

Bellarmino narrowly misses mock-trial title

College finishes a close second in national finals

By MICHAEL JENNINGS
The Courier-Journal

Former University of Louisville football coach Howard Schnellenberger used to boast that U of L was on a collision course with the national championship.

But Schnellenberger's U of L teams never came as close as Bellarmine College did Sunday afternoon, when it lost a squeaker to the University of Maryland in the finals of the national mock-trial competition.

Bellarmino's second-place finish in Des Moines, Iowa, marked the fourth time in 11 years that Bellarmine's mock-trial team has been national runner-up. Bellarmine also placed

second in 1987, 1991 and 1994.

Bellarmino had never come quite as close to the title as it did Sunday.

Maryland beat Bellarmine by two points out of the 840 awarded by the three judges in the championship round. Bellarmine had beaten both Maryland and defending national champion Howard University last fall en route to winning Maryland's own mock-trial invitational tournament.

"This is painful to relive, you know," said Louisville attorney Jim Wagoner, who coaches the Bellarmine mock-trial team with his wife, Ruth Wagoner, a communications professor at the college.

The federal and state appellate judges who scored the showdown between Bellarmine and Maryland "said it was the best final round that they've seen," Jim Wagoner said. "Both teams were just excellent in their presentation of the case."

Each year, the American Mock Trial Association prescribes a court case that must be used in all college

mock-trial matches. This year's case was a murder trial in which a local celebrity claims self-defense in the murder of his drug-crazed child.

Each team must come to trial prepared to prosecute or defend. Jim Wagoner said Bellarmine won the toss in the championship round and chose to prosecute.

Last weekend, before the showdown with Maryland, Bellarmine's crack mock-trial team defeated Georgia Tech, Macalester College and two teams from Yale University.

A second Bellarmine team had more modest success, winning four of the eight ballots cast in its matches at the 64-team national tournament, held annually in Des Moines.

Since launching its mock-trial program 13 years ago, Bellarmine has had consistent success against bigger and better-known schools. More than 300 teams from more than 100 col-

leges and universities register annually for mock-trial competition, and Bellarmine has never finished lower than 15th nationally.

This year, Bellarmine "finished ahead of a lot of other heady programs," including Brown and Princeton universities, UCLA and the University of Michigan, Jim Wagoner said.

Mock-trial competitors, all undergraduates, serve as attorneys and witnesses. Professional attorneys judge matches.

Bellarmino team members who won honors at this year's finals included Vanessa Cox, who was recognized as a Top 10 witness and attorney, and Heather Jackson, who earned a Top 10 attorney award. They and five other Bellarmine students — William Armstrong, Jason Butler, Nathaniel Cadle, Ryane Conroy and Sean Fox — also earned All-American status.