

Remembering

Dr. James John Unger, former debate coach at Georgetown and American Universities and for many years director of the National Forensics Institute, died April 3 at his Washington, D.C. home.

Unger was an NFL policy debater at St. Ignatius High School in Cleveland, where he was coached by Rev. John Miday, a member of the NFL Hall of Fame. Jim reached the quarterfinals at NFL Nationals, and later, the final round of the college NDT, debating for Boston College. While attending Harvard Law School he coached the Boston College debate team.

As a college debater and coach Unger and a group of debate friends, including Robert Shrum and Laurence Tribe, revolutionized college debate and created the model for what high school debate would later become. Unger believed that argument and evidence-not persuasive speaking- was the key to debate victory; and the presentation of many arguments and much evidence increased a debater's chance to win the decision. This focus on content reversed the long history of persuasive oratory that had prevailed in collegiate debate. It also led to "spread": the use of rapid delivery to present as many arguments and as much evidence as possible within debate time limits. NFL Hall of Fame coach Ralph Carey debated against Unger in college and later recalled, "He was the fastest speaker I ever heard." Another debater of that time remembered his first debate against Unger. "Jim put all these file cards on the podium and I thought nobody can read all those cards in ten minutes! But by the end of Jim's speech all the cards had been read!"

Unger received his B.A. as valedictorian from Boston College and his J.D. from Harvard University Law School. During his years as coach at Georgetown his teams reached the final round of every major intercollegiate tournament, including the National Championship, often more than once. His teams were ranked "number one"



Dr. James J. Unger

in the nation in the National Coaches Poll an unprecedented five times. In a national poll of leading intercollegiate coaches and debaters he was named both the Outstanding Debate Coach and the Outstanding Debate Judge for the entire decade of the 1970's. In 1982 he received an honorary gold key from the Barkley Forum at Emory University.

He served as a debate consultant to both NBC and ABC. In every election since 1976, he served as Chairperson of the Associated Press National Presidential Debate Evaluation Panel. In 1992 he also assumed similar duties for the United Press International and the New York Daily News. Unger appeared on more than thirty national media shows.

He appeared as a moderator-host for the NFL National Forensic Library, a comprehensive instructional video-tape series supported by the Bradley Foundation. A substantial component of that series was "Unger and Company", a set of "McLaughlin Group" style tapes in which Dr. Unger led top national collegiate debate coaches in often controversial "debates about debate."

As a coach, Unger was brilliant and creative. He was able to reinvent debate theory and practice to improve the performance of his teams. One notable example was the "studies" counterplan. Counterplans had always been a negative option, but they were often unpopular with judges and therefore little used in contest debates. Traditionally the counterplan was limited to a single non topical alternative to the affirmative plan. Unger felt the counterplan was a valuable tool that could defeat the proposition (the affirmative plan) if it were given a more public policy focus. Unger's teams counterplaned by advocating that the affirmative plan (and other competing policies) must be empirically studied by experts before *any* plan be adopted. Until such studies were completed *no* rational policy decision could be made. Hence the proposition should not be adopted (and the affirmative should lose)! Unger's teachings on issues like inherency and presumption were also brilliant and controversial. As a judge he would not vote on topicality during the early years of his career.

As a debate theorist he ranked with the very best: Dr. William Reynolds and Dr. David Zarefsky. But as a debate strategist he had no equal! In his annual publication, **Second Thoughts**, he would dissect debates and affirmative cases and explain to all in the high school debate community, how arguments should be selected, extended, refuted, positioned and presented. His seminars were widely praised, his lengthy and cogent debate ballots were prized, and his institute was a must for any serious debater.

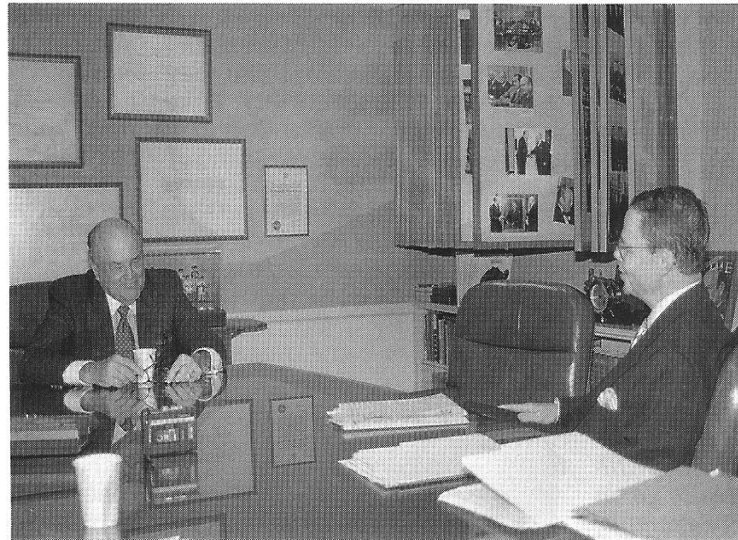
James J. Unger had two passions in life. One was coaching debate. As a Harvard Law School graduate, who was a powerful speaker and a fine writer, he was constantly receiving offers to enter other professions. Top law firms in Los Angeles and Washington recruited Jim. D.C. trade associations sought his counsel, Vice President Walter Mondale wanted to hire



Professor James J. Unger
American University

Unger for his office, and pundit George Will, after serving on a TV panel with Unger suggested, "Why don't you enter my profession?" Yet Jim's life was debate! He loved watching debate, coaching debate, judging debate, writing about debate and... debating!

Jim's second great passion was time with his friends: days on the tennis courts; nights playing bridge; long meals in fine restaurants disputing topics ranging from politics to movies to golf. Unger was very social: many evenings Georgetown would see the Professor, impeccably dressed with his signature vivid tie and elegant walking stick, meeting friends at the 1789 for dinner. He was a man of hospitality, collegiality and wit. Most of all he was intensely loyal and giving to his friends. Jim made many a friend's career by arranging law school admissions, recommending important clerkships, offering sound career advice and reaching out to his vast network on behalf of a friend. One could always count on the "Big U" to help.



Professor Unger interviews Defense Secretary Melvin Laird



Laird with Coach Unger and debaters, Danzis & Behm.

At its end how can any life be properly summed up? No tribute can ever be exhaustive enough to please those who shared that life, and churlishly grumble about a bit of history omitted or a favorite anecdote ignored. No obituary can adequately introduce a man to a curious reader who never knew him and now can never meet him. So let this then be finally said: James Unger was my teacher, colleague, tennis partner, debate opponent, dinner companion, employer, and best friend. I was a better person for knowing JJU, as were Bob Shrum, Bill Southworth, Loren Danzis, Lanny and B.J.Naeglin, John Sexton, Tom Rollins, Brad Ziff, Ted Belch and hundreds of others. And now our great friend is gone And now we all are less.

--James Madison Copeland