

by Glenda Ferguson

Long ago (the fall of 1946) and far away (Henryetta, Oklahoma) there were two eager high school debaters (Bill Sholer and Mike Barcus) who were dead set on qualifying for the NFL Nationals. They were hampered a bit as they didn't have a coach. It seems that World War II was being fought and their coach had been drafted. Bill and Mike would have liked a coach as they had to debate the teams of the legendary H.B Mitchell, but they were determined to forge ahead by themselves. Not only were they debating without a coach, they were debating without any help at all as they were the only team on the Henryetta High School debate squad.

Bill and Mike were persistent, and they were successful. They did, indeed, win State and qualify for Nationals. However, they were not to realize their dream as Nationals was cancelled that year due to the war.

Bill went on to become a very successful lawyer and Mike, a very successful psychiatrist. Everyone except the families of the young debaters could have forgotten this part of their lives, but Oklahoma became the 2001 host of the NFL Nationals and all kinds of debate and speech war stories started to emerge. It seems that Bill Sholer's granddaughter is an NFL member at Edmond Santa Fe High School in Edmond, Oklahoma, and competes in drama events coached by Catherine Johnston. She told her coach about her grandfather. I was contacted; and consequently, I contacted Bill and Mike. I invited them to come to Nationals to participate as observers of the final debate round and to finally get the recognition they had deserved for so many years. Both agreed and I was fortunate enough to spend time with them on the Friday of NFL Nationals. This was truly the highlight of the tournament for me.

These interesting gentlemen reminisced about their debate rounds as if they had just happened recalling moments when they had "crushed" their opponents. (yes, "crushed" is a term that has been around for a long time). They recalled arguments that had been particularly successful and laughed about teams that had been particularly fun to beat. After watching the final round, they both told me how and why they would have voted. They quoted particular arguments and evidence in the round. Remember that they were not flowing. They

listened. They both said that they would have voted affirmative. I said, "Bill, would you have voted affirmative because it was the last speech?" He replied, "Just how old do you think I am?"

I was especially interested in hearing them compare debate of the 40's and the one that they had just heard. Both mentioned the speed, of course, but had little trouble following the arguments. They preferred a slower rate of speed, but didn't seem particularly bothered one way or the other. They did, however, seem perturbed by the amount of evidence and seemed to think that the debate would have been much more interesting if less evidence had been read and more analysis had been given. Both Bill and Mike thought that both teams over claimed evidence and said that both teams seemed a little "paranoid", or at least the evidence seemed that way.. They did comment on how talented the debaters were and realized how much work had gone into the final product.

But, this is the good part. They were very impressed with ALL of the kids. Not just the ones in finals, but the students in general. Bill told me later that some of the contestants were in his hotel and he asked them the outcome of the debate as he had left before the awards assembly. He remarked how pleasant and polite they were.

Bill had wanted to speak to the debaters to make sure that they knew how fortunate they were to actually have the experience of participating at Nationals. When we presented Bill and Mike with their national qualifier plaques right before the final debate, he only said how much he had wanted to compete himself and didn't elaborate. He has said to me several times that he hoped that our students don't take the experience for granted.

The team of Sholer and Marcus got a standing ovation from the audience on the day of Finals. I can't think of anyone who deserved it more. I received a note from Mrs. Barcus telling me how touched Mike had been by the reaction of the audience. Mrs. Barcus wondered if other World War II veterans in other states had received similar honors. I don't know, of course, but it seems like a good idea to me.

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