

# IS THERE REALLY ANY DIFFERENCE OR IS IT OUR IMAGINATION

by Aaron Timmons

In the last fifteen years, Lincoln Douglas Debate has exploded on the forensic scene allowing programs which had deemphasized policy debate an alternative avenue of competition. Increasing participation in L/D has made it the largest event at most invitationals. But alas, things might not be as good as they seem. Before embarking upon issues which some might view as blasphemous, allow me to make two points. First, when done well, Lincoln-Douglas Debate is excellent. L/D makes the speaker synthesize a variety of information in an effort to present it in a coherent and persuasive package. This article is in no way an attempt to denigrate L/D as an activity. It is an attempt to critique current practices. Secondly, my perspective in writing this article comes from having some success on the regional, state, and national level and my self-proclaimed title as "DEBATE COACH." This distinction is important in that too many times we tend to categorize and draw artificial lines between policy people and L/D people. I coach DEBATE--period. For years my debaters have experienced success articulating value and policy issues in both L/D and CX. Too many of our peers sell themselves short by refusing to learn or to coach all types of debate or, at least, to respect the unique differences of each. It is inane to think that we don't discuss value implications to policy making and just as ludicrous to assume that we can discuss values without considering outcomes as well. But that's another article. My growing disfavor with L/D is leveled

primarily to two factions--the NFL and the "traditional L/D purists" (whatever that means.). This discontent was fueled after the latest *Rostrum* and after viewing with disdain and utter disbelief the new rules which are both paternalistic and random. With these caveats in minds, let's embark upon a discourse of what currently constitutes Lincoln-Douglas Debate.

The first problem is specific to the National Forensic League National Tournament. Artificial distinctions and hierarchies are created when the name of the events are DEBATE for policy and L/D for the Lincoln Douglas division. This seemingly minor difference reinforces the concept of L/D detractors and labels the activity as different, less worthy, and stereotypical of "Lesser debate" and "Learning Disabled Debate". These distinctions concretize the beliefs of those who espouse that L/D is really just "dueling oratories" where clash is not important and where the purpose of policy debate is to talk as fast as you can without any logic or persuasion. Obviously, these criticisms fall victim to the same logical fallacies we teach our students to look at and expose in rounds. The solution is simple. Change the name of the event to Lincoln-Douglas Debate and change policy to Cross-Examination or Policy Debate. The act of just referring to Lincoln Douglas as Debate is a step in the right direction.

The second concern deals with the lack of disclosure of decisions after elimination rounds. This problem is endemic at both the NFL National Tournament and many

(most) invitationals around the country. My rationale for disclosure is simple. First, at the NFL Tournament disclosure is done in policy debate; to do so in L/D would only be consistent. Secondly, if the decision is announced, many times in elimination rounds, one doesn't get ballots back, or those returned are illegible, incomplete, or unclear. As a bit of a peremptory note, no judge should be forced to be subjected to contestants who wish to badger them, but if part of the communication process is feedback, what are we worried about? To parallel the classroom experience, education of students should be the focus. Isn't that what tournaments are supposed to be--extensions of the classroom? If you give students oral or written critiques for practice debates and they don't understand, do we as EDUCATORS just allow them to bask in their state of confusion? Obviously not! While we must balance the efficient operation of the tournament, we as educators must be aware of our responsibility to provide adequate feedback so our students may learn from and improve. Some of the best exchanges in policy debate occur in postround discussions where real feedback is given to coaches and competitors. At most tournaments judges in L/D either are as silent as church mice when the winner is announced (or posted in some obscure area), or they deny the debaters the opportunity to ask questions in an effort for self improvement. It is arrogant and antithetical to have education as the goal and yet construct a one way street of communication by denying feedback. Additionally, it continues to

stigmatize L/Ders as "more sensitive" (yea this is a quote from a respected "purist") and incapable of handling the results of their decisions. The reason the NFL National Tournament doesn't allow disclosure (as was stated to me at the coach's suggestion meeting) was that the rounds would be too long. This is where the Educator's skills come into play. I suggest that you disclose and explain, place a personal time limit on the question and answer session, and, if more time is needed, postpone the discussion until after the next round or until you have turned in your ballot. There are times when a short break makes the discussion more productive, but, at least, the students will have the initial decision. In fact the silly 10 minute decision rule at NFL solves the problem. There exists now an unnecessary tension and stress for Lincoln-Douglas Debaters at the National Tournament that policy debaters do not have to experience. In fact, the new declaration by NFL (January *Rostrum*) that we are "silent critics" adding further legitimacy to an intellectually bankrupt concept. There is nothing worse than not knowing how you stand or if your arguments are not working. The best debaters are those who can modify cases during the tournament to reflect what is or is not working. To say Lincoln-Douglas debaters can't emotionally handle the decisions is insulting and degrading-- which again reinforces inaccurate stereotypes.

The third problem area comes in the secrecy of Lincoln-Douglas Debate. Many times people won't allow spectators to watch even elimination rounds because "they will get my case." This attitude is so elementary. Isn't debate a public forum? Disclo-

sure of cases has become somewhat of a practice in policy. People will ask not only what case the affirmative is running, but even what advantages. I have found that this habit makes for better debate. While this is certainly contingent on the region of the country and/or type of competition you are debating and isn't a rule but a courtesy, the increase of this practice has improved preparation and led to better debate. Frankly, and maybe unfortunately, L/D cases are not all that different. If you see one, usually you have a basic idea of them all and anything different is squirrely or offbeat. When a prominent coach won't allow spectators to watch a round that she is judging at a recent national tournament by saying "we don't do that sort of thing," it just reinforces negative stereotypes of the activity. L/D debaters don't seem to have fun because

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of these "limits" that the "experts" of the activity have put on them. If L/D were more open we would see a progression of ideas and more variety of cases and perhaps real/better clash. By talking about case ideas, the self imposed limits will fall by the way side and the upper level thinking skills will be used to expand the scope of arguments so that if you see one you don't see them all. If debaters are afraid to let someone hear their case before a potential round, the problem seems to be either a weakness in the case or in that debaters ability to defend it.

A fourth problem is the

separatism which exists in the debate activity. It is unfortunate that when we go to tournaments the L/Ders don't talk to CXers or visa versa. Everyone is basically the same. All of the debaters are high school students. The separatism is reinforced by coaches who say they "hate" CX or "hate" L/D and refuse to acknowledge the inherent qualities of each. If we work toward more unification of the activity, the more mutual respect will occur. This separatism does more to cause disrespect of each other's activity than almost anything else. Unity should be the aim of all. Occasionally sharing the coaches in the judging pool might also help this problem. My argument has always been that L/Ders and CXers can learn from each other.

Finally, the last issue concerns the quality of judges at the National Tournament and specifically the final round. It says something about the perceived quality of the tournament when the champion of the Tournament of Champions and most major tournaments during the 1992-93 season, choose not to even attempt to qualify for the National Tournament because of the randomness of the judging. This is not to take away from those who do well at Nationals, but to credit them for skills at adapting to an impossible cross section of judges. While luck is a component, credit should be given to those who skillfully adapt to the difficult cross section of judges. Each year great debaters fall prey to the randomness of the judging. A statement for the record: not just anyone can judge Lincoln-Douglas Debate. Students are judged by community people, parents, and others without training in Debate. Although I really understand the problems that exist in recruiting

that many judges, and I agree that a diversity of judging philosophies is important, we must all do our part to increase the quality of the pool of judges at Nationals and some invitationals as well. By the way, wouldn't the judge philosophy sheet that team debaters get be nice for L/D? I have for too many years judged at the national tournament on panels with people who write letters during the round, decide after constructives, and physically sign and seal the ballot before rebuttals and/or complain about having to judge at all or lamenting about their lack of knowledge about debate. Although these problems are endemic in preliminary and early elimination rounds, it is a truism that is undeniable. In the Final Round the habit of handing our final panel judging slots to sponsors and unqualified friends of the activity must be stopped. I agree that our sponsors deserve certain recognition, and a great job has been done to gain NFL sponsorship, but should we place our students in the hands of novice judges at the NATIONAL FINALS? The final panel must be made up of coaches who are EXPERTS in the field of DEBATE. This is the only fair way to treat the finalists. The final panel must be able to flow the debate, not simply to take notes, and must judge on the issues and not on who simply sounds better, speaks last, or whose arguments are the most basic. The finals should have the finest panel of experts in the field. Academic debate needs to be judged by experts in the field of academic debate. Additionally, when the arguments in L/D finals must be so elementary because judges haven't heard rounds on the topic, it reduces the quality of the round. Having coached two of the last

four national finalists and having spoken to at least one competitor the other years, in each final round cases were simplified in an attempt to adapt. Currently, judges have little or no accountability for decisions rendered in the final round. Most ballots are not instructional to either the competitor or the coach. Those who say the ballots aren't important after the final round probably haven't had a student in the finals. One solution might be to publish the ballot of each critic of the final round ala NDT or CEDA debate in the *Rostrum*.

This serves as an additional teaching tool in that students watching the tape can see what the critics thought and makes critics more judicious in making decisions. The final round should consist of the two best debaters at that tournament going head to head with the most well defined arguments on the topic and the most qualified judges.

Lincoln-Douglas Debate has fast become the most popular event at most tournaments around the country. But unless some of the misconceptions and "unwritten rules", are eliminated, then Lincoln-Douglas Debate will not be considered the equal of policy, but it's "learning disabled" cousin that is not to be taken seriously. Brandon Fletcher stated the fact best in his statement at the Lincoln-Douglas National Finals last summer: "...there is not a bit of difference in intellect, argument, and the necessary understanding of debate between Lincoln-Douglas and Policy." The sooner that everyone embraces this philosophy the sooner both Lincoln-Douglas Debate and Policy Debate will get the respect they equally deserve.

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coach at Greenhill School, TX. He coached a National Champion (1990) and National Finalist (1993) in L/D Debate.)