# SPEED IN L/D: BLESSING OR BANE?

## by William (Rusty) McCrady

Back in 1995, I was called for jury duty. By some small miracle, I immediately got assigned to a trial the morning I reported. The trial proceeded quickly, and after a couple of hours of testimony and cross examination, the attorneys presented their closing arguments. I was particularly impressed by the prosecutor, who had outlined his arguments on a legal pad, and presented his case in a clear, deliberate manner so that his message escaped none of us on the jury. As a debate coach, I took note of his organization, emphasis of key points, and general style. I sensed that his approach was virtually the same as what we L/D coaches try to instill in our competitive debaters.

Fast forward to a debate I observed this spring at our District Tournament. As an audience member (not a judge), I witnessed a brilliant debater from a high school in Virginia blitz her opponent with a negative case that must have been delivered at a clip of over 200 words per minute. I kept thinking that it would be next to impossible to take notes on her case for purposes of making a rebuttal or even just to keep track of her points in order to flow the argument in order to judge the debate. When I found out much later that she had won the debate, I was not really surprised, but to be honest, I was troubled. Her opponent, who spoke at a little over half her rate (in other words, at a normal rate of delivery), had in fact made a valiant attempt not to "drop" any arguments, but I guess that the judge felt that her attempt to address this "lightning" speed was not quite sufficient.

Why was I uneasy about the verdict in this debate? I had to ask myself: is my bias in favor of natural tone and normal rate of delivery outmoded in today's world of competitive debate? This may be the case, but even if I am voicing a minority opinion, I still feel the need to take a stand against speed debating, especially in the realm of Lincoln-Douglas rounds.

I keep going back to my experience as a member of a jury, and to memorable moments in presidential debates, political speeches, graduation speeches, and other examples of persuasive oratory directed to the ordinary reasonable person -- not to a specialized audience. As debate coaches, shouldn't we be educating our students to express themselves and their opinions in the real world, and not just in the insular world of competitive debate? To be honest, I cannot think of any instances where speed talking is used effectively in real life, other than at the end of those commercials when the announcer has to rattle off a fifty word disclaimer in ten seconds, or by the auctioneer calling out prices and bids.

Granted, there are advantages to using a rapid fire delivery in debate. The technique has been honored for decades in policy debate, where the burden on both sides is to present reams of documentation in an incredibly short amount of time, both to bolster a case and to counter an opponent with an equally impressive array of facts and examples, In its early years, Lincoln-Douglas debate was deemed by its supporters to be different in both style and substance from its policy counterpart. Thus, for a while at least, it seemed that speed was frowned upon, and oratorical effectiveness and a natural, listener-friendly delivery were encouraged and promoted. But in the heat of competition, things change.

It is not hard to figure out why speed talking has become popular in Lincoln-Douglas debate. First of all, it enables a debater to present vast volumes of material -- often five or six contentions instead of the more conventional three. In so doing, a debater presents the opponent with a highly complex argument and many points to address and refute. Thus the opponent's task becomes that much more difficult, and the likelihood of dropping one or more of the fast talking opponent's points greatly increases. A second, related advantage is that the opponent will have great difficulty trying to take complete and comprehensible notes on a case that is delivered so rapidly. Thus the opponent may become so overwhelmed and frustrated that s/he will be thoroughly demoralized by the end of the speedy opponent's constructive. Third, a fast talking debater naturally adopts an aggressive style and tone, which some coaches apparently encourage and deem the epitome of how a competent debater should sound and act. In debate, speed and an attack mentality seem to go hand-in-hand.

Finally, perhaps the most telling of all the advantages of speed is its effect on judges who have become accustomed to speed talking as a standard debating technique. My theory is that such judges fall into two groups. First, there are those judges who really can follow the flow of argument presented at a high rate of speed, and thus expect all debaters not only to follow the argument as they have, but to prepare an equally speedy rebuttal in the small allotment of preparation time. While I do not agree with such judges philosophically, as I will explain later, I certainly respect their listening skill and ability to comprehend detailed arguments delivered at such a rapid rate. Unfortunately, the second category of judges comprises those who are unable to follow such lightning arguments, but then refuse to penalize the debater for their rate of delivery, and instead credit this debater for using speed to put the opponent at a disadvantage. (Granted, a third category of judges resent an excessively fast delivery, and criticize it accordingly.)

Given the above advantages, I may be unwise in finding fault with speed debating. However, I keep going back to that jury duty experience, and I ask myself: How effective would that prosecutor have been if he had addressed the jury at 200 words per minute? In other words, my nagging concern is that fast talking is a skill whose utility is limited to competitive debate and high pressure salesmanship. If we teach it or advocate it as a desirable public speaking technique, we may be doing our students a grave disservice. A secondary concern is that speed debating will proliferate out of necessity, since an opponent who wants to win is forced to speed up delivery in order to address all of the fast talking opponent's contentions. But as we learn in our study of morality, what is deemed necessary isn't always right.

Maybe speed has become so widely accepted that my objections will be seen by most experts as provincial or antiquated. Still, I must conclude by asking the reader a question: was your most memorable teacher a fast talker, or someone who spoke in deliberate, measured, confident phrases?

*(William (Rusty) McCrady, coach at Walter Johnson HS, (MD.) is president of the Montgomery County Debate League.)*