



Conor Cleary, left, and teammate Blake Johnson parlayed their unique style to rock-star status among the nation's collegiate debaters.

# The People's Team Triumphs

BY BILL MOAKLEY

PHOTOS BY ROBERT TAYLOR

After a long hiatus, OU Debate is back with a new approach that is raking in the wins among the nation's prestige institutions.

**F**or most Oklahomans, and those across the country who follow competitive endeavors, it comes as no surprise some of the nation's most sought-after trophies call the University of Oklahoma campus home. What might be surprising is at least two of those prestigious trophies do not reside in OU's Barry Switzer Center, the campus shrine to Sooner football.

The Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Trophy and the Franklin R. Shirley Trophy, awarded to the winners of the Harvard University Invitational Policy Debate Tournament and the Wake Forest University Franklin R. Shirley Dixie Classic Policy Debate, reside in David L. Boren Hall, home of OU's Honors College and the OU debate team. For only the third time in the collective history of those exhaustively named tournaments, the symbols of victory are displayed on the same campus.

If the magnitude of that accomplishment does not register quickly, consider this: The Harvard tournament has been around for more than 50 years; the latest incarnation of OU's debate program for just four.

The Sooners backed up their wins at Harvard and Wake Forest by bringing home another nice piece of hardware, the Owen L. Coon Award as champions of the Northwestern University Debate Tournament. This March, OU earned the Varsity Sweepstakes, the equivalent of a national championship, at the Cross Examination Debate Association National Debate Tournament, held on the OU campus. OU's two-man team of Conor Cleary and Blake Johnson took top individual team honors with a finals defeat of opponents from Dartmouth College.

College debaters compete in two-person teams at one of three levels: novice, junior varsity and open—in events sanctioned by the National Debate Tournament Organization or the CEDA. Each season, the NDT and CEDA jointly identify a single debate topic. This year's topic was "The Supreme Court Should Overrule One or More of the Following Decisions" with any of four court decisions, identified for that year, coming into play during a particular debate.

At the end of each debate season, roughly September through March, the two organizations hold separate national tournaments. A week after finishing at the top of the CEDA tournament, OU finished third in this year's NDT national competition.

The revival of debate at OU can be credited to a number of people, including debate coach Jackie Massey and President David L. Boren, who was receptive four years ago to Massey's proposal to re-establish the program. However, the program is not without a rich history. Shortly after arriving on the OU campus as an instructor in 1919, Josh Lee established the debate program. A renowned speaker, Lee would go on to become U.S. Senator Lee and widely known as the "silver-tongued" orator from Oklahoma.

During his time as debate coach at OU, Lee would mentor debate greats such as Alfred P. Murrah, Mike Monroney and a future Speaker of the United States House of Representatives, Carl Albert, who became known as "the Little Giant." Other OU debaters have included the late Jack Durland, a 1933 National Forensics League national champion and future president of Cain's Coffee Company; 1940 NFL national champion Robert Loeffler, a Payne-Weber attorney; and Admiral William Crowe,

a 1941 NFL national champion. Crowe's father insisted he take part in debate during the one year he spent at OU before transferring to the U.S. Naval Academy. He would later serve as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under President Ronald Reagan and as U.S. Ambassador to the United Kingdom.

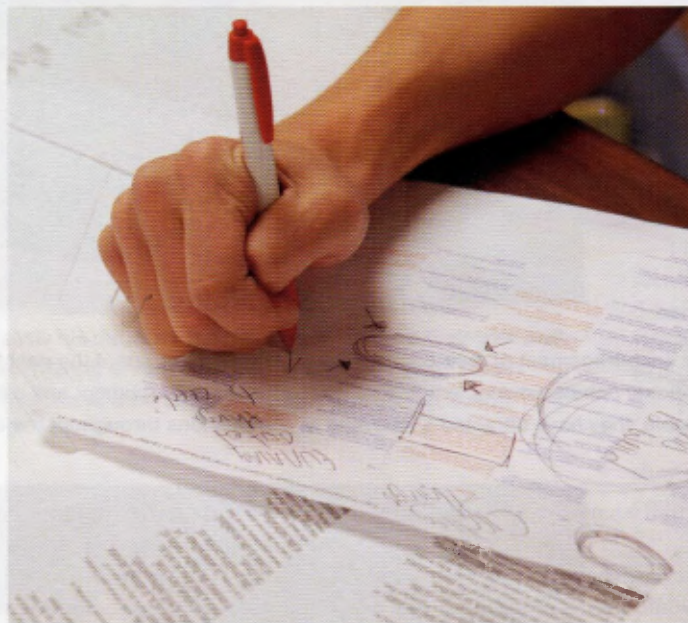
The program died in 1987. In 2003, former University of Vermont and Eastern New Mexico State University coach Jackie Massey, who had family in Norman, was prompted by a friend to approach Boren about giving the OU program new life after a 16-year hiatus. A former debater himself who often credits a high school coach with his success in politics, Boren agreed. Massey went to work.

"I had to figure out a lot of things in a hurry in order to get started," Massey remembers. "But, the president was great in supporting the program."

One thing Massey did not have to worry about was getting the word out to potential team members. Debaters, as a rule, are a pretty tight-knit bunch.

"Word spread quickly that we were going to have a debate team," Massey recalls. "That first year [2003] we had around 12 students on the team."

Massey made it clear from the beginning his would be a different kind of program. He likes to take raw talent—people who have little or no debate experience—and mold them,



While waiting for his turn at the podium, Johnson takes notes on Cleary's presentation. OU's two-person teams work constantly, nearly year round, to master the debate topics, plan their strategy and perfect their arguments.



Johnson, left, and Cleary, with the encouragement of their coach, Jackie Massey, have spent the past four years figuring out how to break into the elite ranks of the national debate powers, employing a broader view of argument and a heavier dose of style. Taking the approach that everything is debatable, they have attracted a following at competitions throughout the country.

encouraging them to use their natural strengths and styles during competition.

"I love to teach people at all levels," he says.

He knew, too, that his team would need to develop a unique approach to debate. That meant thinking outside the traditional "debate box."

"We decided in our first year that if we want to compete, we would have to change the way in which we approached debate," Massey remembers. "If we did it the way in which most other schools that have five to eight coaches do it, we could not compete."

What developed was an approach that combined such traditional tactics as topic preparation with a broader view of argument and a heavier dose of style. That style takes many forms, which Massey encourages. For example, the team of Dominique Baker and Geoffrey Stone, both freshmen from Kansas City, often raps during competitions.

"We're getting into some diverse ways of approaching arguments," Massey admits.

The success of that approach is evidenced by the Sooner debate team's ranking in the top three nationally in spring 2006, plus the rise of the duo of Cleary, a political science senior from

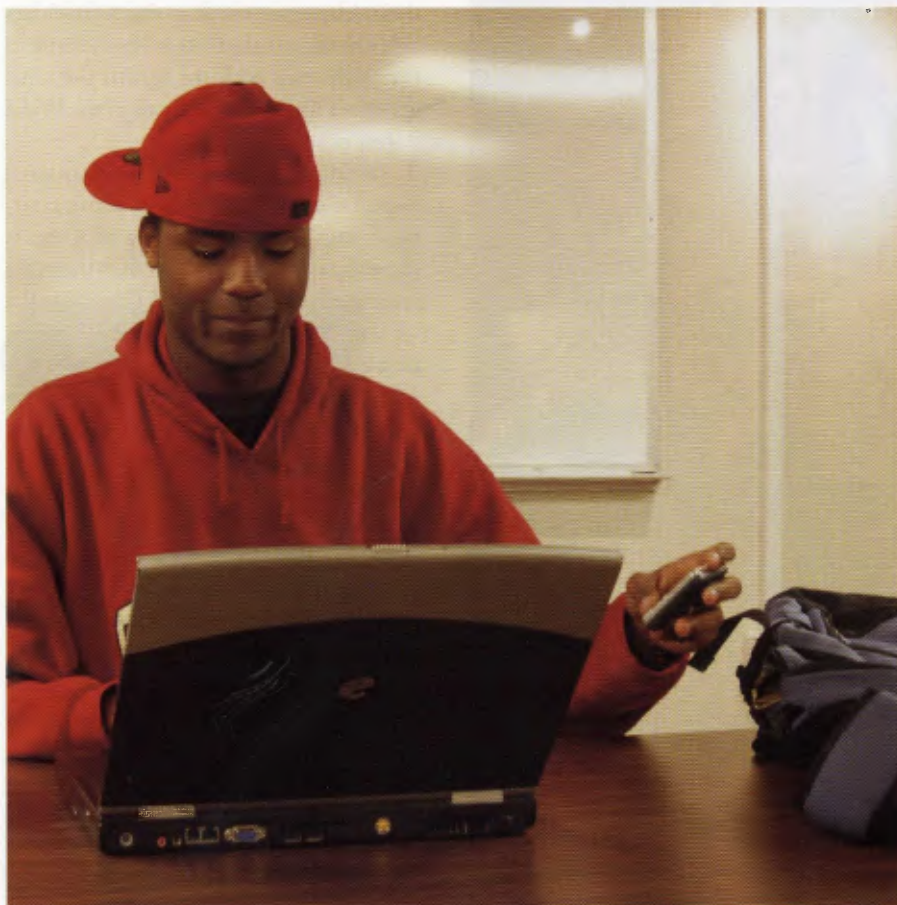
Tulsa's Bishop Kelley High School, and Johnson, a political science and philosophy senior from Edmond Santa Fe High School, who combined to win both the Harvard and Wake Forest competitions, topping more than 70 teams at Harvard and twice that many at Wake. The two are a testament to Massey's "all comers" policy and the emphasis on approaching debate in a fresh manner.

"A lot of students they compete against have been at it since the seventh or eighth grade. They compete at summer camps and get recruited by top schools," Massey points out. "Conor and Blake never would have competed in a round of college debate had we not created a program at OU. Now they're beating up on those other teams."

Cleary and Johnson have enjoyed spending the past four years figuring out how to break into the elite ranks of college debate.

"Traditional teams with seven or eight coaches and lots of resources will always be more prepared than us if we debate them on their own terms," Johnson admits. "The only way for us to gain a strategic foothold is to make them debate us in a different manner."

Often, debates with Cleary and Johnson turn from concrete, black-and-white fact exchanges to arguments about the broader



Coach Massey's willingness to allow his debaters the freedom to develop their own style of presentation is attracting an ever-larger enrollment. Freshmen Dominique Baker, shown above, and partner Geoffrey Stone were known for breaking into rap during debate competitions.



nature of subjects or the nature and legitimacy of debate styles. The response to this unique style is sometimes less than enthusiastic.

"Teams often respond to us by saying, 'This is arcane and nebulous philosophy; you're not talking about real impacts,'" Johnson says. "There are often debates about whether we should be allowed to advance the kinds of arguments we make."

But Massey points out the success of his top team is not all based on style.

"When it comes to philosophy, they're just smarter than most people we debate," he says.

They also work at their craft when many other debaters are taking a break.

"One of their strengths is summer preparation," Massey says. "When debate season starts in the fall, other teams don't have that much time to learn about a particular issue. So if we manage to control what a debate is about other teams just can't keep up with what we accomplished during the summer."

The current OU debate team has seen its numbers swell from the initial dozen to nearly 30 members—high participation in the world of college debate.

"For a lot of debaters, the pinnacle of their experience is high school, but then they get burned out. College coaches come across great talent, but part of the battle is keeping them interested," Cleary explains. "Jackie gets people from all backgrounds involved and gives us a lot of freedom."

College debate tournaments consist of matched preliminary rounds and seeded elimination rounds in which two-person teams compete in a series of comment and rebuttal sessions, arguing either the topic's affirmative or negative.

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OU had been out of the debate business for 16 years when Massey, right with Cleary and Johnson, approached former high school debater David L. Boren about reviving a program that had had a storied history in the institution's past. With the President's blessing, Massey needed only four years to propel his debaters to national prominence.



The headquarters of the OU debate program in the Honors College may soon have to add display cases aplenty to accommodate all the trophies, plaques and other symbols of their dominance that the teams are bringing back to Norman from such prestigious tournaments as the Harvard University Invitational Policy Debate and the Wake Forest University Franklin R. Shirley Dixie Classic Policy Debate.

“It’s closer to a trial format than, say, a presidential debate,” Massey explains. “By doing evidence-based debate where the topic stays the same all year, you get pretty deep into that topic.”

Tournament competition is both intellectually and physically rigorous. Delivering multiple speeches in six or eight preliminary rounds, followed by more of the same in four or more elimination rounds, debaters can rack up a lot of continuous hours making their cases, only to return to a hotel room to prepare for the next day’s rounds.

“It’s draining,” Johnson admits. “You’d be amazed at how physically challenging a debate round is if you’ve never seen one.”

For many teams around the country, debating with OU has become even more intellectually taxing over the years because of the Sooner team’s somewhat unorthodox approach.

“Other teams have learned to debate in one certain way. They’ve learned that debate is about the pros and cons of a government action,” Cleary says. “When a team such as ours employs a different approach, instead of actually engaging us, they say, ‘the debate should just be about the technicalities, so we’re not going to take you up on that debate.’ But everything is debatable.”

Both Cleary and Johnson are skilled at evoking emotion in

their debates, so much so that a considerable crowd gathered late in the evening to watch the pair perform against the University of Kansas in the finals of the Wake Forest event.

“Finding a way to evoke an emotional response is very much a part of our strategy,” says Johnson, adding that he is more the emotional speaker than the more technically adept Cleary. “Traditionally, we’ll perform much better in the elimination rounds than we do in the preliminary rounds because we get a giant audience that will come to watch us. We talk about crazy things, and we’re funny. More than anything, we’re passionate.”

Massey said the OU squad has a lot of younger debaters who are starting to emulate Johnson and Cleary’s style.

“Our younger teams are starting to get into the same groove as Conor and Blake,” Massey explains. “Now, when they debate other teams and people look on the pairings list and see Oklahoma, they know it’s not going to be your normal read about politics.”

The Sooners may be young, but they’re no longer upstarts in the world of college debate. Cleary remembers how quickly the program has risen to prominence when he looks at the names of tournament winners engraved on the base of the Kennedy trophy from Harvard.

“It’s a Who’s Who of Ivy League schools and debate schools,” he says. “Then you see Oklahoma, a team that wasn’t even around four years ago. It’s almost surreal.”

While trophies certainly are a measure of the team’s hard-earned success thus far, there may be even greater long-term measures of that success. The Sooners have added an assistant coach, Jason Russell, a doctoral student in communications, and the team is attracting attention from talented high school debaters with an eye on continuing their debate careers.

“Now, for the first time, kids who debated in high school want to come to OU to debate,” Cleary points out. “With the University’s support, we’re able to offer scholarships to attract them.”

So, is it time to consider Sooner debaters worthy of the same kind of reverence bestowed upon their Ivy League and tradition-rich debate counterparts?

“We’ll always be underdogs logistically and traditionally, and we like to think of ourselves in that way,” Cleary says.

“We’re the people’s team,” Johnson concludes.

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