

C O N T R O V E R S Y

NO!

by
Chad Henson

THE CONTROVERSY

No disrespect to the venerable traditionalist Mr. Mathers, but I think there is more to worry about, at least among the intellectual elite, than the hip-shaking antics of Mr. Presley. The National Forensic League, the eminent national organization for competitive high school public speech and debate, has announced the christening of a new event. This event, aptly named “Controversy”, is likely to spark just that, along with the interest and resentment of every existing clique in the forensics community.

Such realignment would leave orators out of the loop. The interpers are so far removed from this new event that the possibility of them being seriously affected by this event is almost laughable.

So we look at the possibility of an alliance with the debaters. The two existing types of debate, Lincoln-Douglas (LD) and Policy, are struggling to keep participants beyond the novice year. The champions of each existing debate event will be highly resistant to Controversy because there is a risk that Controversy will steal participants from each. Like Policy, Controversy is a team event. Controversy also focuses on issues of time-based importance, also like Policy. LDers, are not immune from the theft, however. The switch of topics on a regular basis and the affirmation of an entire resolution is most consistent with LD. Furthermore, the inability to advocate counterplans or kritiks, combined with the slow rate of speed required, will appeal to the traditionalist judges that didn’t like such nonsense anyway. An additional appeal of LD that controversy might negate is the shorter time of each round. LD rounds

**“I’m not the first King of
controversy;
I am the worst thing since
Elvis Presley.”
~Eminem**

The existing cliques are in a state of harmonious balance in the status quo. If we ignore the internal conflicts in each group, the forensic community is loosely divided into the “debaters”, “speakers”, and “interpers”. The debaters have great knowledge on a large number of subjects, and are primarily concerned with argumentation and advocacy. The focus is almost entirely on content, as opposed to delivery. The speakers either have deep knowledge of a single subject (orators), or knowledge sufficient to have an intelligent discussion on a large number of current event issues (extemporaneous speakers). They focus about equally on content and delivery. The interpers focus on analyzing a single piece of literature or poetry, conveying the interpretation by their presentation. They focus exclusively on delivery, as they are immune from both subject variance and the need for originality.

Controversy, if it gains a large participatory base, will break up the current cliques and cause chaos in the community. The label as a “debate event”, as well as the adversarial mode of communication, would on-face suggest that Controversy participants would ally themselves with the debaters. However, the selection of topics (which changes every month) is more consistent with extemporaneous speaking.

last 37 minutes, while Controversy rounds last only 33 minutes. This will allow debaters to cross-enter.

Perhaps the greatest worry of the debate purists is the appeal Controversy will have to novice debaters. The novi will not be intimidated by having to go up and debate alone (a fear of novice LDers) and will not be scared to confront advanced theory and rapid rates of delivery (major fears of novice Policy debaters, or CXers). Controversy offers an easy format where you have the support of a teammate. This “safety event” will appeal to many novice debaters looking for the easy way out or taking debate as a required class.

This worry is well-founded. Controversy will teach poor argumentation skills that will be hard to overcome, regardless of coaching. First, there are rules prohibiting certain types of legitimate argumentation, most notably counterplans and kritiks. The inability to run counterplans will harm debaters who go into Policy. They will be unable to defend their plans (another device prohibited by Controversy) against opposing plans, rendering them completely incapable of 2NR and 2AR analysis in half their rounds. The prohibition against kritiks will harm debaters of all types. Kritiks are gaining popularity in LD, and have been around since the 70’s in Policy. The reason for such an absurd rule is either far beyond
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my level of comprehension or a result of too much liquor consumed by the NFL's Executive Council. We must be able to debate premises and mindsets if we are going to avoid regurgitating issues and create a new path for argumentation – either in debate or in an activist role.

But forget forging a new path. The requirements for judging mandate the exclusion of judges who could find the old one without a GPS and a tour guide. From the only paper on this event released for publication, "A New Debate Event":

Controversy wants to promote audience debate and media debate (cable access, etc.). The speaking must be very communicative. All **judges must be ordinary citizens — no debate coaches, no college debaters, no ex-debaters.** (Emphasis mine)

In other words, anybody qualified to judge debate is unqualified to judge Controversy. The prohibition against debate coaches judging will veil the atrocities of this event. After all, coaches don't have time to see rounds outside their judging requirement. Prohibiting college debaters will prevent the participants from getting meaningful feedback from those who debate on a higher level. This is especially ironic, as the only existing activity remotely resembling Controversy is college Parliamentary debate. Finally, even ex-debaters are kept out of the judging pool. I suppose the rationale is that those who have participated in legitimate debate will be incapable of listening to this nonsense without vomiting – or that such judges will require argumentation.

These rules seem to have been designed to ensure that Controversy will never improve. At least in LD and Policy, you get graduates capable of coming back and judging the event they used to compete in. This is prohibited in Controversy because the former competitors will be excluded as "ex-debaters", even if many of us maintain that Controversy is not really debate. I would go so far as to say that former Controversy competitors will be incapable of judging *any* forensics event. Unlike the current set-up, Controversy is not close enough to any single event to allow the former competitors to judge those. Every student that competes in Controversy is one less potential qualified judge our community can make use of. But then again, we apparently don't value qualified judges anymore. I, and many other like me, are personally insulted that while we set new trends in Policy and LD debate for four years, we are not considered to be key to initiating a new event; instead, we explicitly excluded. I am a former LD debater, a college Policy debater at Towson University, *and* the Lincoln-Douglas Debate coach at the nearest high school. It appears I am excluded in all three ways. It's insulting, and most of my college teammates who debated in high school feel the same way.

How ironic. One of the central complaints about modern debate is the elitism and exclusion. Does anyone else find it highly humorous that the group that is excluded now is the same group that will be relied on for support? Maybe the idea that those who will be needed to coach the next generation of debaters are prohibited from viewing what is intended to be the debate of the next generation will bring a chuckle to the lips of even the most hardened purists? I can assure you that we really are laughing. I daresay that most of the forensics community will join us shortly after witnessing their first Controversy round.

But we can even ignore, for a minute, the debate implications of Controversy. Instead, we should temporarily look to the effects

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Controversy will have on the other potentially impacted part of our community – the original speakers. Currently, the NFL recognizes Foreign and Domestic Extemporaneous Speaking (Extemp) and Original Oratory as events. There are a few competitors who focus on one of these two events, and many more who will enter into competition in multiple events, including one or both of these. For example, in my senior year of high school, I competed in LD, Oratory, and Foreign Extemp.

The divide between extemp and oratory is simple and already stated. The focus on current events, combined with the possibility of cross-entering, would encourage extempers to do Controversy as a secondary event (or possibly the other way around). Those who did this would rack up NFL points faster than a hard spread, getting debate points for Controversy and speech points for extemp. This goes a long way to remove the 500-point maximums on both speech and debate; those who cross-entered could quickly rack up points in two events where you talk about the same subjects.

These subjects change every month in Controversy, as opposed to every round in extemp. But this gives Controversy the worst of the debate and extemp worlds. Unlike debate, where topics last 2 months (LD) or the whole year (Policy), a single month will be insufficient to truly develop advanced argumentation on a topic. In oratory you at least get to talk about the same subject the whole year. In extemp, you get the sheer breadth of topics, speaking on up to 4 current-event topics in a standard local tournament. Controversy lacks the true breadth of extemp, and the true depth of debate and oratory.

But you may be left wondering how oratory will be affected. Our unusually-dressed speaking friends might well be left out entirely. If Controversy and extemp ally, as the sheer similarity of subjects and time allowance seem to make inevitable, extempers will no longer need orators. Oratory is too original to be lumped in with the interpretation events, and not analytical or adversarial enough to be considered debate. Oratory will probably be relegated to the same role of Student Congress – a curiosity among forensic connoisseurs (and an NFL qualifying event), but nothing more in many areas of the country.

In addition to the obvious problems with Controversy, there are so many semantics to be worked out. For example, how will the Controversy participants dress? Will they observe the elegant attire of the LD debaters? Will they manage the respectable slothfulness of the Policy debaters? Might they wear the black suits and power ties of the extempers or the short dresses or tight shirts of the orators? Perhaps it would be most appropriate if they were to show up in multi-colored hats and pointed shoes. For while this new event may disrupt the balance of the Debate Masters, Speech Queens, and Extemp Kings, the participants in Controversy will never be anything more than Jesters.

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