

Philadelphia

www.citypaper.net

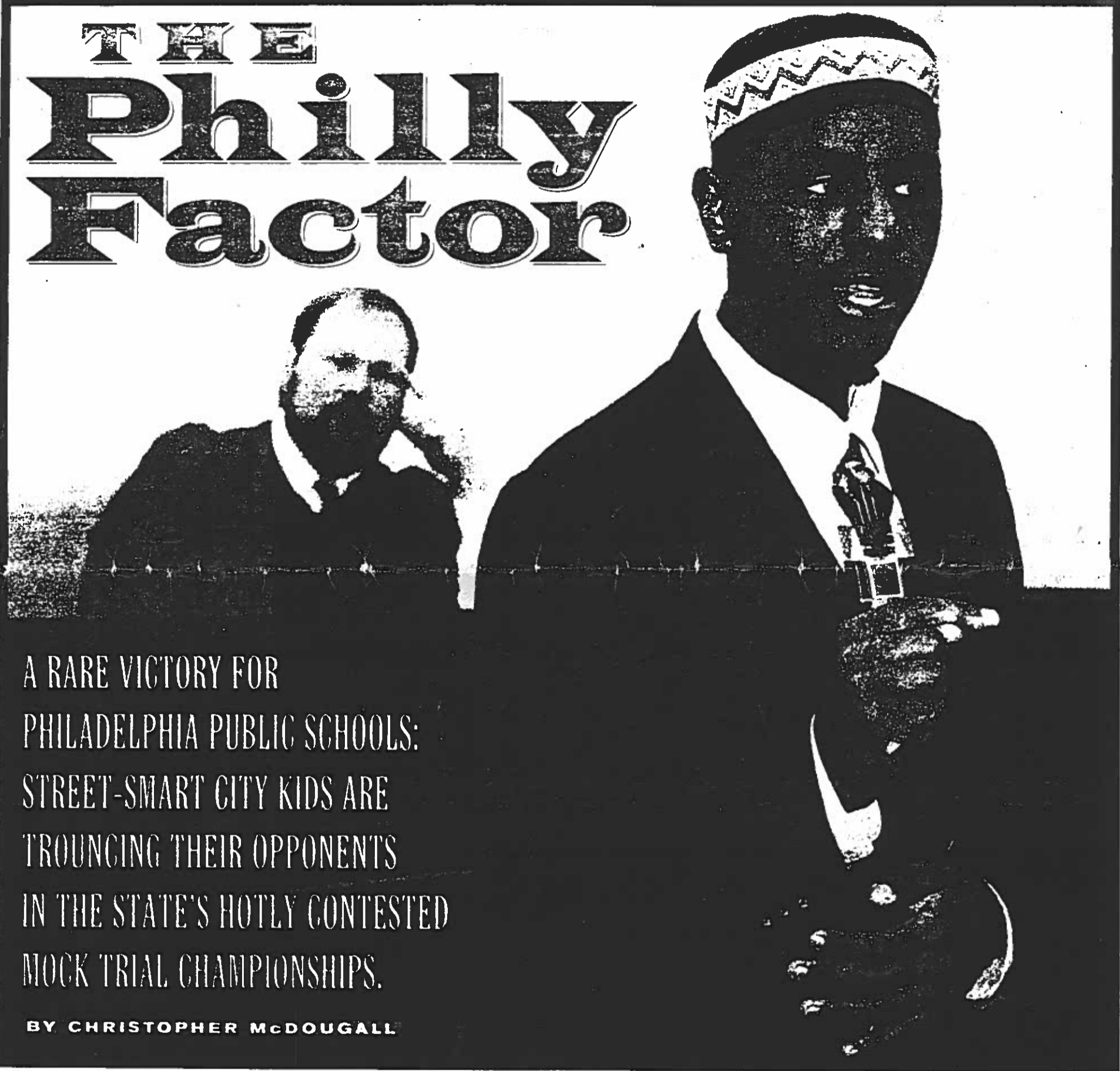
CITY PAPER

The News & Entertainment Weekly

CITY BEAT
The
Diploma Mill
DETWEILER
Online Lunatic
FUCHS
ON FILM
Gary Oldman's
Vicious Mouth

INTERNATIONAL HOUSE
PHILADELPHIA
FESTIVAL OF
WORLD
CINEMA
CATALOGUE
INSIDE

THE Philly Factor



A RARE VICTORY FOR
PHILADELPHIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS:
STREET-SMART CITY KIDS ARE
TRUNCING THEIR OPPONENTS
IN THE STATE'S HOTLY CONTESTED
MOCK TRIAL CHAMPIONSHIPS.

BY CHRISTOPHER McDOUGALL

April 10 - 16, 1998 #673

The PHILLY FACTOR

A RARE VICTORY FOR PHILADELPHIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS: Street-smart city kids are trouncing their opponents in the state's hotly contested Mock Trial championships.

BY CHRISTOPHER McDOUGALL

"Which one's the tough guy?"

The courtroom was packed with white faces and blue blazers, all swiveled toward a group of black teenagers huddled around a table before the judge's bench. Even the bearded old judges in the surrounding oil portraits seemed to be giving the North Philly teens the hairy eyeball. They certainly bore watching — judging from the commotion a similar crew caused last year, these kids were capable of anything.

"Is that him? The one Lauren said?" the woman continued, pointing discreetly over the back of the bench toward a young man in a Muslim skullcap. "No, the other one — the sleepy guy with the sideburns," the polo-shirted man next to her replied, directing her gaze toward 17-year-old Davysses McLaurin.

Davysses, oblivious to the murmurs rippling row-to-row through the courtroom from the schoolgirls in sundresses behind him back to the parents in remote benches, stretched his arms in a luxurious yawn and lowered his head to the tabletop for a few winks. His partners, not nearly so nonchalant, were using the last few minutes they had left to prepare for the trial of their lives.

"Time to do it," Aleeshamonae Dove had muttered earlier to the rest of the group. "Time to get your ghetto on."

Here in Carlisle, the Central Pennsylvania town whose brick buildings still bear the bullet scars of a Civil War battle to turn back rebel troops, another kind of uprising was unfolding. Carlisle's

two courthouses were hosting the scholastic Mock Trial championships this March 27 weekend, and the talk of the competition was a public school from a tough North Philly neighborhood which hoped to outshine the state's top academies for the title of best scholastic attorneys.

Calling Carver a longshot was like saying the same for the Sixers; a pug had a better chance in a pitful of rottweilers. Eight regional champions from across the state were assembled for this two-day, single elimination tournament, and take a look at this lineup: Quigley Catholic, a five-time state champ from Pittsburgh, was here to avenge its upset loss last year; Scranton Prep, the 1991 champ, was back, as were J.P. McCaskey, a regular state finalist, and Punxsutawney High, making its third straight visit to the Final Eight.

The Mock Trial crown usually goes to a suburban or private-school team; that's the way it's been since state competitions began nearly two decades ago. Here's how it works. The schools receive a copy of a fic-

tional case file with witness statements and arrest records. From that, they have to strategize both a defense and a prosecution, and select students to represent three attorneys and two witnesses. During the trial, the mock attorneys question their own mock witnesses as well as a pair from the opposing team. That's where things get tricky — witnesses can get blindsided by questions, while the attorneys have to field any offbeat response they get in return.

As a test of stress control and brain power, mock trial ranks alongside improv theater and tax audits; to get through it unscathed, you have to act, improvise, craft questions, deal with hecklers (objecting attorneys, in this case), memorize hundreds of bits of information and *know your material dead cold*. Lose focus, and lose.

How could an inner-city school ever hope to compete with a Devon Prep when it comes to mastering rules of law and real-life courtroom procedure, not to mention a 70-page case file? The prep school kids had superior academic backgrounds and skilled lawyers not only for coaches, but in some cases parents.

Carver, on the other hand, was... well, it's hard to say what they were. Most of the team had never heard of mock trial before last year. The girls — Tahira Boothe, Aleeshamonae Dove, Tina Maddox, LaShauna Myers, Nahdee Darby — were all favorites from coach Hattie McIntosh's English class and members of her debate team. Thomas Jones had wandered in reluctantly, dragged along by his twin brother John. Although John quit, Thomas stayed on after their dying grandfather urged him to find a talent and stick with it. Nafis Williams became a competitor by accident; he'd just wanted to get over his shyness in front of crowds.

For showmanship, the girls recruited Davysses, a class clown with high grades and a genius for improv. If he could charm juries the way he worked a chem class, the girls figured, he'd be deadly. Davysses agreed; as an "inner-city nerd," all he did after school was play a little hoop and hole up with his bass and homework, avoiding trouble on the North Philly streets. Bashir Hassan, on the other hand, had to squeeze in mock trial between track, band, karate, and piano rehearsals of the *Moonlight Sonata* for the school talent show.

Carver itself is a run-down elementary school in the heart of North Philly, converted a decade ago into a high school for math and science. Though the students are notably high achievers, the building is old, underfunded and still equipped with half-sized desks, urinals and water fountains designed for grade schoolers. Outside, the three-block walk from the Broad Street Subway to the front door is such a gauntlet of crack addicts and stick-up thugs that it's known as a cash-free zone — if you carry cash, chances are you won't be carrying it for long.

As of three years ago, while Quigley Catholic was winning its second straight state title and Cardinal Dougherty was ending its seven-year run as city champs, Carver didn't even have a team. This year, while other schools were preparing to arrive in Carlisle by chartered bus, Carver coach Hattie McIntosh was making Greyhound reservations in case the borrowed vans they'd been promised didn't come through.

It looked like the state championships would be a blowout, except Carver had a special weapon at its command: the Philly Factor.

The Philly Factor first kicked in last year, when Overbrook High School somehow converted its poor academic rating and near



Davy McLaurin wheedles, cajoles and urges as he delivers his summation.

50 percent dropout rate into the best Mock Trial team the state has ever seen. The 'Brook, which had never won a state title in anything, even when Wilt Chamberlain was on the basketball team, stormed to victory in both the city and state championships, finishing 11th in the nation.

No other Philadelphia high school had ever won the state crown, and never before had a Pennsylvania school cracked the national top 20. It was a magical performance, especially considering that all of the Overbrook students were mock trial rookies.

Phil Beauchemin, a social studies teacher and varsity baseball coach who looks more like a Teamster than an educator, formed the squad by selecting nine students from his senior civics class. "Mr. Beauchemin ran a couple of practices in class, then walked around saying, 'You, you and you are volunteers,'" recalls team member April Woods, an art student who had zero interest in law before she was drafted by Beauchemin.

Besides April, Beauchemin recruited other peculiar talents: Tim Carr, a violinist; softball player Chanae Smith; and teen-radio host Tyray Miller. He got some grumbling — Tanika Lott would have to give up her after-school job at Rite Aid and Yenneeka Long would have to find someone else to babysit her little brother — but once he got everyone on board, Beauchemin found they had untapped skills and true fire in the belly.

"That Overbrook team captured magic in a bottle," says David Trevaskis, head of the Temple University Law School program which sponsors the city competitions. "They were smart, polished, dramatic, wonderfully articulate — it was a team full of naturals."

True, but so were the other top contenders. What made Overbrook so devastating in the courtroom was something its prep school competition hadn't encountered before — a quick-witted, street-honed style that sparkled with drama, aggression and showmanship.

It's not a flair you normally develop, for instance, "in the mean streets of Swarthmore, where we sent the maids out to do battle for us," says Trevaskis. But growing up in West Philly, the Overbrook kids learned litigation skills under combat conditions. They worked adult jobs, fended off street thugs and protected their bookbags from thieves on the El. They knew from experience how adults argued, what worked and what didn't.

"On any day, you might have to talk your way out of trouble," Tyray reflected. "It keeps you sharp."

And as a black male, he pointed out, he got plenty of practice from the other side of the law as well. Three members of the team were hassled by police as they walked to a testimonial lunch in their honor, and Tyray was frisked and falsely arrested as a subway turnstile jumper just before the national championships. "Keeping cool while telling

them that all black males aren't crooks is good training," he said. "Believe me."

It was also a motivation to study law, to get some grip on a legal system that seemed biased and arbitrary. That's not a lesson lost on other inner-city students: in the past two years, the number of Philly schools in mock trial competitions has nearly doubled, jumping from 30 to 50 teams to become the fastest-growing extracurricular activity.

A big part of the allure was Overbrook's success. That '97 squad proved that when it came to law and showmanship, anything was possible.

Now it was Carver's turn.

Saturday, March 14: The City Championships

Law student Greg Wiegand had come up with a devilishly tricky problem. Working from an idea provided by Washington, DC's Street Law program, he scripted this case for the high school lawyers to tackle:

On trial is high school track coach Leigh Walker, charged with conspiracy and delivery of

anabolic steroids. Walker's star runner, Ben Johnson, flew into an uncontrollable rage after fumbling a hand-off and losing the 800-meter relay, a loss that prevented the team from advancing to the state championships. In the locker room, the teenage sprinter went berserk, punching the wall till his hand broke, then viciously kicking a water fountain and, finally, battering his head against the wall until he collapsed in a pool of blood.

A blood test at the hospital revealed that Ben had been using steroids and that the manic fit had been a side effect known as "roid rage." An investigation revealed that Walker's assistant had been giving the drugs to the young runner. In a plea agreement which promises him a reduced sentence, the

assistant agrees to testify that it was actually Coach Walker who arranged for the steroids. (Note: Teams can switch the genders of any of the characters.)

Woven into the saga are enough plot twists and brain-teasing details to keep the Dream Team humming.

The assistant, for instance, signed his plea agreement one month before swearing to a statement — did that mean he'd been coached by the police?

Coach Walker is a staunch anti-drug activist — but he also tested positive for steroid use and was kicked off the Olympic team 25 years before. Did that make him a liar and hypocrite, or a reformed man and a zealot?

One of the key prosecution witnesses was Ben Johnson's father. Did his testimony reflect the concern of a loving father, or the hatred of a bitter rival who'd been beaten out of a berth on the Olympic squad a quarter century before — by Walker?

Most importantly, the key witness in Walker's defense was Ben Johnson, who swore the coach was innocent and the true culprits were his overambitious father and

"WHAT YOU SEE IN THESE MEETS ARE KIDS FROM THE WORST NEIGHBORHOODS SHOWING UP IN SUITS AND ACTING LIKE REAL LAWYERS, AND REAL LAWYERS ACTING LIKE KIDS. GETTING ALL EXCITED ABOUT HOW WELL SOME TEENAGER GIVES A SPEECH," SAYS TREVASKIS.



Bashir Hassan attempts to pin down Tahira Boothe on the facts of the steroid case.



the deceitful assistant.

Who's telling the truth? Who's lying? Who's this portly gent who keeps cracking lawyer jokes in front of State Supreme Court Justice Russell Nigro?

Oh, that's David Trevaskis. A school teacher-turned-attorney, he's been running the Mock Trial program for over 15 years, ever since he was a student at Temple Law. For Trevaskis, the city championships about to get underway are a futuristic vision, a glimpse at how life could be in Philadelphia if two professions — law and education — ever lived up to their ideals.

"What you see in these meets are kids from the worst neighborhoods showing up in suits and acting like real lawyers, and real lawyers acting like kids, getting all excited about how well some teenager gives a speech," says Trevaskis. "You see guys like Joey Grant, one of the best homicide DAs in the city, giving up their time to teach workshops, and people like Judge Patrice Tucker volunteering all kinds of time."

The purpose isn't to create more lawyers, says Trevaskis; instead, it's to teach poise and creative thinking, and give the kids a firsthand look at life as a professional. Since many have no idea how to dress or act outside a teenage world, the Mock Trial handbook takes care to contradict nearly every behavioral pattern they've been taught in the streets and on TV.

The rulebook paternally instructs:

Always be courteous to witnesses, other attorneys, the judge and the jury.... Dress appropriately (coat and tie for males and dresses or equivalent for females.... If the judge rules against you on a point or in the case, take the defeat gracefully and act cordially toward the judge and the other side.... Do not chew gum.

Students also get a living-laboratory look at the fickle nature of justice. The Walker trial, for instance, is literally unprovable. It's based on the wet clay of witness statements and circumstances, yet somehow a verdict will be returned.

In October, the case file is distributed to the schools, and Trevaskis hustles around to make sure each team gets an advising lawyer. For the next three months, the students will brainstorm with the attorney and a teacher coach, puzzling out strategies and

tackling rules of hearsay, evidence, relevance and objections. "Basically, the same stuff I spent three years learning in law school," says Trevaskis.

Carver mounted its first team in 1982, but dropped out after a coach retired and didn't return to competition until last year. In the first match they faced Masterman, one of the top schools in the city and an annual Mock Trial ace. The result was carnage. Carver got demolished, and Deborah Carroll, an attorney acting as judge in the match, felt so sorry for the inept students that she decided to volunteer as their lawyer-coach.

"A friend of mine, Priscilla Pearson, was coaching them part-time and she told me, 'These kids are amazing. They can go all the way,'" Carroll recalls. "I was skeptical, but I felt compelled to give them a hand," much as she'd been aided herself as a fledgling attorney.

Born and raised in the Bronx, Carroll came to Temple for college and later became a recreation therapist at a local psychiatric hospital. One day, after working eight years at the hospital, she witnessed a carjacking and was called upon as a witness. The trial sparked her interest in law; four years later, she was an attorney and clerking for Common Pleas Judge Patrice Tucker. Later, Judge Tucker's husband took Carroll into his practice.

Even though she has a husband, two young daughters and a legal career to take care of, something about the Carver kids tugged at her, and she began rearranging her schedule so she could shoot out of her 15th and Chestnut office and reach the school at 17th and Norris for two afternoons a week; then three; then, as the championships approached, five afternoons and weekends.

But the work paid off quickly. After its shellacking in the first match of the '97 season, Carver fought its way back a trial at a time and made it to the semifinals. This year, the team showed that Pearson knew what she'd been talking about — in six weeks of a round-robin double elimination competition, Carver defeated nearly 50 schools and found itself in the city finals against Masterman, its old nemesis.

On the morning of the finals, the small courtroom at Temple Law School looks like a scene from *To Kill a Mockingbird*. With Justice Nigro on the bench and a panel of attorneys acting as jury, the student lawyers take seats at two tables with their teammates clustered at their backs. Behind them, parents and friends fill rows of benches. Crowding the balcony are students from eliminated teams who've come to watch Masterman dismantle the Carver upstarts.

But after blowing them away a year ago,

Masterman discovers a whole new Carver. Bashir Hassan's opening statement is a piece of gospel oratory: Clasp his hands before him in a position of prayer, he reasons, cajoles and preaches the pain and innocence of his poor client, coach Leigh Walker.

Masterman, in response, puts on a clean, hard-charging case, but soon finds Carver's Tahira Boothe has learned a clever tactic: any time they object to one of her questions, she uses her clarification to shoehorn more evidence onto the record. Instead of restricting her case, the Masterman objections are giving her a chance to build it.

The showstopper, however, is Tina Maddox, a shy girl often overshadowed by her mouthier teammates. But in her role as Benita Johnson, the steroid-damaged track star, Maddox brings the house down. In a voice quavering with pain, tears welling in her eyes, "Johnson" explains to the hushed courtroom how her overly ambitious mother had driven her to compete and, finally, filled her with such shame after a loss that she erupted in a mad, self-destructive frenzy.

"Oh, we got it now," whispers Doresa Jones, mother of Carver team member Thomas Jones. "She's good." Her husband, Alcedes, hums in agreement, "Mmm,

hmmmm. That girl's a heartbreaker."

During the tension-filled minutes while the jury deliberates in a back room, Trevaskis compliments the parents in the audience. "If one of these kids stood up and shot me, we'd be on every TV station in the country," says Trevaskis. "What's really newsworthy is the fact that they made it here today. Just getting to school each day for many of these kids is a truly heroic act."

The parents remain rooted to their seats, too anxious to wander the room or chat.

They nod, barely listening, as Trevaskis speaks, while many of the Carver students, still in their seats, hold hands with their eyes shut and heads bowed. Aleeshamonea reaches over to Davy's legal pad and scrawls, "I think we've got it!" He shrugs, glances at the jury room door, and shrugs again.

Justice Nigro speaks up from the bench. Throughout the trial, he'd been smiling, nodding his head in agreement and raising an eyebrow in appreciation, thoroughly enjoying the performance. Now, he wants to be sure the parents and spectators real-

ize what they'd seen.

"The most important thing if you want to be a trial lawyer is to have mastery of the facts," he begins. "That's why these young people were so outstanding. I've heard a lot of trials in my time, and I only wish the lawyers in those cases did the homework and made the same effort you saw from these students."

Moments later, the jury files back in. "Your honor, we've reached a verdict. We find Leigh Walker... not guilty."

It takes a few heartbeats for the statement to register. If the coach is innocent, that means... Carver had done it. They'd beaten Masterman. In a flash, they change from cool litigators back into ecstatic schoolkids,

OVERBROOK HIGH, WHICH HAD NEVER WON A STATE TITLE IN ANYTHING, EVEN WHEN WILT CHAMBERLAIN WAS ON THE BASKETBALL TEAM, FINISHED 11TH IN THE NATION IN THE MOCK TRIAL CHAMPIONSHIPS WITH A QUICK-WITTED, STREET-HONED STYLE.

whooping, hugging and crying, while their schoolmates in the spectators' benches chop fists in the air and pump their arms overhead to "raise the roof."

State Championships, March 27: Carlisle, PA

Creator, thanks for bringing us this far," says Hattie McIntosh from the center of the prayer circle, her voice both strong and hushed. Before every match, the Carver students join hands and take turns offering thanks or a wish. McIntosh, the patient teacher of 37 years who'd taken the team from embarrassment to victory, is always the last to speak.

"Amen," the Carver students say with heads bowed.

"And thank you for these young and wonderful minds." With that, the students' heads snap erect. They are ready.

In the opening round, Carver is prosecuting the Leigh Walker case against Scranton Prep, a very capable team with a sharp-featured, fast-talking senior who looks like an angry Joel Grey. The rest of the Scranton team is clean-cut, blue-blazered and confident, a portrait of preppy self-assurance. As their parents fill the benches behind them and the all-white panel of lawyers take the jury seats, the only minority faces in the room are gathered around the Carver table.

The Carver kids, however, are remarkably poised; they're so used to being an outnumbered minority that they've become philosophical. "Everyone is different in some way," Aleeshamonae explains. "If it's not race, it's religion or something else, so I don't even think about it." Davysse, too, isn't intimidated. "If they don't like me 'cause I've got too much melanin or kinky hair, there's nothing I can do about it," he says. "But you can always find something people will like about you, if you can make contact... here, they'll see you as a good attorney, not as a dark-skinned person."

Carver knows from experience that the prosecution is at a disadvantage in the Walker case, so Bashir decides to "put on the mustard" in his opening statement and blow the jury away. He stands, greets the judge and jury, and is just getting into his hands-clasped, heart-wringing oration when a voice shouts, "OBJECTION!"

Amazed, Bashir stops and looks around. Objections during an opening statement are almost unprecedented; you'd have to drop an F-bomb to deserve one. "Please tell counsel not to mention other instances of drug use," says the angry Joel Grey-looking guy at the defense table. That's it? The quibble was so minor that Bashir recognizes it as a beanball intended to brush him back from the plate.

Instead, he gets angry. With a voice modulating from sweet and high to low and menacing, he uncorks a speech with a vibrancy adopted from the Selma civil rights marches.

"When you hear the evidence, you can only conclude that Leigh Walker was the buyer, with the de-sire, to conspire, in the poisoning of a young body. Oh, he conspired, and we saw what transpired:

young Ben Johnson lying on the floor in a pool of her own blood."

Scranton, in its response, cleverly links the defendant with the president. "Much

like Bill Clinton, Walker is the victim of an overly zealous prosecutor with a vendetta." Then, they hit Carver with an aggressive defense, hectoring them with shouted objections and machine-gunning their witnesses with questions.

But soon Carver spots an Achilles heel; whenever a certain Scranton attorney is forced to rephrase, he stumbles. With discreet glee, the Carver lawyers turn the objection game against Scranton and take turns popping to their feet whenever that attorney takes the floor. So flustered does he become that at one point the student just freezes, stammers, and says, "Uhhh... your honor, I can't think of any other way to ask the question."

Nevertheless, the match is extremely tight. Going into the closing statements, it's impossible to tell which team is ahead. Carver's last chance to score points is left to Davysse, whose sleepy self-confidence had been the difference in many tight matches. ("Davysse was cross-examining a witness from St. Hubert's when he complimented her beautiful hair," Trevaskis confided later. "It was unbelievable; in the middle of trial he's taking phone numbers. It worked, though — she just melted.")

But Davysse's true talent is improvisation. He can alter his closing statement between breaths, incorporating a phrase he remembered from a witness' testimony or a telling comment by an opponent. Against Scranton, he was masterful.

"Ladies and gentleman, do you know what circumstantial evidence is? I'm sure you think you do," he lectures the all-lawyer jury, causing them to smile. "But it's like waking up in the morning and seeing snow on the ground. Your daughter comes in and asks, 'Did it snow last night?' and you say, 'Yes.' You're sure it snowed, because you see it on the ground... but you didn't actually see it fall, because you were asleep. You can still be reasonably sure it did, and that is circumstantial evidence."

The jurors glance at each other. This guy is good. Then, with time running out, he launches a breathtaking summation, throwing in everything from a quote on the courtroom wall, to a comment the judge had made, to that afternoon's sunny weather. As a final fillip, he turns to the Scranton side and volleys their opening line: "And I'm sure even Bill Clinton would agree with me."

Because it takes several hours to tabulate the results of the quarter-final matches, the organizers, in a brilliant move, have arranged a ballroom and a DJ for a pre-verdict dance party. The Carver kids are the first on the floor, cutting loose in an ecstasy of released tension, pulling to their feet Trevaskis and McIntosh and anybody else they can find.

Soon, another team joins in; first dancing alone, then drifting over to the Carver crowd, which immediately absorbs them until both teams are tearing it up in a mixed

and happy mob. "Lord, if we could only introduce this to the real legal system," a pleased and exhausted Deborah Carroll comments, collapsing into a chair.

At nearly 11 p.m., the results are in: Carver has won, advancing to the semi-finals. Amidst the screams and hugs of joy, the Carver kids realize that the team they've been dancing with, J.P. McCaskey High School, will be their opponent. "Looks like the party's over," Davysse remarks. "Back to work."

The Finals

McCaskey was tough, but Carver was tougher. Carver defeated its dance partner and moved into the finals against Punxsutawney, a seasoned team with a string of regional championships.

Now, for the second time in two years, a Philadelphia public school is competing for the title of best scholastic attorneys in the state.

Aleeshamonae has to compose herself. She sits alone for a while on the steps of the Revolutionary-era courthouse, sliding her hands up her face until she is clutching her neat, short dreadlocks in an attitude of dread. This is it.

As the teams and spectators file into the ceremonial courtroom, the Punxsutawney team speculates aloud about what they're in store for.

"We heard the Philadelphia teams are really tough," says sophomore Deanna Bloss. "Really flashy; is that true?"

This time, it's Tahira Boothe who captivates the crowd. A short, pretty girl with neat plaits pulled back in a bun, Tahira plays one of the witnesses, a high school principal. Thrusting aside the microphone, slipping on her granny glasses and addressing the court in a kind, authoritative voice, the 17-year-old schoolgirl turns herself into a middle-aged school administrator. The transformation is so astonishing you want to throw holy water and order the spirit to leave her.

Then the Punxsutawney attorney throws her a curve — he asks Boothe to repeat the testimony of another witness which flatly contradicts her own story. "Objection!" Davysse shouts.

It's a fiendishly clever tactic. According to Mock Trial rules, a witness can't testify about statements in another witness' deposition. But there's no rule against testifying about something she's just heard. In a real case, that's avoided by sequestering the witnesses, but no one has ever thought of that for Mock Trial competition — no one, that is, except Punxsutawney.

"On what grounds are you objecting, counselor?" the judge asks.

"On grounds that a witness' statement must be restricted to her sworn deposition," Davysse replies.

"There's no rule to that effect," the Punxsutawney attorney shoots back.

Tahira, in the witness stand, glances back and forth at the arguing attorneys. If the objection is overruled, she's stuck; she'd be forced to testify against her own team. Then

she has a brainstorm.

"Objection overruled. Please answer the question."

"Certainly," Tahira says with a smile. "Unfortunately, I have a hearing problem in my left ear — this one, you see?" she says, cupping her hand around the ear closest to the witness the prosecution wanted her to quote. "I'm sorry, but I couldn't hear a thing he said. I know what I have to say, however."

Surprised laughter and a brief flurry of applause ripple through the courtroom. "I'm sorry to hear about your hearing loss," the amused but defeated prosecutor responds. "No further questions." But he soon recovers from the setback and wins a few laughs of his own by asking the next Carver witness, "By the way, you haven't suffered any hearing damage, have you?"

As usual, it comes down to Davysse's finale, and he lets it rip. Speaking in an odd, slow rhythm, like Sinatra singing just behind the orchestra's beat, he entertains the jury with a homespun truth: "You heard the prosecution's main witness admit he's lied before. Now, the thing about a lie is, it never travels alone. It always travels with a friend — Doubt. Mr. Reasonable Doubt. That's right — they hang together, that lie and Mr. Doubt."

Then, holding up the witness' affidavit, he says, "So if you doubt his statement, there's only one thing you can do with it," and begins slowly tearing it into strips. "Just rip it up," he says, tucking the torn shreds into his pocket, "and put it away. Forgive me for wasting your time."

There was no way to go toe-to-toe with a performance like that, and the Punxsutawney attorney admits it in his turn to speak. "Wow. That was some closing statement," he says. "But Mr. McLaurin forgot to mention certain key points..." he continues forcefully, and begins laying out a solid rebuttal.

It only takes a few minutes for the jury to retire and add up the score. "We find in favor..." the foreman announces to the hushed crowd, "of the Commonwealth." Again, it takes a few seconds for everyone to translate and realize that Carver, despite its magnificent underdog performance, has lost.

As awards are handed out a few minutes later, something strange happens. Each team is called forward to receive their medals, and the crowd responds with respectful applause — until Carver is called. The crowd doesn't clap for Carver. Instead, as a body, everyone in the room leaps to their feet, shouting and applauding in near-hysterical appreciation.

The reaction is so raw and heartfelt it raises goosebumps. The Carver kids are shocked. Bashir ducks his head defensively and glances quickly right and left, wondering what the hell is going on. Davysse cranes all the way around in his seat, unbelieving, until a huge, warm smile crosses his face.

Hattie McIntosh, their always optimistic coach, knows at once what's happening. Tears fill her eyes, and she covers her face with her hands.

They had come within a few points of becoming the second Philly school in a row to pull off an incredible upset and "capture magic in a bottle." As the crowd cheers on and on, she couldn't have asked for a better defeat. ■

IN THE PAST
TWO YEARS, THE NUMBER
OF PHILLY SCHOOLS IN
MOCK TRIAL COMPETITIONS
HAS NEARLY DOUBLED,
JUMPING FROM 30 TO 50
TEAMS TO BECOME THE
FASTEST-GROWING EXTRA-
CURRICULAR ACTIVITY.