

# An Army of One A challenge to Debate Coaches

by

Bob Bilyeu

## Introduction

This past weekend I returned to Springfield-Parkview High School where I spent twenty-four years teaching speech and directing forensics. I had the pleasure of presenting the sweepstakes trophy at a tournament that bears my name. Nancy Wedgeworth, the excellent young coach who is now in charge is outstanding in every way. The tournament ran flawlessly. Her students were professional, polite, and polished. Some of the bright-

analysis, research, persuasion, and critical thinking are gained here in a way that no other forensic activity can match. No other activity I know prepares students so well to be our future leaders. But wait a moment; maybe I'm talking about the way cross-ex debate used to be. Based on what I have heard lately in this activity, I'm not sure the same thing can still be said.

It has been almost fifteen years since I coached debate at Parkview, but even before I retired, there had been tell-tale signs of impending change. First we started hearing spread debate which escalated to run-and-gun. Next we were faced with topicality arguments against almost every affirmative case. Staying on the cutting edge of avoiding actually debating the merits of the resolution, negative teams started majoring in perverted inherency arguments. They were easy to spot. They asked questions like, "What's to prevent the present system from adopting this plan?"

These harbingers were, however, only early signs of the ultimate escape from debating the resolution.

About the time I quit teaching debat-

ers and started teaching debate teachers, the use of "kritiks" made its appearance—the ultimate method of avoiding debating the merits of a specific policy. Never mind that some of the best forensic coaches and scholars in the nation had written the topic and thought it a good one. Kritiks may be grounded in theoretical issues that are important and worthy of discussions—but not at the expense of traditional policy debate.

I'm aware that by this point many readers have already dismissed me as another old fogey who wants to turn back the clock to the "good old days" and are only reading out of curiosity—or maybe not reading at all. That's fine. What I have to say wouldn't have changed their minds anyway. But those of you who are still reading are the ones who can make a difference in restoring policy debate to its rightful place of prominence in forensics. It is too valuable to lose. The atrophy needs to be and can be reversed. It won't be easy and it won't be instantaneous, but it's imperative that we try.

## The Solution

I wish it were possible to accomplish this goal on a grand scale, but I'm not sure that's either politically possible or ideologically defensible. Anytime we start making rules that limit what a forensic event can be, we risk losing innovative, creative, and desirable changes. That,

**"Debate must continue to be an activity that produces tomorrow's leaders and those leaders to be effective, must be analytical, persuasive, fluent, charismatic speakers."**

est forensic students in the central part of the United States were there competing. The whole atmosphere made me proud to have been a part of what I believe is one of the most important disciplines in secondary education.

## The Problem

Looking through the program, I saw one thing that did disturb me. The smallest event at the tournament was cross-examination debate. It only seemed yesterday to me that it had been the largest debate event at Parkview. I felt a little guilty, because I had been a part of the national effort to establish Lincoln-Douglas debate. Perhaps I share the blame, but I felt then and I feel now that Lincoln-Douglas debate is an alternative avenue for debaters who aren't comfortable in two-person debate for a variety of reasons, but I never saw it as something to take the place of policy debate. Public Forum debate is an attempt to provide a more user-friendly forum of debate, but no matter what its final name may be, it cannot be what cross-ex debate should be. And how long until it morphs into unintelligible kritiks and speed? Wouldn't a better alternative be to return policy debate to its original form of discussing issues of policy in a persuasive format?

I believed then as I believe now that policy debate is the crown jewel of high-school forensics. The skills of

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of course, doesn't mean we shouldn't have parameters in debate, but it does mean that we should impose them very judiciously. Instead, I propose that coaches individually begin their own war against what they believe to be detrimental to the best interests of their debaters.

First (plank I), your debaters need to be made a part of the crusade to restore debate. High school students like to be involved in doing things to make their world a better place. Make it a squad project to learn how to go into a round where a team is doing something that is bad for debate and win the round by showing the fallacy of their approach. In effect, learn how to "kritik" "kritiks (don't let your students call it that)," or speed, or spread, or inappropriate topicality or inherency arguments, or whatever else rears its ugly head. Your students will really be ahead of the curve, on the cutting edge of debate. Such a novel approach might even appeal to debaters who have been to high-powered debate workshops.

It won't be enough to assert that speed, kritiks, or whatever is bad. Your students need to block out arguments against those things just as they would against any argument they would attempt to defeat. Construct the blocks well. Support them. Show their impact on the outcome of the debate. 1989 was my last year to coach debate at Parkview. We were lucky enough to have two cross-ex teams last past Wednesday at Nationals. We didn't debate on the national circuit and we knew we couldn't play the speed game with those teams who had played that game all year. What we did instead was run a block we called "speed kills," against every team we met that debated in the warp-speed fashion. We only lost to good teams who did *not* break the speed of sound.

It won't be hard to find evidence to support these blocks. Who are the experts on what practices beg the central question in any debate? Who are the experts on what debate practices killed NDT at the college level and are killing it at the high school level? Those experts have been writing brilliant articles over the last couple of decades in the *Rostrum*. If you don't have back issues in your school library, find some library that does and have your students start reading about what school administrators, coaches, and scholars have to say about the problem. Creating anti-kritik blocks should be no great challenge. In addition to articles in the *Rostrum* there is plenty of theory and evidence online and in handbooks (William Bennett's CDE debate handbook for one.) Your debaters won't find complete agreement, but they can find ample support for their position from the people who are the real experts.

Be sure debaters don't commit the crime they are indicting. Don't let them speed. Don't let them spend a lot of time away from the topic. They shouldn't spend a lot of time defeating their opponents' specious tactics in a round either. They should make their response and then get to what they point out is the question at hand: "Should we or should we not adopt the resolution?" In subsequent speeches they should answer any responses to their block and quickly get back to what they say the debate should be about.

The next weapons in this assault (plank II) are the ballots you write. We talk about paradigms in debate. As a judge make your judging paradigm a "protect debate" one. Unapologetically vote against any team that does something that you believe to be harmful to debate and tell them why on the ballot. Neither they nor their coach may like your opinion, but it's your opinion and you have a right to it. You wouldn't hesitate to give a team a loss for falsifying evidence, so why not give them a loss for using an approach that is killing cross-ex debate. In fact if you believe that it is

killing debate, how can you in good conscience do otherwise?

Finally, (Plank III) enlist other coaches to be a part of your army. You may be surprised how many coaches are in your corner but feel helpless in the face of the opposition. No one who knows me well is in the dark about where I stand on this matter. I have talked to many of my coaching friends all over the country who admit that they don't like what debate has become. They seem to feel that to compete, they have to let their debaters play the game that they learn from summer camps and from other debaters who win using those tactics.

### **Making the Solution Work**

It's hard to convince debaters to debate in a way that insures their losing the round. What we have to do is to convince our debaters, and other coaches and their debaters that they *can win* in rounds where bad debate practices are being used. Debaters can be convinced by giving them the tools to win those rounds. Once they gain these tools and start winning, they will actually start looking forward to those kinds of rounds. Once they start winning, particularly in final rounds, the word will spread. Oh yes, once the opposition catches on, they will start finding counter arguments, but they will be playing catch-up and your teams will have right and the weight of the future of forensic survival on their side. Even those judges who love esoteric arguments in a round will find it difficult to vote against your novel arguments since most of them profess to vote on what happens in the round.

Once you, as a coach judge, start voting for sensible debate by your ballot decisions, you will not only start having an influence on the kind of debates that happen in the rounds you judge, but you just might become a factor in giving other coaches the courage to follow your example, particularly if you give your reasons clearly on the ballots those other coaches will read. You'll probably be protested. Take it as a compliment to your integrity.

### **Conclusion**

The time for appeasement has passed. Kritiks or speed may not be weapons of mass destruction, but they have made high school debate an endangered activity. It doesn't help to question the motives of those who employ these tactics, nor argue against their educational value. The truth is that because of the way debate often is today, we're afraid to let school administrators hear what it has become. We shuffle community leaders into some other newly-named activity so they won't think we have lost our mind. What matters is that a valuable activity be saved from extinction. Debate must continue to be an activity that produces tomorrow's leaders and those leaders, to be effective, must be analytical, persuasive, fluent, charismatic speakers. Debate once taught all of those qualities. The way it is often done today doesn't. It can be again if we make it so and it can be even better because it can evolve into something that gives students the new, fresh tools necessary to succeed in a new century. Once again we can proudly invite parents, administrators and community in to show off the best of what we do in forensics.

Enlist today!

*(Bob Bilyeu, Hall of Fame, coached at Parkview High School in Springfield, MO for 23 years. During that time Parkview qualified twelve debate teams to Nationals, had seven teams in the finals of the Missouri state tournament with four first places, and won the National Water Alliance Debate Tournament in Washington D.C. in 1986 which was shown nationally on C-Span.*