

POINTS OF INFORMATION FROM THE PRESIDENT'S PODIUM

Skip Rutledge

Point Loma Nazarene University

This last year has been an exciting one. The National Parliamentary Debate Association (NPDA) has continued growing not only in numbers of participating programs and debaters, but in depth and sophistication of argumentation. Debaters seem more informed on events of national and international importance, are making better arguments, and are providing better support and refutation in constructive speeches and better on balance analysis in rebuttals. It was only a few years ago that I can remember hearing rounds or hearing of them where senior level debaters were making claims like "Columbus sailed to America on the Pinto," or "NATO stands for the Native American Treaty Organization." One can only assume that Columbus' companion ships were the H.M.S. Gremlin and the Crown Victoria. Fortunately, the bar has been raised on the expected quality of preparation for senior level debaters. Given the vast number of potential topics and most beginners' relative lack of understanding of national and world events we can continue to expect to see some of these embarrassing claims born of ignorance in the lower levels of the activity.

Based on the ballots I see and comments overheard from colleagues and competitors, the quality of adjudication is also improving. Critics are spending considerable effort to communicate reasons for decision, praise of strong points, and recommendations for improvements. Critics are also giving much more thought to their judging philosophies. The addition over the last few years of judging philosophy books at the national tournament has helped to focus on some of these issues and also helps provide a fairer playing field for competitors wishing to know how a given judge views the activity prior to constructing a case.

Also noteworthy is the increase in parity I am sensing in the activity. It is not surprising to see relatively new programs with strong competitors quickly ascend in the organization and meet with considerable success, regardless of the traditional strength of their competition. NPDA seems to be less about perpetuating program dynasties and more about recognizing the strengths of individual competitors from year to year. These are indicators of a strong and growing organization committed to making this activity as fair, open and educational as it can be.

Our national tournament is also growing by leaps and bounds,

unfortunately keeping us from hosting the event at most of our member schools. We will have to make some tough decisions in the coming year or two on how we wish to construct this national event. It is my hope that we can continue to encourage each member organization to designate at least one competing team, but then look to some fair and equitable means for assigning the other competitive team slots based on the merits of the individual teams accomplishments throughout the competitive season. This will recognize both functions of the national tournament. At one level we are attempting to crown the national champion. But we must also remember that this gathering is about the coming together of the entire community both for determining organizational business decisions and to serve as an educational forum for our competitors and coaches alike where they can watch and/or participate with the very best in the activity. Our future growth both qualitatively and quantitatively will hinge in large part on how we accomplish these sometimes competing goals for the national tournament.

The much larger size of the tournament has already presented some difficult logistical problems at the Creighton National Championship Tournament. I want to publicly thank our gracious hosts, the competent and committed tournament staff, and especially you the patient and long suffering participants for your unflagging support of the tournament. As you may know, at the business meeting it was decided to add yet another elimination round (partial quad octafinals) to an already crowded schedule. This will of course create some unique planning difficulties, but will insure that all competitors with a winning record advance to the elimination rounds. For the 2001 NPDA Championship Tournament to be hosted by Metro State University in Denver, we will take whatever steps are necessary to run a smooth tournament. Your suggestions have been appreciated. Every effort is being made to minimize the delays between rounds on the last day of competition. Additionally, should there be such a delay, you will have the ability to relax in the comfort of your hotel room or hotel coffee shop, since the last day will now take place at the tournament hotel. Other specific improvements will be detailed in the tournament invitation, which should be available shortly after the business meeting at the NCA Convention in Seattle (November 2000).

The last issue I would like to address here is one that I think should be of major concern to coaches, critics, and competitors alike. If this activity is going to continue to thrive and offer meaningful, educational instruction in a competitive arena we must all commit to do whatever it takes to fortify and safeguard the ethical standards and integrity of the event. Without reading evidence verbatim in rounds, we are at the mercy of the contestants to honestly reflect what they know to be true, not to manufacture evidence and falsify claims to win a given round. By the way I should state

unequivocally that dishonesty is not a prevalent problem in our activity today. However, I would be naive to claim that it does not occur at all. I think the time to discuss how to insure this does not become a problem is before it becomes widespread. For those of you that enjoy metaphorical resolutions, "This house would lock the barn door in time."

Friends that are used to reading evidence cards in rounds frequently ask what prevents people from just making up evidence in a debate round to win a given contest. The obvious answer is "The debaters' integrity." When asked if that is always a sufficient safeguard, the regrettable answer is "Well, not always." But that is also true with written evidence forms of debate. There are urban legends within the NDT, CEDA, and NFL high school Oxford style debate community of programs and/or students that have been caught falsifying written evidence (even to the point of type setting a falsified journal page to provide if a critic asked for the original article). Doubtless there are countless more examples of evidence falsification that have not been caught. But when such dishonesty has been exposed programs have paid dearly. Some critics would presume against the offending institution in any close evidence calls thereafter, at least with the debater in question and often the entire school for up to several years. Others would flat out punish that program with future ballots, regardless of close calls on evidence. Some programs have even been cancelled over such an ethical breach. But with evidence, it is argued, at least the critic or competitor can call to see the actual citations and look up the sources to verify the claims for that or future rounds. It is argued that this practice provides a check for honesty. That claim is doubtless true. But it should not be the only check.

If this activity is to remain healthy and beneficial, a strong message must be sent from coaches, critics and competitors alike that dishonesty will not be tolerated. If that is allowed to go unchecked, than we do indeed have a flawed product, or like Socrates claimed of Rhetoric, "mere puffery". Just as in other aspects of the real world, debaters must realize that their word is their bond. By making factual claims debaters must realize that individual and perhaps even institutional integrity is at stake. If you think you recall something but are absolutely certain, then give it a modal qualifier of how certain you are and from what source you think you read it. But don't sell a factual claim with conviction that you do not know with a certainty is true. Likewise, when you think someone is making something up in a round. Go out and look it up. Chances are if successful the first time, it may reoccur in the future where you or a friend or a teammate can expose it.

Remember too that mistakes can easily occur, and filter your reactions through a screen of grace. They may have just been repeating something told to them in a prior debate round. If you think it is just an

honest mistake draw their attention to that error, but beware of future such mistakes. Look for habits of dishonesty to determine if a real problem exists. If such seems to be the case you may wish to confront that individual, perhaps with coaches present, to try to abate the practice. Obviously, this should be handled with the greatest diplomacy and sensitivity.

Critics, too, must be aware of the possibility of misstatements being purposely employed. If you are certain of the mistakes, mention that on the ballot and ask the competitor to be more careful of such erroneous statements in the future. If you are less certain, jot a quick note to yourself and look it up later and again draw it to the debaters attention if you can recall the competitor in question. If you notice a trend or tendency for certain debaters to do this with great frequency, be willing to take your concern to the debater's coach who is probably best suited to stop the practice. In the case of student directed teams, take it to the student director. I suspect most such student directors are especially sensitive of the damage such a practice could cause a student directed team.

It is also up to coaches and critics to always provide the highest ethical model for their debaters. This means that critics must be extremely careful to not discuss a resolution with their debaters prior to the official reading of the resolution for that given debate or round, even though the coach may know the topic earlier by reading his or her ballot usually distributed well before the round starts. It also means that tournament or event directors that are selecting resolutions should bend over backwards to avoid choosing a resolution that their debaters may have an unfair advantage with, spawned perhaps through practice debates on a similar topics at least if they are fairly uncommon and narrow. No one is suggesting that it would be unethical to choose a topic such as gun control or the death penalty that their debaters are familiar with. All debaters should be familiar with such common topics. But to select a fairly narrow topic area that you know your debaters are uniquely researched on and prepared to debate raises questions of fairness. Obviously there is much gray area in such calls. But one should err on the side of caution and avoid even the perception of impropriety.

The last safeguard, the student competitors themselves, is probably the best and most effective way of stopping any such ethical problems. Students are very aware of what other students are doing, both on and off their own squads. As long as students communicate a firm message of no tolerance for ethical breaches the activity will remain healthy. If instead such practices become tolerated or even bragged about then there is probably very little that can be done by coaches or critics to police the situation. My appeal is to us all to do whatever we can to clearly communicate that ethical breaches will not be accepted by anyone at anytime. Competition is

merely a means to an end. That end should not just be trophies and accolades, but instead include the learning of skills, abilities and integrity that not only improves your communicative competence but improves the world around you. Cashing in on ethical entropy is hardly the best way to achieve those ends. Our goals for the ideal debater should be like those espoused by Roman rhetoricians Cicero and Quintilian, when they claimed the ideal rhetor was a good person speaking well, insisting that rhetors must be judged by what advances the public good, not merely their own good. We should focus both on the quality of the person and the message. I am grateful that this has not become a significant problem for our activity. Let us strive to make sure it never does.