UC SANTA BARBARA

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At the Top of Their Game

Usually, a team at UC Santa Barbara preparing for an intercollegiate national championship would be big news. Fans, hoopla, campus pride — you couldn't miss it. And then there's the Ethics Bowl Team. Studying and competing under the radar, the team is heading back to the finals of the Ethics Bowl for the second year in a row.

Haven't heard of it? You're not alone. The Ethics Bowl is a debate-like competition in which teams address tough ethical questions on a wide variety of topics. It's not like athletics, though, where the big schools make mincemeat out of the little ones. Last year's winner was tiny Taylor University, a Christian liberal arts college in rural Indiana. The competition is stiff; UCSB making the finals again is no small feat.

"This is a remarkable achievement," said Thomas Holden, professor and chair of the Department of Philosophy at UCSB. "It reflects very well indeed on both the students themselves and the coaches who are both students and teachers in training. It also shows the versatility of the philosophy program and training in philosophy."

UCSB's team consists of five undergraduates who are coached by two philosophy graduate students. Just two members of the team — co-captains Gabrielle Marie Balance and Preethika Santhakumar — competed in last year's finals. The others — Laic Beugre, Salim Damerdji and Patrick Wu — joined this year. In sports, that sort of lineup is usually a recipe for hard times, but this year's Gauchos team actually fared better than the 2015 squad. A year ago the team placed third in regionals, the competition that determines which teams go to the national finals. The 2016 team

placed first at the recent regionals in Utah. The finals are in Dallas Feb. 26-28.

“We were a lot more prepared than a lot of the other teams this time around,” said David Mokriski, who coaches the team with Sherri Lynn Conklin. “We definitely worked harder getting scripts written up and clear arguments for each case. We did sort of wing it a little bit more in previous years. I guess it paid off this year.”

Unlike other teams, which benefit from established programs at their schools, the UCSB team is an independent, student-run club without faculty or staff coaching. But they do have Conklin and Mokriski, who have devoted countless hours since taking over the coaching duties three years ago. Since then, the team has consistently advanced to the regional finals, placing third or better each time. “We like to think of our first year as the practice round, since our first year was the only year we did not advance to nationals,” Conklin said.

“There are definitely other teams out there who take it a lot more seriously,” said Balance, a fourth-year philosophy major. “There are also other teams that have an actual Ethics Bowl class offered in college courses where they can get unit credit for it, whereas we just meet casually after class. It’s an opt-in sort of thing.”

Conklin, though, thinks the students underestimate their commitment to the team. “Sometimes we would spend 10-plus hours a week prepping on top of coursework and other clubs,” she said. “While it’s true that it took the team and the coaches time to figure out the right sort of structure needed to be fully prepared for the competition, it is certainly not true that we do not take it seriously or that we were not competitive. Moreover, we have consistently done well, which I think speaks both to our seriousness and competitiveness.”

The team meets regularly to discuss issues and strategy, often over pizza. What sets it apart from other teams is its approach. In addressing topics like national self-driving cars or security vs. privacy, other teams will often cite a particular philosopher or moral theory.

“We, for the most part, don’t do that,” Mokriski explained. “We just try to talk about all of the potential considerations. If you cite a moral theory you open yourself up to the question, ‘OK, that follows from your theory maybe, but why should we accept your theory?’ Whereas, if we talk about all the potential considerations, from welfare concerns and autonomy concerns, then you don’t have to squabble about which one is the right one. You take into account all.”

They also focus on making their presentations accessible. Not all the judges are philosophers, and diving deep into the weeds of Kant or Kierkegaard risks losing a non-philosopher along the way, said Santhakumar, a fourth-year philosophy major. “Other teams try to focus on ethical frameworks and make it very academic,” she explained. “I feel like we try to focus more on explaining the philosophy to a layman, like in terms anyone can understand.”

The team almost didn’t make this year’s regionals. The California regional, which they’d planned to attend, filled up before they could enter. “There was a solid day or two where we thought we might not have a competition this year,” said Damerdji, a second-year philosophy major who is in his first year with the team.

Salvation came when they realized they could still attend the regional in Utah. It meant hustling for funding from Associated Students, but it was worth it. “We only decided to go to the competition in Utah to give the new people a chance to see what the competition was like,” Santhakumar said. “Because Gabby and I are graduating this year and we want Ethics Bowl to keep going, we wanted to give them a little taste of the competition. We did not expect we were going to win.”

The new guys, in fact, weren’t sure what they were getting into. Damerdji competed in high school Lincoln-Douglas debates and Wu participated in mock trials, but Ethics Bowl is a slightly different animal. “I think it is comparable to things that I’ve done before, and that helps a lot, even though it’s a new topic of discussion,” said Wu, a second-year economics major. “A lot of the things that we learned in previous experiences can carry on.”

Even if they weren’t as successful as they are, the camaraderie found in working together closely has leavened the hard work put in. “It’s been fun,” Balance said. “We came and didn’t even know each other at all, and now we’re really good friends.

“They came for the free pizza,” Mokriski joked.

Beugre, a first-year biology major, was invited to participate in Ethics Bowl while taking a course taught by Conklin in the Freshman Summer Start Program. It was new territory. “It’s my first time ever being in a team setting,” he said. “In high school I played tennis, which is a solo sport. I was on a team, but it’s not the same. This is like a weird family dynamic. I kind of didn’t want to be a part of it because like, ‘They’re all philosophy majors. They’re all going to be really close.’ But they

were really nice and they had open arms, and it was great.”

Damerdji agreed. “I really like the fact that we’re a team,” he said. “I didn’t have that before. All of these team members are rad. I would actually want to hang out with them, and we do.”

“Best experience of my life,” Beugre said.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.