

No debate: Tennent's debate team is on the rise

By Gary Weckselblatt Staff Writer | Posted: Monday, May 5, 2014 12:00 am

They wear suits and ties to each classroom to display their professionalism.

On bus rides to events, they blast the “Rocky” theme to get psyched up.

And before they compete, they gather in a circle where one of them recites lines that are repeated by the others from an emotional Winston Churchill speech:

“We shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets. We shall fight in the hills. We shall never surrender.”

The William Tennent debate team is making a name for itself in events where words and thoughts matter.

Tennent, led by senior Michael Pronin, the team’s first National Speech & Debate Tournament qualifier, will have competed in eight states and the District of Columbia by the end of June. It has accumulated 71 individual and team honors this season, boosted by the efforts of Pronin, who coach Chris Berdnik called “our superstar.”

“Let me be unequivocally clear,” said Berdnik, a former high school debater at Pittsburgh Central Catholic and Saint Vincent College. “There are better debate teams in the region, but what we’ve started here in the last two years, with Mike’s leadership in particular, is a program that in the next decade will put up a national champion. I have no doubt.

“It’s like planting an olive tree. You plant the seed, water it, fertilize it, and you reap the fruit much later on.”

Five Tennent competitors are ranked in the top 150 students in the commonwealth for lifetime points among active participants:

Pronin is fifth with 1,581 points followed by senior Donato Luongo, 30th at 1,108; junior Loqman Adnane, 64th at 895; sophomore Chris Berdnik, Jr., 119th at 684; and sophomore Cameron Zurmuhl, 123rd at 668.

Points are awarded for each debate. Berdnik, who coaches the team with social studies teachers Bernard Miller and Michael Sander, figures 1,000 points is equivalent to 1,000 points for a high school basketball player.

Though about 40 students are part of the team, the core is made up of about five competitors as many students are involved in other activities or have after-school jobs.

Miller formed the team in 2002, and until December 2011 it competed almost exclusively in the

Southeastern Pennsylvania Debate League, an after-school Bucks and Montgomery County equivalent of the athletic Suburban One League.

The region is “rich in storied high school speech and debate programs,” Berdnik said, including La Salle College High School, Holy Ghost Prep, St. Joseph’s Prep and Pennsbury High School, “all of which have been excellent for decades.”

During the 2012-13 and 2013-14 seasons, Tennent increased its competitive schedule by attending more than 30 tournaments each year. It served as a host competition site for the National Catholic Forensic League’s 2012-13 Grand National Tournament, and ranked in the top 10 percent of chapters by the National Speech & Debate Association for its point totals.

Berdnik, the district’s business manager, likened the tougher schedule to a college basketball program. “If you load up your preconference schedule with softballs, then when the games on the line you’ll not have been as battle-tested. If you compete against the very best, you just instinctively know what to do.”

The results are pronounced.

Luongo, Pronin and Zurmuhl qualified to compete in Chicago over Memorial Day weekend by capturing the Philadelphia Catholic Forensic League’s city championship.

Thirteen Tennent students competed in the Pennsylvania High School Speech League state championship, where Pronin advanced to the quarterfinal round of Lincoln-Douglas debate.

Tennent captured first place in a Southeastern Pennsylvania Debate League championship event for the third year running as Pronin and Luongo won first place in policy debate.

The district’s administration has taken notice of the accomplishments. Superintendent Joyce Mundy called the debate team “a point of pride” for the district. “They are truly a gifted group.”

Tennent Principal Dennis Best said, “The results of their efforts are clear with regard to their competitive prowess and overall personal growth. Without question, our coaches have done a great job of preparing our debaters for competitions, but I think they have done an even better job of preparing them for life.”

Pronin, who has been the team’s anchor, has a fascinating background. His parents, who immigrated from Belarus, both speak Russian. Pronin did not speak English until the age of 5. In addition to his status as co-captain with Luongo, he is the school’s top tennis player.

Berdnik said Pronin’s leadership and character set him apart.

“A lesser captain would have been more into greater individual performance,” he said. “Mike has spent extra time mentoring younger debaters, helping to redefine their cases.”

Pronin, who says “I’ve always been a talker. I liked to argue,” started off slowly as a freshman, not winning a single debate round. His competitiveness took over.

“You cannot underestimate Mike’s will to win,” Berdnik said. “That’s not to say he will win every single debate. But I’m confident he is prepared as well as he can.

“In a given round of debate in any tournament, he stands a better-than-even chance of winning that debate. And that’s pretty special.”