Creek High, compete. At a tournament there in December, which was optional for DUDL students, Teague and Theron won all but one of their rounds.

"I was just playing around on the computer one night and I put it together," Theron says with a shrug. "People think I'm a genius, but all I did was mix and match some cards."

That's selling himself short, DUDL judges say. "It's a very advanced type of debate theory," says Meng. "They're critiquing the way we think about things."

"Lots of people run these generic arguments that claim some remote risk of nuclear devastation, and so these nuclear-war scenarios become kind of trite," says Paul Loupe, the debate coach at DSST. "The deontology argument is prepared for our resentment for it and turns it on its ear."

The fact that Theron figured that out speaks volumes, they say. "What makes him a standout is he's always looking ahead in terms of his development as a debater," says Margesson, the Regis coach. "He learns one thing and then he's immediately asking about the next thing."

Teague, though not as excitable, is every bit as intelligent. Margesson describes her as a "nice, calming force." "She's a great partner for him," he says. "I think two Theron's on one team would be a trainwreck."

But while Theron's unbridled fervor can sometimes work against him, Margesson says, it does set him apart. "A lot of these kids are just happy to get through a standard eight-minute speech and then sit down and hope to God that the other team screws up. And I think that doesn't interest him. He wants to kill everyone in the room, debate-wise."

On a Friday afternoon in mid-February, the air inside the Montbello High School library is hot as nearly one hundred students wait for the fifth tournament of the season to begin. Though the league encourages debaters to dress business-casual, most kids are wearing the same clothes they wore to school: tight jeans and low-cut tops for the girls, baggy jeans and flashy sneakers for the boys. As they watch for the first-round postings to go up, some listen to iPods while others compare raunchy ringtones. Most munch on snacks provided by the league — bottles of soda, granola bars, fruit snacks, bananas — and huddle in groups, chatting loudly and giggling.

Teague and Theron aren't among them. The league's all-stars won't have a chance to win this time. Theron has an F in chemistry, making him ineligible to compete in this, the last tournament before the city championship. Per school policy, his first-period chemistry teacher dropped his grade from a C to an F because he was tardy eighteen times in the trimester. "I'm not a morning person," Theron explains.

Teague won't be debating, either. She's eligible, but she decides not to participate without her brother, which would have meant switching partners and learning a new case. She isn't pleased about it; in fact, she says she's "pissed."

The rest of the team is let down too, but they don't dwell on it. Similar to track or swimming, debate is an individual sport tucked inside a team sport. "I feel happy and sad," says Manual

debater Jessica. Sad because they're not here, she explains, but happy because Teague and Theron's absence increases her chance of winning.

At around 3:30, a DUDL official tacks up a piece of paper listing the first round of match-ups, and the students rush toward it. They scan it for their names and hurry back to where they've stashed their plastic bins full of evidence. Game faces on, they scatter to the classrooms where they'll compete in the first of five rounds over two days.

The first round goes well for Manual. Eight debaters are eligible this time around, and three of Manual's four two-person teams win their rounds.

Rashauna, who doesn't speak much in class but is sassy and confident when she debates, has moved up to the varsity division, where she's partnered with Jessica. They're debuting a new case today: that the U.S. should withdraw from South Korea because the military's presence has been linked with higher rates of prostitution.

Kendale and Kahdijah are arguing that the U.S. should withdraw from Iraq because our soldiers are spurring more terrorist violence, not less. Kendale is passionate and his voice is rhythmic. "If we withdraw, we'll save more lives!" he shouts in one round. "Withdrawal stops terrorism, because the terrorists are attacking *us*!"

Meanwhile, Scarlett is partnered with sixteen-year-old Terrance Campbell, a new junior who caught on so fast that he moved up to varsity after only one tournament. They're also arguing for withdrawal from Iraq, but by a specific date: December 2011. Having a timeline is key, Scarlett says. Otherwise, the promise to remove troops is empty. "It's like telling your landlord you're going to move out, but you keep painting the walls and moving in new furniture," she says.

None of the other schools seem to notice that Teague and Theron aren't there. Debate isn't a spectator sport, and amid the hubbub, their absence isn't obvious. But word has spread among the coaches and judges, and when Theron shows up at 5:45, his welcome is short of warm.

"Disappointing," says one coach, shaking her head as she passes Theron in the library. Ben Durham, an energetic young judge who likes to give advice, pulls him aside in the hallway. "What are you doing, man?" Ben asks, as Theron leans against a row of lockers, looking sheepish.

When Theron comes back into the library, Jon Denzler, a sophomore debater at Regis who also volunteers as a judge, waves him over.

"Don't cuss me out!" Theron pleads. "Everybody has."

Denzler doesn't. After chatting with Theron, he says, "I think he just got bored. They were winning too much and not being challenged. It was almost like he needed a break."

It's true. There were things Theron could have done to make up for his tardies in chemistry. But he chose not to, a decision that frustrated his coach, Smith, who had his own hallway chat with

Theron. "Debate teaches you to own it," Smith says. "I just want to empower my students to see opportunities and take them."

But Theron confesses he's struggling with the weight of those opportunities. "I don't even know if I *want* to go to college," he tells Denis Saprano, another young judge who has come looking for Theron in order to playfully smack him upside the head.

Several colleges have expressed interest in Theron, and he says he's considering applying to DU. He'd love to live in California, so Stanford and the University of California, Berkeley, are also on his list. Teague, meanwhile, would like to go to Regis.

Saprano is sympathetic. He himself dropped out of college and says he doesn't want Theron to make the same mistake. "I understand there's a lot of pressure on you because of what you've accomplished," he says. "And I think it's okay to take a break."

He pauses. "So," he adds, "what's the plan?"

Theron thinks a minute. "I hope that this weekend, I hear something that motivates me to have my grades where they need to be."

Almost on cue, Ashley Stadille, a Regis student who serves as the DUDL's events coordinator and is at every tournament, wanders into the library. She's also come to have a heart-to-heart with Theron, and she ends up making him an offer: If he brings his GPA up to at least a 3.2, she'll bake him a cake. And if he beats her ACT score, a 31, she'll buy him a pizza. "Do we have a deal?" she asks.

"Yes!" Theron says. "I *will* beat you."

Theron stays at the tournament until the very end of the second day, watching his teammates. His mother and Teague stop by, but they don't linger too long. During the closing awards ceremony, Theron watches as two girls from the Denver Center for International Studies, a pair he and Teague have defeated a few times before, take first place. It's the first time his name isn't called at all.

A new trimester has started at Manual, granting Theron a chance to get his GPA back up so he's eligible to compete in the city championship, the tournament that could get him and his sister to New York. At home on this Sunday afternoon, three weeks before the tournament, the siblings craft their strategy.

"What's a good number of practice rounds to do against other teams?" Theron asks. He's still pacing the living room, pivoting in his stocking feet and tossing his mini-football.

"We should try to do five," Teague answers.

Theron considers her idea for a second. That's not enough, he decides. They have to train harder than that. "We should do eight!" he says. "That's how many there are in a tournament. So it's like we're making up for the tournament we missed."

There are some who think that missing the last tournament will hurt Teague and Theron's chances of winning the city championship, which will be held Friday and Saturday, March 18 and 19, at the DU Sturm College of Law, where the DUDL is headquartered.

"They lost a lot by not debating at [the last] tournament, because it's all about continued momentum," says Denzler, the Regis debater and volunteer DUDL judge. "But if they can buckle down, I think they can do it."

That's why they've started early, hammering out a complicated strategy for the city tournament that calls for them to abandon the Okinawa deontology case that their opponents know well by now for more experimental, college-level types of cases. It's stuff they've never tried before, and they ask that *Westword* not reveal the details in this story. Then they change their minds for a moment, joking that maybe they should post their new cases on Facebook, the epicenter of debate trash-talking, the night before the tournament and dare their opponents to stay up all night coming up with counter-plans.

As with some of his wilder ideas, Teague talks Theron out of it. At one point, when Theron brags that "everyone tells me to stick with one or two affirmatives, but I don't," she questions their entire strategy.

"But do you notice that whenever we do that, we only win narrowly?" she asks.

"Yeah, but we've never lost!" Theron answers.

Theron and Teague don't know what awaits them after the championship. But right now, they're focused on today, and Theron is convinced their plan will work.

He looks over his sister's shoulder at the list of goals they've now completed. There are a total of eleven. "Then I just put WIN WIN WIN," Teague says.

"No matter what," Theron answers, quoting a popular T-Pain lyric.

"This is the finals," he adds. "Nobody gets any mercy."