

INTERCOLLEGIATE FORENSICS IN THE
1980s: CURRENT FRAGMENTATION
AND POTENTIAL REFORM

by Jim Brooks

Wherever a few tired and declining debate coaches gather, there is the obligatory obituary on debate as it used to be and as it never will be again. This paper is an effort to carry on this fine forensics tradition. Thus, allow me to observe initially that debate has gone to hell in a hand-basket. I will, however, break with the tradition a bit toward the end of this short statement by suggesting some directions that forensics educators might go toward to reclaim debate as a healthy, popular, challenging, co-curricular, educational, and theory-based intellectual activity for fulltime, serious students and for coaches who must also be classroom instructors, researchers, and even family persons.

Before sharing some of my observations and concerns, I would like to issue several preemptions to the challenge of credibility, or as it might more likely be developed among my colleagues: "What the hell does Brooks know!" I do not present this statement as a scholarly research effort, but rather as a series of personal concerns and observations about a very valuable educational activity, and an activity I have been associated with for almost twenty years. My observations may be seriously flawed, but they are based on a good deal of experience at all levels of intercollegiate debate. I have coached two hundred and fifty debaters,

heard thousands of practice rounds, judged a thousand rounds of competition, directed thirty to forty inter-collegiate debate tournaments; and I have been a consistent coach -- fielding teams good enough to lose in every kind of way, in every kind of debate, and in practically every state in the Union; they have lost in levels of competition ranging from the octa-finals of the National Debate Tournament to a still bitter loss to West Georgia College in the final round of the Boll Weevil Invitational Debate Tournament in Enterprise, Alabama. At this point in my association with forensics, I have no ax to grind or angle to work; I don't care who votes for or against a team from my institution; I have no reason to be an advocate or apologist for CEDA debate, NDT debate, policy debate, value debate, or any other kind of debate. For all of these reasons, you might find my comments, hopefully, worthy of some consideration.

I believe that intercollegiate forensics may be in the midst of a small crisis today. It is not a crisis of numbers. Indeed, it would appear that the participation in some form of competitive forensics is at an all time high. Individual events participation seems to be at the strongest level ever. Further, I have the impression that there has been an increase in the number of students participating in debate, and in the number of institutions fielding teams in tournament competition.

The crisis then concerns the current practices in inter-collegiate debate and their value as theory-based, educationally sound learning activities for our students. My own judgment and my conclusions from talking with a number of coaches in both NDT and CEDA debate is that the activity today is not what it should be. And I believe that we may be at a point where the decisions we make as educators will either perpetuate in some form the status quo with all of the problems I will outline in a moment, or we will turn the activity toward some new directions that will make it the kind of educational and intellectual experience it should be for our students.

Currently there are two major debate organizations or groups of debaters and coaches -- with some overlap. Commonly referred to as CEDA Debate and NDT Debate, each kind has its advocates and apologists. NDT Debate, it is claimed, centers on the intellectual concerns in an argumentative confrontation and thus focuses on issues, arguments, and evidence. CEDA Debate, others claim, maintains a commitment to traditional concerns for issues and arguments, but has less emphasis on evidence, and focuses more on the educational benefits of effective persuasive delivery appropriate for the general audience. In practice, however, neither kind of debate appears to be providing the best kind of training for effective oral

advocacy. NDT Debate is made up of an increasingly smaller group of debaters and judges significantly insecure about the future of the activity as they prefer it, yet very active and vocal in reinforcing a good many destructive, counter-productive, and seemingly non-educational practices. On the other hand, CEDA Debate, essentially a reactionary movement against some aspects of NDT Debate, has failed after ten years to provide a quality alternative. The majority of CEDA teams I have heard, many of whom enjoy some competitive success, are participating in a very mediocre version of what most of us believe is effective intercollegiate debating. Moreover, in their efforts to ward off the evils of NDT, many CEDA coaches appear to reinforce the mediocrity. In summary, there are indeed serious problems with NDT Debate, and, despite some very good contributions to our activity, the CEDA organization to date has failed to provide us with a very good alternative.

At this point, please allow me to be more specific if very brief in indicating to you the problems I find in the two competing debate groups. The first charge I will make against NDT debate is neither surprising nor new: despite some wonderfully ingenious arguments in its defense, the delivery style-- particularly the rate -- is unsuitable for effective oral advocacy. It has become incomprehensibly fast, too fast even

for an audience of one or more intelligent, expert judges. The results have been devastating to our activity. CEDA founders, in my judgment, reacted almost solely against the delivery style of NDT debate, and that remains the one thing that disturbs them the most. Since the founding of CEDA, the rate of delivery in NDT has significantly accelerated. The real impact of this presentation style has not, however, been among the original CEDA advocates. Rather, the important impact has been the much more recent effect on the traditional NDT folks. I am convinced that today there is an already small and ever-increasingly smaller pool of judges nationwide capable of flowing what debaters refer to as a "fast" NDT round, and even fewer who can while flowing comprehend all of the issues, follow all of the arguments, attend to all of the evidence, and ultimately render an intelligent decision based upon the arguments presented in the round. There are some, but very few who can do this. Even in strong NDT tournaments, the debaters themselves will label half of the judges in the pool as weak, or, worse, incompetent. With few exceptions, the debaters will prefer the first-year graduate student just out of NDT Debate as a judge instead of an author, for example, of one of our best textbooks in argumentation -- a real and repeated example! The rate of

delivery and the incomprehensibility of the speeches have led a lot of coaches -- people whom I believe to be very bright scholars -- to conclude that they simply are not capable of judging NDT Debate and thus they want nothing to do with it -- even though they do not always embrace the CEDA organization and its sometimes ill-informed criticisms of NDT.

For those judges who remain active in NDT Debate, their decision-making can take thirty minutes to an hour after the round so that they can read all of the evidence, wade back through their flows, and hopefully make some sense out of the clash. We have come to the point that the final round of the NDT may be decided partially by a judge considering a piece of evidence that was never actually read in the debate, but was given to him after the round was over as if it were read. The fact is that NDT judges have failed to demand that debaters speak at a rate that allows the arguments and evidence to be presented, understood, and considered within the format of the oral presentation.

Two other indictments of NDT Debate are perhaps less important but still worthy of mention. NDT debate educationally is a poor investment, in the same sense that spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to build a national championship basketball team is not a sound way to promote physical

education among a student body. In the quest for national competitive success, too much of our budgets is spent on too few students on a limited number of national-level tournaments involving expensive travel. Moreover, those students almost certainly have already benefited significantly from debate training in high school and will receive only limited additional benefit from the intercollegiate training. I have heard all of the arguments about providing opportunities for the very best students to meet the very best students from universities all across the nation. And while there may be something to those arguments, I think they too often are simply the rationalizations for coaches' ambitions. Whatever the case, I think the price is too great to pay when we could and should broaden our base and increase the educational impact of our programs by benefiting more students on our campuses.

Thirdly, NDT Debate is unhealthy, physically and academically. Actually, this may be somewhat true of CEDA debate, but it seems more a problem of NDT debaters. The time demands on both debaters and coaches are severe. Research time, travel time, practice round time, and tournament time require too much of students. Tournaments are too long and exhausting. Students attend too many tournaments. The impact on students can be

more destructive than we would like to admit: they fail or drop out of courses; they drop out of school completely, although they sometimes keep debating; they don't graduate on time, or don't graduate at all. They get through rounds with sugar and caffeine highs from colas, coffee, and donuts. Between rounds, we rush them out for fast food made up primarily of fats, salt, and sugar. And, of course, there is a good deal of reliance on and recreational use of tobacco, alcohol, marijuana, and various forms of speed. Most of these things also characterize the life of their role-model - the coach. Debate coaches are not significantly involved in their academic departments or universities; they don't complete terminal degrees; they don't research or publish; they don't get promotions or tenure; they are notoriously out of shape with addictions to all sorts of bad habits; their marriages are on the rocks; and they soon burn out and quit coaching. If they do somehow survive, get tenure, and stay around awhile, they suffer the worst fate of all -- writing papers about how debate has gone to hell in a handbasket. In NDT debating, students and coaches pay a rather heavy personal price in maintaining the pace that the competition demands. And we should not underrate the impact of this factor on the success or failure of NDT debate. There are

increasingly fewer students and educators willing to pay this kind of personal price.

But what about the alternative to NDT, CEDA Debate. I have found this to be a very limited alternative. It lacks any philosophical and theoretical independence from NDT. After all, "talk slower and use humor" does not exactly form a new theoretical departure. After ten years and despite a few well-written articles, CEDA remains a reaction to NDT, and any justification I read for CEDA develops little that is new, positive, and unique; rather, CEDA Debate is invariably defined in terms of not being NDT Debate. I have no particular objection to CEDA being substantially no different from NDT Debate except in delivery style; however, apparently from the ballots my teams in CEDA receive, there are many judges who believe there is some significant and obviously unspoken philosophical and theoretical difference as if CEDA were some "new kind of argumentation." Thus, I have ballots that in fact read "that argument is an NDT argument and is not acceptable in CEDA Debate." This belief among some coaches that there is some vague, mysterious, intuitively-known difference is very frustrating to debaters who want to develop their skills, to coaches who want to teach those skills, and to both groups who want to know why particular rounds are won or lost.

Secondly, I do not find CEDA Debate to very innovative, as if innovation in CEDA were completely spent in its departure from NDT. Now seeming suspicious of innovation and ever on guard against that "ole debil" NDT and its gamesmanship strategies, many CEDA advocates in practice shun innovation and departure of any kind.

Thirdly, for whatever reason, CEDA Debate in practice lacks judge accountability. Ballots my teams receive at tournaments often say very little either specifically about presentation style or about the issues argued. And finally, CEDA Debate, for whatever reason, is poorer in substance, analysis, and evidence presentation -- despite some occasional exceptional teams. Maybe the reason here is that CEDA has more inexperienced debaters, or perhaps less intensified coaching, or a more relaxed attitude toward substance. But for whatever the reasons, the debating is not particularly good.

Despite all that I have said, NDT and CEDA debating both have important and unique assets. NDT Debate is theory based. A well-developed body of information and ideas on effective argumentation is available and growing, and NDT debaters learn that theory and develop their arguments on its basis. Judges have important expectations of debaters. Issues are expected

to be argued within some theoretical decision-making framework. All claims are supposed to be supported and documented. Judges have a mature attitude toward language as a set of symbols that is dynamic; things are things because we label them in that way, not because they are inherently that way. Thus, the meaning of a resolution is a question to be resolved in the debate. There is important judge accountability. Judges are expected to reveal in writing their attitudes toward decision-making, and they are expected to make their decisions on the basis of those attitudes -- even if they don't always succeed at that goal. And, importantly, there is the ongoing demand that judges write on their ballots clear reasons for decision based on what actually happened within the round. Though rigid in some ways, NDT debate also encourages innovation in decision-making theory and in practical argumentation strategies. Finally, NDT debate provides a challenge and an intellectual outlet for very bright students -- a challenge and outlet often not available otherwise at many of our mega-universities.

The CEDA departure has provided a number of practical, educationally sound improvements in intercollegiate debate. The two resolutions per year, the various kinds of resolutions, and the time of when they are announced are important developments. The burden of spending months researching the topic has

been lessened. Students can enter the activity in September without being already behind. Or they can enter after Christmas and begin with everyone else on a new resolution. If a resolution is really bad, the burden lasts only four months. Beginning debaters can be moved into the activity much easier. Since the activity is less demanding in terms of research time, tournament time, national travel, and pressure to win, students without high school and high school workshop experience, students who have parttime jobs, students who have other pressing responsibilities, and students who participate in other activities can more easily participate. CEDA has a continuing commitment to a delivery style which is effective for the expert debate judge and at least understandable to the general audience. The CEDA advocates are probably quite correct in arguing that CEDA Debate provides important kinds of training for public advocacy and public speaking. This activity, finally, seems to have people and coaches who have broader academic and personal interests, who are much healthier and happier. Clearly, empirically, it is a more popular form of debate. And we cannot have debate programs and debate coaches if we do not have debaters.

The future of intercollegiate debate depends upon whether we accept the current fragmentation of our activity which in the competition between the two factions appears to reinforce

the worst liabilities of each, or if we develop a synthesis of the two that combines the assets of both. I would hope we would do the latter. To go in that direction, I will simply list four possibilities that should be considered:

1. AFA should be the single, national governing and certifying organization for intercollegiate debate.
 - A. The NDT Committee and the CEDA organization should be abolished.
 - B. To deemphasize national titles, perhaps the NDT itself and the point system used by CEDA should also be abolished.
 - C. If a national tournament is retained, it should be an open tournament with randomly assigned, AFA-certified judges.
 - D. If any kind of point system is retained, it should promote attending strong regional tournaments with no more than six preliminary rounds, and should discourage "point hunting" by attending weak tournaments or putting strong debaters in junior divisions.
 - E. AFA should coordinate the selection of two national resolutions annually, with one announced in September and the other in January. AFA should see that there is some variety in the types of resolutions used.
 - F. AFA should sanction tournaments that adhere to the AFA Code of Ethics, that occur between October 1 and March 31, that have no more than six preliminary rounds (except for round robins), and randomly assign AFA-certified judges.
2. AFA should certify all judges who are fulltime instructors in higher education and meet these additional criteria:
 - A. Each judge must provide in writing for annual publication his/her ideas on decision-making

theory. This essay must be certain to address the questions of the pedagogical and argumentative importance of delivery style/rate in intercollegiate debate, the impact delivery has on decision-making in various advocacy situations, the judge's precise expectations in a debate round regarding delivery, and the actions the judge will take should his expectations not be met.

- B. Each judge should indicate his/her commitment to intercollegiate debate as an educational experience in oral advocacy, so that only evidence read and understood by the judge within the speeches and documented fully and qualified to the judge's satisfaction within the speeches would be considered. Other than to resolve questions of ethics, evidence should not be read after the round.
 - C. Each judge should indicate his/her commitment to provide in writing by the close of the tournament reasons for decisions based upon the judge's theory of decision-making and upon what occurred within the speeches themselves in the debate. Pre-round prejudices about issues or interpretations of resolutions and post-round evidence reading should not be factors in the decision-making.
 - D. AFA should publish each summer a yearly booklet containing decision-making statements of certified judges. Additional supplements may be published later in the academic year.
- 3. Students should be limited in their participation in intercollegiate debate to six semesters or nine quarters, to a maximum of ten tournaments a year, and to five tournaments on any one resolution.
 - 4. Tournament directors should experiment with formats that might encourage more in-depth consideration of issues, a more reasonable delivery rate, and fewer gamesmanship strategies. For example, a 10-3-4 format with a 6 minute first affirmative rebuttal might be one possibility.

I do not have time here to defend each of these charges in terms of advantages -- although I certainly am willing to do so.

But I will say here that if we do some of these things or at least move in some of these directions, I believe it would represent two important commitments: One, a commitment to theory-based debate training that would include judge accountability and concern for the education of students in methods of effective oral advocacy; and, two, a commitment to making the learning activities in debate enjoyable, healthy, stimulating, and exciting experiences for a wide range of students and rewarding experiences for communication educators who are also debate coaches.

NOTES

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