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### Debate against me?

High School. The best or worst time for any teenager, even worse, is being a freshman. No idea what to do with your life or even what extracurriculars to do. I want to do sports with my friends, they're so fun, but all the odds are stacked against me. I'm 5'2 freshman year and have major asthma. Any sport I play I'm an instant bench warmer; I simply can't compete. But then I remember my 8<sup>th</sup> grade pathways (a class that helped you figure out what you wanted to do in life) teacher coach Fellows, a nice man who had my best interests in mind, told me to join him in cx debate. "Nothing else to do... why not." I think to myself. Whether I succeed or fail it should be a fun experience, and hopefully I'll meet some people along the way. However, nothing could prepare me for what comes next.

It's the first day of debate and honestly, I already want to quit, I mean who wants to meet at 6am. Whatever, I do what I must. I walked into the computer lab the meeting was being held and saw a few familiar faces, I know who these people are, but I'm not close friends with any of them. Pruitt, Blake, and Brandon were their names. All freshman, and all were quite nice and welcoming. All of us had the same amounts of confusion about what to even do in debate, at first I had thought it's just arguing but in suits. In a sense I was right, but there was so much more behind it. Being for something or against it (affirmative or negative) and trying to disprove everything the other team says. We had to build a case for a certain topic that had been decided for that year, then make it impossible for it to be seen as anything other than positive. Words like Disad (disadvantage to the case) and topicality (not being topical to the topic we were given) were being thrown around and none of us had any idea what they meant. So much to learn and in so little time, as our first meet was coming up in just a couple weeks.

Fear starts to creep in as I doubt my abilities to perform, I feel so much weight crushing me and stress coursing through my body I mean who wants to embarrass themselves in front of a random judge and two other random people from different schools. I'm unsure of what to do, and I don't want to fail my partner, Pruitt. That's when I hear Coach Fellows say, "The first meet is just going to be practice, everyone there is going to be new just like you." And with that, I was slightly more prepared for this.

First debate meet, go to the school at a staggering 5AM as the meet starts at eight or nine and we have to drive three hours. Once again, questioning if this is really what I want to do, because what sane teenager enjoys waking up when it's still dark out just to sleep in a car for 3 hours with four other men. The answer is none. Moving on, we finally get to the school and Pruitt and I (a team dubbed "The stepbrothers") are flabbergasted at the school's design. It's much larger than the school we attend and even has... stairs! However, our excitement is short lived as Coach Fellows tells us to get changed soon because the first round is coming up. The suits the others wear are much nicer, sleek, and look like suits you would wear to a nice event. The one I'm wearing is pink. Full pink, with no jacket and a clip-on gray bow tie with pink polka dots on it. The lord is testing me and I'm failing. No time to self-reflect, the first round is starting.

It's all over. We go through the first four rounds thinking we did horrible, always saying "we lost" after every round. Now all we can do is wait for the results and see who's moved on to the next rounds. Obviously, none of us are feeling confident, except Coach Fellows who thinks both teams can make it to the next rounds, for some reason. The worst part isn't the anxiety you feel in your chest and stomach while waiting for the results to be posted for everyone to see, it's having to stay in those suits just in case you move on. For anyone else, it's fine, but for me I have people looking at me then looking away and giggling. "So much for meeting any new people" I think, and just as soon as I finish that thought two people come up to Pruitt and I and start talking to us. We were very confused, but we weren't going to

turn some people away. We started talking and found out their names are Julia and Delaney, and that they started talking to us for two reasons. Our hair (very similar, hence “The stepbrothers”) and in a random turn of events, my suit. While we’re talking to them the results get posted, and that intense feeling of anxiety washes over me. Thoughts racing in my head, “What if we didn’t make it, we got last, I failed my teammate, I should quit.” All just pounding into my head making me second guess everything I’ve ever done. We see the results, and we’ve moved onto the next rounds. Another round of us having to battle for first, telling the other two participants that they’re wrong and finding any amount of evidence to prove so, or having to defend our cases against snide remarks and evidence that’s clearly not in our favor. The slightest mistake can cause the judge to say you’ve lost, which is what happened. Unfortunately, we didn’t win the meet, we did get second place though, and that’s a lot better than I was expecting. There are so many other debate meets in the future, including state in Austin, but for now all I can do is bask in my glory.

Short lived. It was all short lived. We had done mediocre at every other debate meet and gone 0-4 at state. Any sense of confidence that was previously held was shattered like fragile glass. The next year was more of the same. We won district, a huge sense of accomplishment, not dropping a single round. Then we went 0-4 at state again; even losing to Julia and Delaney, who seemed to dislike us now. Junior year and Pruitt and I were faced with the choice of continuing or leaving it all behind. We decided we can get back on that saddle and try again, regardless of all the loss debate was a safe space for us, we had friends and enjoyed having some sort of leisure time in our lives. Unfortunately, not everything can go as planned. In a turn of events, Coach Fellows stepped down as the sponsor for debate, and the new one was our AP English teacher Mrs. Greene. Nothing against her she’s a very nice woman, and very helpful. However, she wanted to truly push us to become better, as our results in previous years were... unsatisfactory. It was something that would have required a lot of time and energy that neither Pruitt nor I had. I had to work and an AP class, and Pruitt had five AP classes to worry about. We were once

again faced with the choice, continuing or leaving. This time, we chose it was best to step away. A place we had been able to go to calm down and enjoy ourselves; Had become an intense, time-consuming area.

Like it had been infected with the harsh ideals and standards of any high school sport. Neither one of us had the time or energy to deal with that. To be forced to put in an exhausting amount of effort to be met with nothing but judgement and failure.

A place we could feel safe was taken, and the rest of my high school life I never felt like I had one of those again. Every year after that felt like autopilot, like I was a spectator in my own life. Things can go from happy to awful in such a short time. But it isn't all bad. Pruitt and Blake stayed some of my best friends, even at the current stage in my life. I even became friends with Delaney again. Although my entire career in debate was a technical failure, I will always be grateful for my time in it. It blessed me with confidence I never knew I had and some of the best people I'll ever meet.

