



Nevada's Dynamic Duo

Nevada students win two national debate crowns in one season

In the annals of modern collegiate parliamentary debate, few have ever done what University of Nevada, Reno debate team members David Pena '09 and Max Alderman did on Monday, March 30 when they captured first place in the National Parliamentary Debate Association Championship Tournament in Stockton, Calif.

Pena and Alderman not only defeated competitors from 233 teams for first place, they also become only the third team in the history of collegiate parliamentary debate to win the sport's two most prestigious prizes in the same season. A week earlier, Pena and Alderman took first place at the National Parliamentary Tournament of Excellence in Berkeley, Calif.

Pena, who graduated in May with a double major in philosophy and women's studies, was also named the Tournament of Excellence's

Top Speaker. Alderman, a junior double major in philosophy and political science from Reno, earned second speaker honors in that contest.

According to Phil Sharp, director of Nevada's debate program, the last victory further underscored Pena and Alderman's unique abilities. Pena and Alderman, who used a philosophy-based approach to win the Tournament of Excellence in Berkeley, used a much more topic- and argument-based tack in winning the Championship Tournament in Stockton.

"With 233 teams, instead of 64 (at the Tournament of Excellence), the tournament required much more adaptation to the audience," Sharp said. "It really showed David and Max's versatility. In Stockton, they debated the topic and engaged in a completely different way.

"The same team winning both

National debate champions David Pena '09 and Max Alderman, Class of 2010, followed different paths before teaming to bring the University two national championships in debate.

championships doesn't happen very often, because often different sets of skills are required. To back up one championship with a similar performance is very impressive."

Different paths

Both teammates followed different paths in winning the national championships.

"It's definitely a place of privilege to be in," Pena said of moving to the United States from his native Mexico at age 15 without knowing the English language. "It is," he added, "exciting to look back at where my past decisions have taken me."

Alderman, a National Merit Scholar from Reno High School, didn't consider himself to be championship debate material when he took up the activity. At least not in the beginning, when he went out for debate as a sophomore at Reno High, only at the urging of a classmate.

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“Cierra Iveson, who is one of my best friends in the world, talked me into it,” Alderman said with a smile. “I remember thinking, ‘But I’m a choir kid . . . I can’t do debate.’”

Former Nevada coach Debbie Seltzer-Kelly, now a professor at former champion school Southern Illinois wrote in an email, “I’ve been getting emailed congratulations from coaches and competitors all over the country. David and Max have been truly outstanding all season, and they are also terrific representatives for UNR; they are well-liked, and the debate community sees this victory as well-deserved.”

Sharp, who helped his team through a grueling week-long, 13-hour-a-day preparation during spring break leading up to the first tournament, said: “You have to have such a perfect confluence sometimes to win a championship. You have to have the right judges, the right topics and the right opponent . . . and you need to execute. I had faith in David and Max, that they had done all the work and that they were prepared.”

For Sharp, it wasn’t surprising that Pena and Alderman performed so well with their backs against the wall.

“Max and David were motivated all year,” said Sharp, who admitted that the pressure was enough for him to have to watch much of the action at the Tournament of Excellence offstage, through a crack in a hallway door. “We knew there were favored teams, and Max and David had their arguments ready for all of them. They weren’t afraid of any of them.”

“It’s like some script for a Hollywood story,” Sharp added, with no hint of exaggeration.

Two days after he turned 15, Pena moved from Guadalajara, Mexico, to the town of Overton, Nev., with his family. His parents, Juan and Lidia Ochoa, who own a body shop in Overton, knew their son was an uncommonly intelligent and confident young man, the type of person who can quickly take possession of mounds of complex information and easily tie it to the great philosophical tenets of our time.

As it turned out, such an approach was an essential part of the team’s success. Instead of downloading fact after fact after fact upon the judges, Pena and Alderman chose this season to tie many of their arguments to more philosophical and theoretical approaches

that made many of their arguments seem more personal and creative. For instance, while debating about the European Union’s involvement in the Gaza conflict and the regulation of the trading of financial options, they used philosophers and theorists such as Jacques Derrida, Edward Said and Slavoj Zizek to question underlying assumptions about the topics.

“We try to turn the tables and frame the debates in ways that benefit us,” said Pena.

Although, as Alderman admitted, it wasn’t as easy as it looked: “Our opponents at the Tournament of Excellence were some of the most brilliant people I’ve ever met. They were scary-good. I’m not going to lie to you. My stomach was going crazy. It was very nerve-racking for me. David is always so calm about everything. He’s always saying, ‘Max, just chill out.’”

A natural pairing

Nervous stomach aside, Alderman also brought several undeniable strengths to the pairing. He grew up on the Nevada campus. His father, Stuart, is a computer programmer and his mother, Dana Edberg, is a longtime College of Business professor.

He attended preschool on campus, and can remember more than a few days romping up and down the shaky stairs of the old Getchell Library as a child. In conversation with Alderman, it quickly becomes apparent that he treats everyone around him with gentleness, good humor and a genuine, unfeigned courtesy and engagement. He is the type of young man equally at home with great ideas and great piles of information in need of an intellectual home. The love of language, life and of his sport all seem to flow with a good-natured ease from him.

He is quick to give praise to his teammate, Pena, and what his steady influence has meant to the success of the season.

“David was a junior when I came in (and joined Nevada as a freshman),” Alderman said. “We did a lot of partnership pairings (on the Nevada team, which, by the way, has several other top-rated collegiate debaters) and when David and I got together, we just clicked.

“He’s one of the most brilliant people I’ve ever met. He’s going to do such amazing things.”

Pena noted: “Max has been the best partner

a person could ever have. He’s such an unbelievably talented person. He has a bright future ahead of him.”

Understanding their place

Sharp, who has seen the two young men form a truly historic partnership, said the two could not be more similar, yet more different.

“They both have this amazing passion for debate,” he said. “They are willing to work so hard at what they do. They are both so talented, and I knew that because of their talent level, I could challenge them to say that a national championship was something they could get.”

The coach, soft-spoken and thoughtful, also could see that both possessed an intangible quality central to success in the activity. They both seemed to have an innate understanding of their place in debate. Sharp said that Pena and Alderman possess the centrifugal ability to take center stage and make the debate seem to hinge on their every move, their every gesture, their every word. Theirs is a thorough faith in their knowledge, skills, and perhaps most importantly, their instincts in a sport where concepts and topics and facts can spring forth at the speed of a bolt of a lightning.

“It’s a pretty remarkable story,” Sharp said. “David didn’t know English until he was 15. He grew up in Mexico. His story is one of constantly grinding toward being the best. Max, from the minute he started the activity, has won practically every award there is. He has boxes and boxes of trophies at home, all across the spectrum of debate.”

The coach paused, remembering the final moments of the team’s performance in Berkeley.

“When Max’s speech ended, there was a 30-second silence in the room,” he said, as with any cherished memory, his words taking on a laconic significance. “It took the audience a while to process what they had heard . . . and then . . . the place erupted. People were jumping out of their seats . . . and their cheering was so loud . . . it was a huge moment.

“David and Max did everything perfectly. You couldn’t have asked for anything more.” 