

# DEBATING WITH A WEAKER PARTNER

by  
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Almost every team debater in America has entertained the fantasy that their "weaker" partner will wake up some morning with a new brain, more tournament experience, or a new personality, even if the strain of competition has created exaggerated impressions of weakness, and the fantasy is lodged in the mind of the student actually less experienced. Nonetheless, real mismatches occur, if only because no more experienced colleagues are available, and that situation can be as frustrating as any in debate. And mismatch partnerships can be a struggle for coaches who want students to learn how to succeed as a team, even as they tire of seemingly constant complaining.

Policy debate is a team event, and everyone in a team relationship has to make compromises, to learn how to empower others. But when egos are on the line, and understandable insecurities are in full flower, stronger partners trying simply to "help out" can end up looking pompous and condescending. And coaches willing to mediate such relationship struggles can end up reinforcing insecurities when they divide labor between debaters to minimize competitive losses.

Of course no team is perfectly matched, for every student brings a different combination of skill, experience, and intellect to a partnership. The problem is thus universal to an activity that hitches students together. And yet, the more I've navigated this difficult problem with my own teams, both at home and in summer settings, the more I realize how much the "weaker partner" syndrome simply reflects the need to instill in students the values at the heart of all good teaching.

Are you struggling to manage your partnership under circumstances of real imbalance? Consider the following:

## **1 . You once walked in your partner's shoes, and not very long ago.**

All of us have a tendency to forget how far we've come, and how foolish we were when we first made the awkward transition to successful regional or national debating. When short memories combine with the ticking time clocks of an ever-short-

ening high school career, pressure can build to win all the time. Those pressures often come at the expense of a good working relationship.

Keep in mind your own insecurities, and how small you felt when you didn't do things the right way. Even more, try and recall advice you heard that made a crucial difference in your debate education, advice that helped you "catch on." Find ways to convey such advice in a supportive way.

## **2 . The aftermath of an embarrassing screw-up is not usually a "teachable moment."**

The temptation can be overwhelming to jump on your colleague right after he or she has fumbled a topicality argument, dropped something else critical, or contradicted you in a round-losing way. After all, what better time to "reinforce" the message than right after the judge has made the same point? (As in: "YOU IDIOT! We'd be in semi's now if you hadn't dropped the turn!").

Defeat is an important teacher, but lessons are hard to learn in the *immediate* aftermath of loss. Your partner probably knows exactly how the key argument was mishandled, and doesn't need to hear it from you following a judge's critique. Or s/he may simply need time to come to terms with the lesson they've already heard. Instead of launching into criticism right after the debate, or even on the way home, work out an arrangement to talk later, when competitive passions and disappointments have cooled, and when comments will be received more constructively. I made a deal with my high school partner where she agreed not to discuss my shortcomings until the middle of the week after the tournament ended, and vice versa. We also agreed not to broadcast the shortcomings we perceived in each other up and down tournament hallways to anyone else who would listen; it finally sunk in that we both looked foolish marching around, broadcasting each other's failings.

I'm not advocating pathological cheerfulness either, since that can be even more patronizing ("Great rebuttal! Now, when we get home we'll work on how to fill more than 10 seconds of your speech time! I said LOOK AT ME! How any fingers am I holding up?"). There's nothing wrong with

candor or the expression of disappointment. The problem comes when bitterness, arrogance, and hostility creep in. Nothing can poison a productive relationship more quickly.

## **3 . Sometimes you may not be the right messenger.**

Your partner sees your warts and all, every bit as closely as you see his or her shortcomings. Better perhaps than anyone else, because they see you under conditions of maximum stress, partners grasp your weaknesses. This means you may not be the voice most likely to get through when a problem needs to be addressed. Let your coach play the role of intermediary. Let her make suggestions that might be misunderstood if made by you. For example, you should only rarely suggest switching speaker positions, especially when the change moves you into one of the more visible "2's." Talk to the coach first, and then the partner. Some issues do need to be directly discussed, just not all of them.

## **4 . Stop trying to program your partner.**

Program. It's an ugly word, but apt given some situations I see even at major tournaments where one partner literally dictates a colleague's speech during prep time. It never works; the prep time disappears, making you look foolish later during your impromptu rebuttal, the speech you envisioned never sounds as good when delivered out of someone else's mouth (after all, your partner is not uttering his or her own thoughts), and it's a situation ripe for conflict. What sentient being wouldn't object to being programmed like a machine, or, in the insulting jargon of contest debate, performing as your "tool"?

You may be in programming denial. That is, you've gotten more subtle than dictating speeches. You may have moved on to strategies like "sharing" flowsheets (trans: "only my brilliant thinking is worthy enough to serve as the script for this forensic encounter"), "prompting" your colleague repeatedly during speech time (trans: "I said, GET TO THE TURN, MORON!"), or "stepping in" to facilitate "productive cross-examination exchanges" (trans: "What my partner MEANT to say was ac-

tually the OPPOSITE...'). Judges rarely intervene to prevent such behaviors, and sometimes their silence ends up encouraging destructive patterns.

Stop scripting rebuttals. Partners need to answer their own cross-ex questions. And most of all, they need to write out their own extensions. They will not be great at first. But less experienced colleagues will only get better as they start thinking for themselves under the pressure of competitive situations and the stress of time limitation. Yes, hold truly necessary conversations during prep time. But rather than dictating entire speeches, limit talk to those two or three most vital issues on which the whole round may depend.

"But," you may be sputtering, "we'll always lose! My partner can't \_\_\_\_\_ [flow, think, defend my brilliance - you fill in the blank]!" Well, then.....

### **5. Find more subtle ways to get the job done.**

Negotiate unobtrusive ways to prompt your partner, tactics not demeaning to him/her. Instead of converting your arm into a windmill ("Move on! Move on!"), devise ways to communicate your panic less visibly - lightly tapping the table or your colleague's leg. Agree to intervene only once, twice at the most (every time you interrupt your partner they lose 15 seconds of coherent speech time). If your colleague isn't able to explain a particular disadvantage turnaround, talk it through at home. Arrange rebuttal reworks that focus on troublesome or confusing arguments.

If your partner struggles to flow the negative block, find ways to relieve the stressful pressure. Here's an important tip I think just about every 1AR should follow, regardless of your experience: As you hear the 2AC deliver answers, circle the four or five best arguments on each position, the ones you know from experience your partner will most rely on in her rebuttal. Then, as the second negative responds, listen especially carefully to his answers on this circled arguments. Work to get a very good flow there, even if you've been mistakenly persuaded not to flow anything else in the negative block as you write out 1AR responses. The benefits? Your prep time will be focused on the most important answers, and if your time allocation ends up distorted, your eyes will jump right down to the most important answers.

If the experience shortcomings are less technical and more substantive, divide the argumentative labor in ways that minimize

the adverse consequences. Under most (*Cheshier to page 37*)

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circumstances topicality and critique arguments cannot be turned by the affirmative. So think about working with your partner from the start to make her a specialist on those, or on impact-reducing case positions also unlikely to be turned (such as harm takeouts and solvency responses). The more expert the first negative is at extending topicality, the less likely he is to mishandle it in the 1AR.

### **6. The greater the experience gap between partners, the more necessary it is to work together at home.**

This advice can be hard to handle, since the temptation is to go off and do your own work, leaving "drooler" behind. But interaction is the most important source of experience, and over time it benefits you both.

When I say "work," I'm not referring to a setup where you read and mark articles and your partner becomes your processing "slave." One squad I know started calling a debater named Ed "Edward Scissorhands," after the popular film, since all they would let Ed do was cut and tape cards and cites together. Should anyone be surprised when such an arrangement produces tension? Work together in every respect: Find materials together, card together, talk everything through, brief together, write extension briefs together. Do this on every argument you run, even the ones on which only you plan to specialize, since (at a minimum) real teamwork inoculates you against the understandable concern that you're trying to take everything over.

One of the greatest benefits of team debate is how it teaches us to work productively with other people, no matter how different their experience or perspective. Finding ways to make your interaction more substantive and sustained will make you both better persons, prepare you for a lifetime of teamwork, and help you finally to appreciate the real contributions any dedicated colleague can make.

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