

Debate team vies for national title

When the Lee College Debate Team came together in September for the 2013-14 season, expectations for the brand new organization were modest at best.

After all, none of the seven founding team members — Cody Bijou, Reagan Dobbs, Cassie Kutev, Zachary Martin, Brian Montgomery, Tyra Mouton and Dylan Putt — had ever competed in the International Public Debate Association (IPDA) tournaments that routinely draw hundreds of skilled collegians from around the country.

“At first, all we wanted was to establish something that would last longer than our own time on campus,” said Bijou, a co-captain.

But that was before the team amassed more than 40 awards and honors at 10 different tournaments in Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas and Mississippi. And with a trip this week to the IPDA National Championship, to be held April 10-13 on the campus of Middle Tennessee State University, team members and coach Joseph Ganakos are far more confident about their chances of taking the top prize.

“Now we’re the top community college in the association,” said Bijou, whose performance throughout the season has earned him the distinction of being the second-ranked novice debater in the nation out of nearly 500 competitors. Fellow captain Martin is ranked No. 1.

“The fact that we’ve been able to literally write history is amazing,” Bijou said. “Everyone is constantly putting their best foot forward.”

The debate team’s unheard-of success in its inaugural season has regularly come against schools with more members and bigger budgets, from in-state rivals like College of the Mainland and Texas A&M University, to powerhouse contenders like Louisiana State University and the University of Arkansas. Members devote 20-40 hours each week to tournament practice, poring over current events and fine-tuning proper argument construction, fact organization and oratory strategy.

In each round of competition, debaters are given five potential topics from politics, philosophy, sports, economics and even pop culture. After narrowing the topics down to a single choice, they then have 30 minutes to prepare their arguments for the stage, where they are judged on delivery, tone, organization and logic, among other factors.

“This is a form of intellectual, gladiatorial combat,” Ganakos jokingly told dozens of supporters last week at a special exhibition held before the team embarks on the 15-hour drive to Murfreesboro and the quest for a national championship. He first envisioned a debate team at Lee College in 2006 and lobbied for its formation every day until his vision became a reality.

“LC debaters have consistently proved themselves against some of the most talented college and university students from around the country,” Ganakos said. “It has been a tremendously special ride.”

Despite the excitement of traveling for competition and the thrill of collecting golden trophy after golden trophy, many debate team members consider the familial bond that has formed between them to be the greatest thing to come from their whirlwind first year of competition.

Everyone is different: Martin has cerebral palsy and sometimes struggles to maintain his endurance at tournaments; Bijou earned a degree in instrumentation; some are

majoring in art and music; and others are non-traditional college students. Yet, through debate, they have forged a strong connection.

Even after engaging in fierce, aggressive practice battles with one another, the teammates are able to quickly shake hands and relax into the unique camaraderie that holds them together.

“People are definitely starting to recognize us at tournaments,” said Dobbs, captain-elect for the 2014-15 season. “We’re loud, we all prep together and we help each other. We all agree that the best debates are when you can walk out and feel like a better person, knowing that was a great round.”