

# MUSINGS ON TED TURNER DEBATE

by  
Larry A. Smith

I have been following the contentious articles in the *Rostrum* on the new Ted Turner debate event, and I once again don my curmudgeon-at-large hat to offer a few Andy Rooney type musings on the controversy over Controversy Debate, later renamed Ted Turner debate.

Participation in policy debate has declined. That began slowly with the adoption of Lincoln Douglas debate, but the rapid expansion in participation in Lincoln Douglas, at least in the past twenty plus years, indicates that the problem is inherent in the nature of what policy debate has become in the same time period.

**...Policy debate is the great granddaddy of forensic competitive events..."**

To verse an old adage, if it is broke, fix it.

Adopting another rhetorical argumentative event "to encourage more students to participate in a debate activity" is akin to find you have a wobbly wheel on your car. It needs to be fixed. Those funny little emergency spare tires that come with many cars look like the training wheels for a child's first bicycle, and they are meant for a short period of driving to a point where the real tire or wheel can be repaired. (Alas, you see too many cars blasting along at 70 miles per hour with these little training tires mounted, accidents looking for a place to happen.) The "training tires" are not a fix for the initial problem, the decline in participation in policy debate.

Policy debate is the great granddaddy of forensic competitive events. It is truly a shame it has evolved into an event in which only a select few can and will participate. About the sixth year of my coaching career I came to the conclusion that learning to debate was the most important educational experience my students could have. From that point on, for twenty-two years, I required every student in my program to debate, either policy or Lincoln Douglas. The skills they learned were what hundreds of them later told me carried them through the rigors of university classes, and they were grateful for it. The competitive aspect of that required participation was just a bonus to the learning experience. (And forty that I know

of finished law school. Considering our litigious society, I've never been sure whether that was a good or bad result of their debate experience.) Sorry, I digress from the original intent.

In order to fix something that is broken an analysis must be done to find the cause of the problem. It is not terribly difficult to find possible causes, and the cumulative effect that has occurred. The question following the analysis is, what can be done to remove or alleviate the problem areas?

Start with summer debate institutes. Few would agree that the "forward, cutting edge" thinking that is nurtured by these camps is not a problem. From these intensive training sessions students return to school with tubs full of canned multi page disadvantage arguments that to any sane and thinking person are specious at best and counter intuitive at worst...generic arguments designed to fit all occasions. The same is true for topicality blocks that nit pick definitional interpretations to the point of absurdity. And, of course, there are the evolving political correct arguments over word choices called kritiks. Tack, of course,

there are the evolving political correct arguments over word choices called kritiks. Tack on to that list 500 word per minute delivery and "word economy" that becomes cryptic and indecipherable to any person not privy to the intensive indoctrination. Small wonder that an intelligent and educated adult finds it impossible to judge a high school debate.

However, this is a free enterprise country, and there is nothing coaches or the NFL can do to thwart these lucrative institutes, which, by the way, are predominately open only to affluent students who, in turn, are predominately enrolled in schools which have the financial wherewithal and coach(es) who wish to promulgate the type of debate "game" on a national circuit. In effect the institutes are providing more and more to create less and less in the number of high schools willing to participate in policy debate. Consequently, the NFL will not find a fix for declining debate by looking to curb institutes, particularly as long as several members of the national executive committee are among the coaches who field high powered debate game teams for the national circuit.

How long will it be before summer institutes begin instruction in Ted Turner debate and corrupt it from its intent just as they have policy debate and Lincoln Douglas. My best guess is the summer of 2003. How then will Ted Turner Debate encourage more schools to try argumentation events, includ-

ing policy and LD? I double it ever will.

Consider next the problem of finding coaches who 1) are willing to put in the time to coach policy (or LD) and 2) qualified to do so. A very high percentage of schools are "coached" by a person who has been conscripted or coerced into taking on the extra duty task. Principal, "You want a job in our school? We can hire you, but you will have to also coach the forensic team." Prospective Teacher, "OK. Uh, what's a forensic team?" (Woefully, in California a prospective teacher cannot get a credential that stipulates "speech/debate" but instead must take a teaching position under an English or social studies credential. Thus there is a dearth of teachers with the background or training in forensic and speech preparation.) Small wonder that the intricacies of debate and LD look far to foreboding to a teacher assigned to coach, voluntarily or involuntarily. Humorous interpretation? Now that's something they can understand. They watched Saturday Night Live or the comedy Channel enough to feel comfortable "coaching" HI.

Could the NFL attempt some repair in the deficit number of coaches who are unwilling or unable to coach policy and LD debate? To be sure, the NFL has made some great strides in recent years in providing coaching materials...the coaching video library, for example...but far more could be done. Why not free coaching workshops scattered regionally around the country funded by the NFL? (Staffed, or course, NOT by instructors who subscribe to the spread/spew/kritik style of policy and LD). Currently coaches can attend a handful of workshops, but at their expense, and too often summer course work must be of another nature for the purposes of salary upgrades or retention of a teaching position. Few can afford the fees of both necessary summer classes and the type of coaching enhancement classes offered. Beyond NFL funding for coaches would be the question of just how would these potential new debate coaches be enticed to take a course in coaching an event they find too daunting, too time consuming, too irrelevant to educational goals, and too expensive to maintain on their meager school budgets. I have no answer to the latter part of this proposed fix.

I believe the NFL must also examine its own core for possible causes of the decline in participation in policy debate. What is the NFL's true purpose? Is it to promote competition or is it to promote educational goals? That is a very fundamental probe which must be addressed. From my perspective the overarching purpose appears to be to promote competition with educational goals as a secondary priority. Perhaps I'm wrong. Perhaps I'm not.

California, with the exception of a handful of schools, has always been somewhat provincial in policy debate. A decade ago the California High School Speech Association adopted a comprehensive mission statement to focus our competitive speaking events and contests towards the educational values rather than the competitive nature of the activity. To that end the state speech council has been very diligent in developing contest rules and judging instructions that meet the goals of the mission statement.

Personally I have always been skeptical (or cynical) about mission statements. Too often these are laboriously hammered out by some committee in a business or institution, then engraved on a letterhead or a plaque that hangs in an office, and that is the end of it. (I wonder what Enron's mission statement was?)

Judging instructions (and rules) for all events, not just policy and LD, are written with the mission statement as the guiding principle. For example, there are no paid judges at the California State final Speech and debate tournament. Judging panels include coaches, lay persons and college students, though it is not a rule

that each and every panel must be comprised of an equal mix of all. Most strikingly, the final round panel of judges for policy and LD are comprised of four coaches and three lay judges...no college students. And it is never stipulated that the four assigned coaches be "expert" judges in either type of debate.

I have always believed that any adult, 98.6 degrees and breathing should be able to, with some pre instruction, judge any high school debate. If we can expect adults to determine guilt or innocence on a jury, then we should be able to trust them to render a fair decision in a high school debate.

Consider, it is to the tax paying public that the schools must answer. High school speech contests are one of the rare arenas where the public can actually see the results of their tax money. Who could blame a taxpayer for being angry after listening to a round of spew/spread/kritik debate? (And countless words of anger and protest have resulted from these angry taxpayers). The answer in many areas is they hide the activity from the taxpaying public and utilize only paid "expert" judges. While I can see the need for paid experts in sports officiating, I cannot see a need to have only experts judging what is supposed to be an educational activity that is supposed to showcase good thinking and communication skills.

I know, music festivals and drama festivals and newspaper competitions and science competitions are judged by experts in the fields. That brings us full circle back to the original question...exactly what is the mission and goal of the NFL? If it is supposed to promote competition, then expert referees are required. At the national tournament, therefore, only expert extemp coaches should judge extemp, oratory coaches oratory, etc,... The same logic applies, only an expert in the event should judge competition in the event. What is fair to one event should be fair to all (and many who coach only interp events would breathe a sigh of relief at not being assigned to extemp or debate?)

Will Ted Turner debate address the issue of "expert" versus lay judges and revive argumentative events? Maybe initially, but I'm troubled by the preclusion of "expert" debate and LD judges from Ted Turner Debate. The message is negative, either way you read it. Either you are an "expert" debate judge and thus too good for inferior Ted Turner Debate judging, or you are too ignorant to judge any debate except Ted Turner. Which is it? And after the summer institutes begin teaching "forward thinking" techniques to Ted Turner debaters, how long will it be before there is a cadre of Ted Turner expert judges? How long after that will it be before schools bail out of Ted Turner competition too?

This has become too lengthy a rant from an old, retired coach. Thanks to you who bore with me to this point. Would I coach and enter my students in Ted Turner Debate if I was still coaching? Probably, but only to give one or two more a change to experience the national final tournament, not because I'm enchanted with the event (which is fodder for another long rant, but others beat me to it). I loved coaching, and I found coaching policy and LD the two most important educational endeavors I provided for my students. And the competition was fun too.

I would like to see policy restored to its original popularity and purpose. I remain unconvinced that adopting a training wheel event will have any effect to that end, at least not until some major repairs are applied to policy debate. And now, back to retirement

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