

PROMOTING FAIRNESS IN L/D DEBATE

by William (Rusty) McCrady

In her book *The Argument Culture* published earlier this year, bestselling author (and Georgetown University professor) Deborah Tannen critiques our current tendency in American culture to attack each other unscrupulously rather than to voice opposition in logical, fair, and appropriate ways. Clearly, her book has something to say to coaches of Lincoln-Douglas debate.

If we accept that the resolutions presented to us every two months by the NFL are legitimate and worth arguing, we must guide our students toward generating valid arguments on both sides of these resolutions. In different situations, either side of the resolution could be valid, and in other situations the truth could lie somewhere in the middle. These resolutions are ideas about which reasonable people can and do disagree.

L/D debate is not merely a game, but a valuable academic activity. It follows that we should approach it in a spirit of reverence and fairness; we must argue as decent human beings, not as attack dogs.

With this principle in mind, I would like to address some tactics I've observed over the past few years which undermine the spirit of fair play that ought to imbue Lincoln-Douglas debate.

Where are we remiss? Probably in several areas, for in the heat of competition, survival sometimes seems to be the only priority. Over the past decade as a judge and coach, here are four infractions which I've observed that consistently undermine the spirit of fairness and honest inquiry which must underlie L/D debate.

Infractions

The first is probably more common in novice and JV rounds, and it is more of a minor annoyance or distraction than the other three. Nonetheless it **IS** common, and we as coaches can and certainly should easily eradicate it. For lack of a better term, I'll call it nit-picking. In a debate on the morality of possessing firearms which I judged back in the early '90's, I heard the two debaters spend most of their rebuttal time arguing whether John Locke or Jean Jacques Rousseau had coined the term "social contract." In a different type of nit-picking case, I've heard a debater claim that his definitions were superior because they came from

Black's Law, while the opponent's were from *Webster's New Collegiate*. When this sort of off-topic exchange predominates, the purpose of the debate is lost, and the judge is tempted to interrupt and ask the debaters to start debating and quit elevating minutiae to major issue status.

The next three foul-play tactics are more serious and less easily corrected. They are true examples of what has been traditionally called sophistry: arguments that are superficially clever, but in reality fallacious and misleading. The three prime examples I have witnessed are the accusation of abuse, the infamous "balanced negative" and the dismissal of the resolution.

In the case of accusation of abuse, one side, either the Affirmative or the Negative, hears something from the opponent which is challenging and potentially damaging to that side's case. Rather than coming up with a counter-argument, the side who has been challenged simply terms the opponent's argument "abusive."

Abusive. That's a powerful term. We have spousal abuse, child abuse...now debate abuse! This word is not one to take lightly in today's culture. If a debater implies that the opponent is an abuser, what's next? Call the opponent a racist? A sexist? In the situation where I saw the abuse accusation, the topic being debated (at the District tournament) was "Civil disobedience is justified in a democracy." The Negative had invoked the rule of law, which he deemed a sacred democratic tradition, and one that could be overthrown by tolerating civil disobedience. His line of argument made sense, but his opponent claimed that his way of arguing was "abusive" to the resolution and to her case because it did not allow for civil disobedience. As an observer, I would rather have heard an honest, logical rebuttal rather than a pejorative label ("abusive" which was supposed to dismiss his argument as unfair. (Who was really being abusive here?))

This is not to say that abusive tactics are not used in L/D debate tournaments. One that I find damaging to the spirit and true purpose of debate is the famous (or infamous?) "balanced negative." I know there are coaches out there who accept and even teach this technique as a winning strat-

egy for the negative side, but I must question it. An example of the strategy: in arguing the resolution, "A just social order ought to place the principle of equality above that of liberty," the Negative side claims that it has proven that equality and liberty are equally valued principles in a just society, therefore the resolution is negated, therefore Negative wins the round. Please! Aren't we debating CONFLICTING philosophies? If they are equally desirable and always harmonious, why hold a debate at all? I find the "**balanced negative**" technique to be unfair to the affirmative side by assigning the Negative side half the burden of the Affirmative side.

Even more "abusive" is the fortunately rare but truly egregious tactic in which the negative says in effect: This resolution is (choose one) nonsensical or untrue, and therefore I as the negative side win because I have proven the resolution to be thus. (For example, in the above resolution above equality and liberty, negative states, "These two principles don't conflict in a just society, so I win the round by 'proving' that they don't conflict") Oh really? We have ignoramuses getting together at Nationals every June to come up with wrong-headed resolutions? Although this technique is fortunately not likely to fool most judges, it destroys the spirit of the debate and leaves the Affirmative side in the awkward position of having nothing to argue against. It's a dirty trick--one that all coaches should forbid.

The above examples aren't the only ones I've witnessed of poor sportsmanship in debate. Other equally regrettable ones include sarcasm; ad hominem attacks; saving up new arguments or attacks until final rebuttal (so that the opponent has no time to address them); rude interrupting during cross ex.; and even cheating involving hand signals from a member of the audience.

One of the valid points Deborah Tannen makes in her book is that we in America make too much of winning whenever we engage in conflict.

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