



THE D G E

HOW VERY SMALL DEBATE PROGRAMS CAN ACHIEVE NATIONAL SUCCESS

**by
David M. Cheshier**

In the summertime I enjoy the extraordinary pleasure of working with the very bright students who attend the Dartmouth Debate Institutes. Typical of the major summer programs, the students there reflect the range of American high school debaters. Because the national debate circuit is dominated by a set of large and well supported programs, their students tend to numerically dominate. Every summer, though, I end up talking and working with students who don't fit this "profile" — maybe they come from a part of the country not regularly competing at the big national tournaments, or they have been sent to New Hampshire by a very small or under-resourced program.

Now don't get me wrong. I bear no ill will whatsoever toward the big programs, which succeed thanks to the accumulated hard work of many wonderful students and coaches, often reflecting years of sacrifice and struggle. Because of the great instructional support systems in place on those squads, their students are likely do well in national competition year after year, and so I do not even disagree that they numerically dominate the top workshops.

But I have to confess: as much as I like any debater who wants to learn and work hard, I often cannot help but root for the small program underdog. Partly this reflects my personal history. Back during the Civil War when I debated in high school, in a very small program in northwest Indiana, there was never much more to the debate program than me and my partner. The program started when I and a friend

expressed interest in debate while 9th graders, and it ended fairly soon after I graduated. Wonderful teachers worked with me at Harrison High School in West Lafayette (Purdue country), but they weren't particularly committed or trained to teach debate.

I vividly remember how thrilled I was to gain admission to Wake Forest University, which I chose on the strength of their summer workshop reputation. But in sharp contrast to their present day size and strength, I was surprised to find how small a college program Wake Forest was back then. Though this will sound absurd to those familiar with WFU's now impressive efforts, I often recall feeling that I debated for a very small squad.

Both my high school and college experiences thus gave me an intimate sense of the frustration of encountering much bigger competitors. But I was also fortunate to succeed in both environments. To this day I am awestruck by the skill Ross Smith and Allan Loudon showed in preparing me for competition, often very much against the odds — and today I can only imagine the challenges I created for them as an arrogant 18-year-old (hey, I had made it all the way to the Indiana State *final round!*). But I benefited immeasurably from their dedication and intellect, and will always be grateful for the enthusiasm they showed for good argument, not to mention their considerable patience.

Since college I've seen the playing field from every vantage point: I've had the good fortune of working with mega-programs, where success seems to come (I hesitate even to say it) easily. And I've also had the good fortune of working with programs where success is a much tougher nut to crack. Here's the point of this tour of my tortured past: After all this, I remain an optimist about the capacity of students from smaller programs to succeed. In what follows, I want to offer a little advice about why I remain optimistic, and in the most practical way, with specific suggestions for how to maneuver in an environment with few resources.

I passionately believe this: Although debate is in too many respects a game rigged to reward the wealthy, the lack of money (and the resources it provides — coaching, prepared materials, travel) is *not* finally an obstacle to success. With intelligence and hard work and just a little creativity, the advantages bestowed by big bucks can be neutralized. And I don't simply mean: "Beat your head against the wall for ten years, and then maybe someday you'll fluke into the octafinals somewhere so you can be savagely destroyed by the 9th team from Megabucks Academy in front of their minion fans." No! I mean that with dedication you and your small program can win it all. How can this be?

Three Derailing Myths

When I talk with students who are trying to strategize success from the perspective of limited resources, I often hear them express a couple points of view which I find, though reasonable, derailing. These myths are worth brief mention since you may believe them too:

It's us against the world: it's all a matter of "rep," and we don't have any. There is a pervasive sense, even among some coaches I talk with, that success is invariably effected by a school's reputation. The somewhat inbred nature of the national circuit understandably reinforces this impression — national coaches talk to successful debaters, and sometimes have worked with them over the summertime. Because of the more frequent nature of their interaction, it's easy to believe that nationally successful debaters are the beneficiaries of a secret system of reward.

But that view gets it wrong, seriously wrong. The vast ma-

jority of judges work very hard to set aside whatever preferences they have when they judge. And presuming that some judges are predisposed to vote for "winners," they are usually as much disposed to champion the underdog. A strong reputation can be earned by hard work, increasing success, and an openness to improvement. The view to the contrary is nothing more than a psychological barrier which will interfere with your true potential.

We can never beat them: they're too rich! They have all those assistants! Money does matter, no question about it. Programs with access to more money can pay for expensive subscriptions to online databases, travel more widely to national tournaments, and retain the services of additional assistance. I don't intend to deny any of this — when faced with a choice between a \$1000 or a \$100,000 budget, who wouldn't always choose the latter? But I do want to insist that the marginal added value of extra money is easy to exaggerate. As one coach told me a while back, a good friend: "The older I get, the more I realize how unsuccessful programs can just as easily spend \$50,000 as ones that win everything!" It is true that big budgets buy research assistants, but the work product of those assistants is often unreliable, and since debaters have not immersed themselves in the argument production, their ability to defend even strong arguments is diminished. And money enables more frequent national travel. But this national interaction soon reaches its own limits: students who travel nationally all the time are the first ones to burn out on the activity, and in the age of email and listservs one need not be present everywhere to acquire a good sense of what new arguments were run there. There is no good reason for debaters to forego weekends of potential work to be debating every single October, November, and January weekend.

As for the assistant issue, the perceived need to connect to a college program is a common one, and programs with access often try to get help from the best available debaters. Sometimes the assistance is wonderful, but sometimes college debaters end up imposing their own pet arguments on teams, sometimes to their detriment. And it can be pretty hard to get useful work out of assistants-for-hire.

We're doomed to run tiny affirmatives and a kritik my whole life. The genesis of this thinking is a little different, and not as thoroughly defeatist as the other myths I've mentioned. Here's the logic behind the sentiment: "We have very few students debating, and not much access or time for heavy year-long research. So the obviously smart strategic alternative is to think small: we'll run one critical argument all the time on the negative, and a little tiny, preferably non-topical affirmative all year too (after all, if we're topical we'd link to all their generics!)."

This way of thinking is common, but often wrongheaded. The problem is that teams often gravitate to this approach even when they debate on a circuit which resists support for one critique round after round, and which may insist on fairly mainstream affirmatives. But even when the circuit is amenable to these choices, they often do not pay off competitively. The big programs will be deep on your critical position no less than they would be on a, say, politics argument. A trade-off can develop, where the team ends up with real expertise on their critique but find the battle to make it link every time is soon uphill, as their opponents learn how to adjust over repeated encounters. And even if you try to slightly diversify, word soon gets around that what you intend to extend is the one preferred position (critique, states, Bush/Iraq).

I also think this approach can be counterproductive since it

doesn't necessarily get you off the hook for doing the extended week-to-week work of updating the bigger positions. Whatever affirmative you run, opponents will run their generics, and they will soon catch up and overtake you if your main answers consist of one-trick turns or takeouts. By a month or so into the season, you'll be scrambling to get caught up either way.

Still, although I've identified this last issue as another myth to be avoided, it does take us in the right direction since it evidences some degree of strategic thinking at work. With some more careful thinking, this direction can yield consistent and year-long success. And yet, other important issues remain, and this brings me to more specific advice:

But There's Not Enough Time!

The greatest frustration of debating in a small program is the absence of time: there just aren't enough hours in the day to keep up with the larger machines. I see many debaters who drown all year just doing weekly updates on the major positions, and then when you add in the difficulty of doing work on a new affirmative, and practice, and money raising, it can quickly become an impossible situation. Here are some ideas:

Run a popular summer affirmative, but with a twist. Some small programs start with the assumption that to survive they need to write brand new affirmatives, but although that can pay off, it also commits you to a high risk strategy. New affirmatives take up a disproportionate amount of preparation time, and at the time of year when time is most precious, before the first tournament. Further, they are risky simply on account of their novelty: because the affirmative has never been run before, it can be very hard to anticipate what teams will say against it. Worse, when teams from big programs (with their deep backfiles) encounter a new affirmative, they are likely to simply pull out their old mega-files, and you start from behind.

I recommend instead that you consider running a case on which the basic mechanics have been briefed by high quality summer peers, but that you spend your preparation time modifying the case so that it contains new tricks. Think about the difficulties the case encountered in the summer; how can the plan be changed to address or provide you with strategic options against them? Pick a case that is basically true, and therefore likely to hold up well over time — that is, avoid one trick cases that only obligate you to major additional research projects as the year continues.

In my view this approach — old case, new twists — has several benefits. It frees the best debater from the time intensive work of writing a major affirmative for national use from scratch. Because the basic case has a track record of sorts, you are better positioned to anticipate what teams will say. And there is a tournament bonus too. When other good teams ask what you're running, the news which will spread around will emphasize the label everyone knows ("oh, they run eating disorders"), thus diverting the opposition from hard and creative at-tournament strategizing, as opposed to having them hone in on the tricks you've built in. News of those will travel more slowly.

When picking what to run on the negative, start by concentrating on positions you'll have to research anyway, for the preservation of the affirmative. Here's what I mean: If you know the affirmative you're running is especially vulnerable to the "courts" counterplan, then why not make the courts counterplan a focus of your negative strategy? If you do, the research you accomplish will have benefit you whatever side you're debating on.

Another important aspect of time management is *partnership coordination*. Maybe you have a colleague who has much less experience, or other priorities more important than debate. The problem arises when the more experienced partner starts to resent their colleague's relatively less than total support. But this can be negotiated, and ought to be: Make explicit arrangements with your partner so work expectations are clear. Is your partner only willing to work three hours a week outside of tournaments? Fine — coordinate that time so it is at least productive.

Take off weekends between tournaments to get serious work done. A lot of high school debaters I know go to too many tournaments — they feel as if they have to literally travel every weekend, and so a season may include an absurdly high number of events, maybe even upwards of twenty. But that number is outrageously high, and is bound not only to subvert your debate preparation but your schoolwork as well. Far better to schedule major tournaments so they are fairly evenly spaced over the season — how about, in a given month, a regional tournament weekend one, weekend two off, a national tournament on the third weekend, and the fourth weekend off for work? It may surprise you to realize how great a work time compensation this can produce relative to larger programs, whose coaches are literally on the road nonstop and scrambling to get their own work done.

Find time to get work done at tournaments. I'm often surprised at how much time gets wasted by students from big programs at tournaments. Sometimes they are distracted by the sheer number of students and coaches hanging around, so it seems like they're just chatting or playing all the time. Or maybe they are having to wait around for the big bus to come rolling around. Either way, you can compensate somewhat for the time differences if you remain focused and disciplined at tournaments. As I've tried to stress many times, this does not require you to give up at-tournament fun or friendships. If you simply take the fifteen minutes immediately following every debate and put it to productive use you'll be surprised at how much new work you accomplish.

Time can be saved in other ways. For instance, I urge you to *take full advantage of web-based information sources*. And I'm not referring to Lexis-Nexus or web-based news sources, as important as those obviously are. I'm talking instead about debate resources, like the case lists and judge philosophy lists that have sprouted up. Those information sources are great equalizers, since even five years ago only the big programs commanded the resources necessary to collect information so complete.

Do you feel like your at-home time is stolen by novices you're responsible for coaching? Online materials can help you there too. The University of Vermont debate site, Planet Debate, includes hours of web-based video material which can be used to teach novices while you get other work done in the background.

The time deficit relative to the big programs usually gets worse as the year continues. Think about finding times in your own schedule where intensive work can be accomplished. Obviously you should especially *coordinate at the start of the year*. I've written before about the need for very specific organization at the start of the year. But it's also important, if you can manage it, to *find a week or so during the midterm holiday period* for a mid-year work push. Setting aside the first full week in January, or the week between Christmas and New Year's for major work will pay major dividends, and often give you an edge against bigger programs whose students may feel confident enough to take a more considerable holiday break. I'm often surprised at how few major

new affirmatives and positions are run at the early January tournaments, such as at the Montgomery Bell tournament right after New Year's.

But We Just Don't Have the Money!

Let's face it – no one has enough money, and the solutions to constant resource pressures are varied. Given the diverse creative ways by which programs pay their bills, I wouldn't presume to laundry list them here, or give a recommendation to certain strategies over others. Some have found apparently permanent success in acquiring funding from school boards or parent groups, others by institutionalizing successful money-making projects. And every forensics coach in America has explored the many possibilities for saving money: six kids to a room, sharing hotel rooms with other schools, relying on parents and students for transportation, fee swapping, and more.

I do want to mention one possibility that has less to do with making and raising money than with locating research resources. It is one of the ugly secrets of contemporary debate that too many students acquire access to the Lexis-Nexus database by use of bootleg passwords, sometimes provided by friendly law students. To some extent this problem has been reduced by the wider availability of Lexis Nexus Universe, a web-based subscription option regularly utilized by large institutional subscribers. Universe accesses the same large database as that manipulated by paying law customers, but uses a simpler search engine.

There is much to be said about the benefits of Universe, which is by now available in most large university libraries. What you may not know about the Universe pricing system is that institutions are charged based on the number of potential in-house users. Thus, you should make a point of approaching your high school librarian or media specialists, for the purpose of recommending that he or she inquire to see how much a school-wide subscription might cost. The price for a school-wide subscription is often surprisingly manageable. And if this is so, high school media specialists might be more easily persuaded to seek support for institutional access than you might think, since the idea that every student in the school would have online access to the full database of hundreds of newspapers and law reviews should be innately attractive.

If the answer from your media specialist is “no!,” then there are still options remaining for students who desperately need (legal) access to regularly updated newspaper databases. Consider, for example, collaborating with friends from other programs who do have legal access to databases. What information resources can you exchange with them to receive legally downloaded articles? My point is not that you circumvent the proprietary interests of the Lexis-Nexus corporation, but simply that you consider ways to generate your own work product (that is, briefs produced out of books and other hard copy resources) which you can then exchange on a limited basis with trustworthy collaborators at other schools who will mainly generate positions out of newspaper databases. I'll say a bit more about these limited trading arrangements in a bit.

But I'm the Only Experienced Debater!

This is a common circumstance, and I want to just mention advise that will seem, and is, basic common sense, but which if carefully implemented can compensate for the real limitations of being the only experienced debater in a program.

It is especially important to find ways to *make your novices productive assistants* without exploiting them. As a senior or relatively more experienced debater, you will likely be assigned some responsibility for supervising and training novices. There are more and less productive ways to make this arrangement mutually beneficial. Obviously, younger debaters may be willing to assist you in evidence processing, although I think seeking such help from them can quickly become exploitive — much as senior debaters might like it to the contrary, novices are human beings and not slaves!

It is better to find ways to involve younger debaters in activities that both ease your workload and also contribute to their own education as competitors. After positions have been produced by you or others with some experience, supervise novice debaters in how best to explain the position and in drills where they debate each other. You'll find that this kind of specific coaching improves your own understanding of the argument. You might want to consider collaborating in argument production with younger students who show lots of raw talent. Consider supervising two or three simultaneously working novice groups, where you oversee card cutting and research production.

Make an explicit work arrangement with your partner. If one student has considerably more experience than the other, the situation can be combustible. The more advanced student may see success more closely within reach, and thus may be more motivated than her or his colleague, and that can increase tension too. As I alluded to earlier, I think this problem must be addressed in a productive and well-planned way as early as possible. Instead of forever nagging your colleague to invest more time in debate work, have an honest conversation up front, at the year's start, about the realistic and actual likely work contribution your partner is willing to be held accountable for. If the hours promised vary widely week to week on account of school and other responsibilities, it won't be a problem if the arrangement is agreed to beforehand. And more than negotiating hours, agree up front on the major positions which you and your partner commit to fully preparing for tournament use. Negotiating specific agreements for practice and tournament schedules can often help too.

I also recommend that you organize very specific trading arrangements with good debaters you trust from other schools. Like most coaches, I oppose wholesale trading, especially the swaps that often occur immediately before big debates – it's hard to see how evidence changing hands at that point contributes to the educational process.

But if you lack a squad that can offer research support, I think it's reasonable to *create an extended squad*. Pick three or four friends in similar circumstances. Make sure they work hard and are basically on your wavelength. Then, make specific assignments to be exchanged at the tournaments you'll attend together. One might agree to bring politics updates, another a new disadvantage, another a rebriefed critical argument, and so on. To avoid disillusionment, set specific page targets, so everyone is making a roughly equal contribution. To avoid possible awkwardness, agree up front that these arguments become the common property of everyone, which means you can even run them against each other when you end up debating. And to avoid promiscuous trading (after all, that defeats the purpose of the arrangement in the first place), make an explicit deal that only your three or four schools may use this evidence in competition, that it won't be traded more widely.

Finally, two pieces of obvious but no less vital advice. *Pick research assignments that are manageable and productive beyond one team or case.* I mean this in the most basic sense. Some very experienced debaters end up bogged down either in the long production of a new affirmative which may never see the light of day, or obsessing about the Big Case which their most significant competitor prefers. This is wrongheaded, apart for some very narrow exceptions (such as the specific process required in planning for end-of-the-year events): instead of picking the weird case for which you have no apparent response, only runnable by one team, make research priorities by perusing the overall list of cases you need to answer. Where can your research achieve the most “bang for the buck”?

Related to this is the imperative that you *work especially hard to stay organized.* I am often surprised by the number of major program teams who seem positively disadvantaged by the amount of evidence they carry, since they can’t possibly have had the time to read through it all, and their apparent disorganization obliterates the chance of finding the critical page at the critical moment. The result is a filing fiasco where paper is strewn everywhere. I’m also regularly surprised to see how commonly students from smaller programs seem unable to put their hands on a critical piece of evidence. This is obvious but true: If you can’t find it, it may as well not exist.

But My Coach Doesn’t Provide Detailed Argument Instruction!

Debaters from small programs sometimes feel disadvantaged, and reasonably so, because they lack access to well organized and argument specific coaching help. Coaches tend to get more credit than they deserve, both for their students’ successes and failures. Still, coaching helps, and good coaches can help their students stay focused on the task at hand.

In my experience, debaters tend to needlessly disparage the possible contributions of their coach, or activity adviser, or program sponsor. They do so because they mistakenly believe that unless the coach is card cutting, he or she cannot provide important assistance. But such a view is way off the mark. Even our metaphors lead us astray here; we talk about coaches as needing to be “in the trenches,” helping to make arguments. The inference is that anything different is instruction at a distance. But debaters need support in many ways, and even if your coach is educationally opposed to generating research (as many are), they can assist you in countless other ways which will enable your education.

It’s important to *appreciate your coach for what he or she does.* Be grateful for any commitment of time coaches are able to make, since it is an exceptional sacrifice for an overworked teacher (as all of them are) to commit to any support to forensics activities.

Have your coach listen to you do rebuttal reworks after tournaments. It saddens me when coaches pull back from providing assistance because of their impression the students they serve are ingrates.

In a worst case scenario, where a program simply lacks access to any reliable teacher support, there are still ways to acquire coaching support from the tournament experience. For instance, it’s indispensable to ask good judges for specific advice after they hear you. Engage your smartest opponents in detailed conversations – see what they do and then integrate their best ideas into your own practice. Carefully read through prepared materials, since they often offer tutorials on the most current controversies in theory and practice. Watch and pay attention (that is, take notes) to

elimination round debates. Copy down evidence citations, and if a citation proves unavailable to you, network with your friends from other schools to see if they can track it down for you.

Some other thoughts on the idea of *stealing the smart ideas of your opponents:* I don’t so much have in mind that you should wholesale rip off the major affirmatives being run in your area; obviously the advantages of such a strategy are limited. But I encourage you to freely borrow at what one might call the “micro-“ level. Every smart debater has ways of expressing her ideas, mechanisms for explaining the big picture and the overall story, that help them win in close major debates. When those explanations can help you, integrate them into your own debating.

Students usually avoid watching elimination rounds where their own affirmative is being run; after all, why watch something you already know? But if you lack coaching or an experienced second team against whom to have practice debates, these elimination rounds can be invaluable. Carefully flow the first negative, and then set the flow aside. When you are back at home, prepare your own 2AC against the arguments you wrote down. Compare notes with the arguments actually presented in the elimination debate you watched, and see if you can benefit by copying tricks used there.

Finally: *read, read, read, practice, practice, practice.* Lacking the benefits of a strong at-home debate peer group, one simply has to compensate by more fully immersing him or herself in the topic arguments, participating more actively in the major debate bulletin boards and listservs, and practicing whenever possible.

Conclusions: The Limits of Optimism

It’s easier to spin out a series of tips than to find the discipline to implement them. And even after all the extra work entailed by debating for a smaller program, let’s be honest: it will still prove very difficult to defeat well-prepared teams from major schools.

Still, the number of teams from small schools who do manage to succeed must be doing something right, and whatever they’re doing you can do too. And when victory does come, it will be all the sweeter if it’s the result of your own personal initiative and disciplined hard work. The considerable benefits of extended participation in national circuit debating will be all the richer. Good luck, and get to work!

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