

Dottie Hinson (played by Gina Davis): "Why is this so hard?"

Jimmy Dugan (played by Tom Hanks): "It's supposed to be hard. If it was easy, everyone would do it."

—FROM A LEAGUE OF THEIR OWN

by Jon Brusckke

The National Forensics League and the newly-emerging Urban Debate Leagues share the common goal of promoting healthy, populated, and active local debate leagues. The NFL has the benefit of decades of experience in league development, and the UDL movement has the distinction of being the most energetic effort in recent years to establish a large number of new leagues – at least eleven new debate circuits owe their existence to UDL support. Needless to say, both groups have an interest in the continued success of the embryonic UDLs; we have at this junction an unprecedented opportunity to expand participation in debate. If the UDLs take hold or even expand, debate can become a regular feature of the secondary school experience and not just a rare opportunity at scattered high schools.

What will it take make urban debate succeed? There are those who characterize urban debate as a movement (Baker, 1998), and it is characterization that most of us wear with pride. I'm no historian, but I do believe that all movements need at least two elements to flourish: A really good idea, and a well-organized means to implement it. The first element we have in abundance. Those of us with careers in forensics know the almost intoxicating list of benefits our activity offers. Few things compare to the intrinsic reward of watching students develop, mature, and transform as a result of participation in debate. This paper will dwell on the much less sexy and less uplifting question of logistics. The movement label may provide insight into the importance of discussions about strategic direction — those with even a passing familiarity with Malcolm X and Martin Luther King understand that sharp minds can agree on a common goal but differ sharply about the means to attain it.

This essay will discuss strategic directions. It will start by trying to diagnose the challenges to league expansion, it will then explore reasons that it is difficult for us to see those problems, and will finally conclude with some suggestions that might

help fix the problem. It will be disappointingly short on specific alternatives, but will dwell at some length on strategic directions.

The Problem

It is quite easy, when facing a problem for the first time, to miss something basic and produce solutions that look comical with a dose of hindsight. Samuel Goldwyn once dismissed audio in movies with the comment, "Who the hell wants to hear actors talk?" Ptolemy watched the sun move across the sky and concluded the earth was sitting on the back of a big turtle. In each instance, something basic was missed: Dialogue improves the plot, and the earth revolves around the sun. Of course, you don't have to be dumb to make these mistakes. Goldwyn is a media legend and Ptolemy is correctly viewed as a scientific trailblazer. On the other hand, it is staggering to imagine how much more Ptolemy would have learned had he known a little bit more about the center of the universe. When starting off in a bold new direction, there are decided advantages to knowing what problems need to be solved.

Perhaps we can begin by asking, "Why isn't there widespread debate participation now?" Why aren't there active leagues in every district? There are many possible answers. It is possible that debate simply doesn't have enough to offer, but its intellectual value is now beyond question (Allen et al., 1999). It is possible, as Kozol (1992) eloquently argues, that economic inequalities preclude all sorts of extra-curricular opportunities in poor schools. Clearly, economic inequality is part of the answer. But that answer is only partial simply because there are many wealthy districts that don't offer debate either. Speaking as one who has been working with urban debate for four years now, I can say that the main problems we have encountered have not been intellectual (in the sense that we are teaching something unimportant), or pedagogical (in the sense that debate is difficult to teach), or motivational (in the sense that it is hard to get students interested), or

even financial (thanks to the generosity of the Open Society Institute). Why, then, is there not more urban debate? Why is there not more debate in general?

The answer, I believe, is that it is damnable difficult to be a debate coach. Even a teacher lucky enough to have a debate class as part of the curriculum spends an extraordinary amount of time after class working with the students. Teachers give up long weekends that could be spent relaxing or simply getting ready for the next week of school. The teacher must arrange permission slips, get district and board approvals, arrange for buses and janitors and security, and find some way to pay for it all. Budgets are hard to get and rarely adequate to the demands of the students. I preach to the choir in these pages, but it is worth reflecting on how much we do and how hard we work. We often do what it is not reasonable to ask us to do. We are debate coaches because we make unreasonable sacrifices. The reason why there is not more debate is easy to see: Being a debate coach is really hard, and not many people can (or want to) do it.

Part of the Problem

There is a story about Ted Williams, the great Boston Red Sox hitter, who some time after he had retired was asked to help coach a .240 hitter. Williams suggested that the hitter crowd the plate so that he could easily hit outside pitches, and then told the player that when the pitcher threw inside he should light up and cream the ball. "If I could crowd the plate and cream an inside fastball," the player explained, "I wouldn't be hitting .240." Williams was a great hitter but not a great coach, in part because it was hard for him to understand how exceptional he was. Williams could hit .400 because he could cream an inside fastball, and he never understood that nobody else could do it.

Because the job of debate coach is so hard, only exceptional people can do it. There are indeed educators who are willing to give virtually all of their free time for nothing more than the intrinsic reward of seeing the students grow. But it is an error to imag-

ine that because the very best educators are willing to work extremely hard for no extra pay that there are a large number of teachers who will do it. The examples offered by outstanding teachers do (and should) serve as inspiration and by watching our best there is much to that can be learned. But in some ways, the successes of our best teachers also serve to blind us. Ted Williams couldn't understand why nobody else could turn on an inside fastball. If we focus only on successes, we may never learn why those successes can't be translated to less adept educators. High school students love repeating that Einstein failed out of school. The very motivation behind a gifted program is that you can't teach Einstein the way that you teach everyone else. But, it turns out, the reverse is also true: You can't teach everyone else the way that you teach Einstein. We can't treat every teacher as if they were Jaime Escalante (the famous math educator chronicled in the movie *Stand and Deliver*).

I fear that one problem endemic to all debate leagues – from those in the most ivy-covered collegiate debate district to those in the most rural high school novice divisions – is that the leagues come to be dominated by only outstanding instructors, who have a hard time appreciating why others can't match their excellence and have difficulty replacing themselves when they are gone.

Another factor, at least as important, is that even the exceptional teachers do not receive the support they need and deserve, and after performing miracle after miracle they are taken for granted. One result is burnout, and it is a problem that resonates at all levels. Even at the collegiate level, the demands of coaching have made coaching and publishing almost mutually exclusive, and the number of tenured Ph.D. coaches is shrinking to dangerous levels. I suspect the problem is at least as pronounced at the high school level, with its longer travel schedule and heightened paperwork. A serious problem that our activity has is that we have difficulty retaining even the exceptional teachers. We must be constantly vigilant that we do not support our best teachers less because they are capable of more.

Part of the Solution

There aren't easy solutions, but there are at least two directions to try. The first is that we can seek ways to make the debate job less demanding. We can offer Saturday-only tournaments, provide assistant

coaches, lobby for better secretarial support for the paperwork, limit topics, limit travel schedules, provide curriculum materials, and try to establish class meetings rather than after-school meetings. This is a short and non-exhaustive list. The bottom line is that debate coach is a demanding job, and any measure taken to reduce the demands of the job will make it something interesting and accessible to all teachers and not just the exceptionally motivated. Those of us who work actively with districts trying to make debate programs flourish should make sure that teacher support is a central part of the equation.

A second approach is to try to do more to attract the very best teachers. At present, it is simply stating the obvious to say that the reward system for debate coaches is badly out of step with the effort involved. Simply put, the job of debate coach is not a good career move. There are no promotions or pay raises for doing well but there are costs, measured in lost portfolio development and stress. "Better pay" is not something that can be written into a grant or won easily from a district. There are, however, some limited successes in some districts where compensation for coaching has risen to \$4,000-\$5,000 a year. Although these victories will not be replicable in all areas, they do demonstrate the possibility that victories can indeed be won. And, as other movements have taught us, the ease of victory does make the need for it any less important. Desegregation must have appeared unthinkable in 1920 Mississippi, but it must have been equally apparent that equality would never be achieved without it. Adequate compensation for an enormous number of overtime hours might seem completely out of the question in the current environment, but the reality of nation-wide debate leagues with large-scale participation will be impossible without it.

I'll return to the movement analogy one more time, to highlight the importance of facing the most difficult problems squarely, to dwell on the need for a clear strategic direction, and to end on a note of hope. The civil rights movement faced seemingly intractable problems: The racist power structure was unwilling to cede even basic respect to non-Caucasians. The problem was obvious but the solutions long and difficult. The cause was noble but there was vigorous dissent, even within the movement, about strategic direction (Do we seek justice by the correct application of laws or by any means necessary?). Our own move-

ment faces problems no less apparent and with the remedies no less obscure. We will do well to discuss vigorously our own strategic direction. If we take this unique moment to dwell on a strategy for long-term league development, the UDLs can flourish and the joint goals of the UDLs and the NFL can become more attainable.

I hope this essay can spur some thinking about the strategic direction leagues might take to guarantee their long-term success. Part of the process will involve taking a sobering look at the challenges we face. Such discussions are rarely uplifting. But of all groups, debate professionals must surely be the most able to engage in frank discussions about the problems we face and reflect maturely on ways to fix them. If we do this thing right, we can transform education. If we fail to reflect on the factors that limit our success at present, we may not realize our full potential. If we fight and win battles for our teachers, try to recruit the best teachers, and support the teachers we have, debate can flourish.

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References

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