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A look at Policy Debate

by Steven Pope

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POCATELLO - If debaters could speak for as long as they desired, there wouldn't be the need to jam information into a short speech. But if policy debate was an art form utilized by the masses, much more than that would change.

"Debate is a system of intellectual contests created by wealthy people to create a vernacular and way of being that legitimizes the power of elites by creating a kind of language that excludes common people," said Spencer Janyk, a debater for Whitman College.

"So you criticize the form of debate, kinda, so why do you participate in it?" I asked.

"Debate was initially fun for me because it's everything about theater that I loved. Plus intellectual competition. Debate celebrates and glorifies pretending that you're smarter than other people and acting like you know everything," said Janyk.

Not everyone feels like Spencer does. But most debaters agree, debate must be free from as many restraints as possible.

"Anytime you try to constrain an activity by putting limits on what can or cannot be done, creates a situation where people can't express themselves. That's probably uniquely key in debate. An activity where it's all about communication and identity, the way we interact through these arguments with other people," said Andrew Ridgeway, a debater for Idaho State University.

That's why if you showed up to a tournament like the one held this weekend at ISU, you'd see everything from Nixon impersonations.

Speed reading from computers.

Or some casual cross examinations.

This year, ISU is holding its own with the elites.

"Currently in the national coaches poll, we're ranked 18th. And we're improving all the time. At some of the biggest and best tournaments in the country... At Kentucky and

Georgia State, against the likes of Harvard, Emory, and Berkley, Northwestern... We've placed in the top 16, top 10," said ISU Debate Coach Scott Odekirk.

That's because when you put the best intellectuals from ISU, Harvard, or wherever, it's anybody's game. Regardless of how much funding they have.

"Some programs have 20 coaches, some have 1. But you can compete with a program of any size or type, if you think smart, and work efficiently," said Odekirk.

Whitman College from Walla Walla, Washington won both the varsity and junior varsity divisions at the weekend tournament held at ISU.