

# THE NATIONAL 'SNAPSHOT' OF LINCOLN-DOUGLAS DEBATE

by Mitch Gaffer

In 1980, the National Forensic League sanctioned Lincoln-Douglas Debate as an event at the Huntsville, Alabama Nationals. Since then, it has grown in popularity nearly every year. It's safe to say that LD Debate is out of its' infancy and has become a permanent part of the debate world. As we approach the twentieth year of LD Debate, I believe that it is time to evaluate the current state of the event.

In its' infant years, early LD debaters had to 'feel' their way through. They were unsure of how this new form of debate should be performed, especially when dealing with the varied approaches involved in debating national competition.

In 1995, at the Ft. Lauderdale Nationals, the Lincoln-Douglas judge card was developed to remedy this situation. Judges attending the national tournament were able to relay their views on how LD Debate should be done to the students they were judging. By examining the data, a student could get a profile of a judge's individual Lincoln-Douglas perspective.

It was in Ft. Lauderdale that I suggested to James Copeland the possibility of compiling the data from these LD judge cards to discover a national perspective on Lincoln-Douglas Debate. With so much information being collected, it seemed a shame that we didn't use it to see where Lincoln-Douglas Debate was, in terms of its' rules and accepted debating practices. In his true diplomatic way, Mr. Copeland suggested that this was an excellent project for some interested young coach, and he flashed a knowing smile! With the challenge laid before me, I began counting numbers.

## *Methodological Considerations:*

Each judge attending the national tournament is required to fill out a judge paradigm card. Data from the judge cards are reported in a paradigm booklet given to each LD coach attending the national tournament. Therefore, the data counted represents only those judges who filled out and turned in the judge card.

After counting the numbers for the individual judge responses, I translated that raw number into a percentage of the total. I then rounded it to the nearest whole num-

ber. This did result in a slight shifting of the raw number's true value. (For example, 21.3% became 21%.) But, it allowed this busy coach, with limited time and 3 kids to raise, to have an easier time plotting and drawing the graphs. I am confident that the national 'snapshot' of LD Debate is still intact.

Finally, I have utilized data from 3 different national tournament years. I found that trying to fit too many lines on one graph caused it to lose some of its' descriptive ability in the resulting blur. I began with the 1995 Ft. Lauderdale National's data. Because it is the oldest available, it seemed that it would offer the best hope of showing any change when compared with more recent graphs. Next, I calculated data from the 1998 St. Louis National's to see what had happened in 3 years. At the last minute, I decided to add the 1999 Phoenix National's data. Being the most recent, it gives us the most up-to-date view of LD Debate. For purposes of easier graph interpretation, the lines get darker and more solid as the data gets more recent.

## *Examining the Graphed Data:*

There are many different conclusions that can be drawn from examining the graphed data, and it is hoped that this information will spark debate as to their meaning. Utilizing the data from our national's judge survey can only improve the quality of LD Debate discussion. With the national 'snapshot' in place, we can begin to see what coaches and judges believe about the different key issues in LD Debate. I encourage reaction and discussion among you and your peers, as I'm sure there will be many different interpretations of 'what's going on'.

## *What Does a '3' Mean?:*

One of the first differences of opinion that appeared for me and my colleagues was the interpretation of the '3' response. All of the questions asked on the judge card are based on a graduated scale; with '1' being the one extreme and '5' being the other. So, is the '3' an undecided vote because it's in the middle and supports neither position or is it a call for moderation between the two perspectives? Without knowing the mind set of the person filling out the card,

we can't be sure why they chose the '3'. For example, graph 3A, dealing with the rate of delivery, could be interpreted in one of 2 ways: a call for moderate speed in the round or a willingness to accept a variety of different debating speeds. Continued dialogue between coaches and judges may help to reveal the true nature of the '3' response.

## *Rule vs. Paradigm:*

When interpreting the graphed information, we find that it supports different levels of acceptance for certain key LD Debate principles. The difference between a rule and a paradigm is found in the levels of acceptance for each given idea. If most people accept a certain argument or belief, then it approaches the status of a rule. Graphs with rules potential, such as 3B- persuasive communication and 3D- value premise, appear to be skewed to one side, as most people believe a particular perspective is true in each case.

Paradigm graphs appear to be flatter, as more perspectives get a respectable number of votes. Graphs, such as 3C- LD theory arguments or 3L- rebuttals, demonstrate a more paradigm tendency. Many perspectives have a decent chance of being in the back of the room. Since there are a variety of acceptable ways to approach these issues, students need to adapt to the particular judge panel in the round.

While it's true that no graph shows pure rule formation (all people voting for one perspective) or pure paradigm formation (a perfectly flat line with equal acceptance of all ideas), we can divine a general principle from this. The flatter the curve, the more it represents a paradigm mentality in the nation. The more skewed the curve is to one side, the closer we seem to be to rules mentality.

## *The Strength of the Curve:*

I believe that the strength of the curve can help us to better discover the difference between rule and paradigm. If any one or two responses should get a strong percentage of the total vote, one could say that such a percentage indicates a rule. Graph 3K- burden of clash, for example, has 79% of the respondents selecting '4' and '5'. This

makes the burden of clash closer to decisive for most LD judges. As a coach, this makes a good rule of thumb' to follow when advising your team on debate strategy. Accepting the burden of clash in the round appears to be the way the LD Debate game is most often played.

Graph 3A- rate of delivery, 3G- use of evidence, and 3H- approach to the resolution all have strong curves as well. Each of them had over 50% selecting one response, resulting in a strongly pronounced curve. Trouble is they all selected the uncertain '3' response. This leaves interpretation difficult, and discussion open.

### ***Uses of the National LD Debate 'Snapshot':***

Certainly, a professional examination of our sport through our own responses has great value. Knowing where we are can help us to better direct where we are going. We should continue the national dialogue on LD Debate, using this great resource of LD information.

Looking at the shift of the curves over time can allow us to see how the sport is

changing. Although we shouldn't put too much stock in any one curve changing current practice, over time new curves will reveal new attitudes towards the sport. Periodic revisiting to the judge cards would certainly be helpful.

On a more immediate level, the graphs can be used to compare your state vs. the national snapshot. By matching the national data to the South Dakota data (See National / South Dakota Comparison 3H- Approach to Resolution), it confirmed what many of us here already suspected. South Dakota LD Debate is more pragmatic than the nation as a whole.

This definitely affects our case writing strategies when preparing for nationals. Knowing that we will be facing a more philosophical judge pool than we are used to allows us to add philosophical arguments that are integrated into our cases; not simply added on before the round. It helps the effectiveness of our work when we can see a snapshot of the national judge pool during the early stages of national's preparation.

Overall, I've learned a great deal from

this project. I've shared the results with the students in my class and with my fellow coaches at the South Dakota Speech Convention. Each time I presented it, the data opened up new avenues of discussion on what LD Debate is and should be; just as I hoped it would. We can learn much from this annual national judge survey.

Nearly twenty years ago, the National Forensic League sanctioned LD Debate as an official event. Over 4 years ago, James Copeland issued to me a challenge to put to use the national's Lincoln-Douglas judge data. Today, both the event and I are a bit older. but hopefully a bit wiser!"

(Refer to Graphed Data found on the following pages)

*(Mitch Gaffer has been the Head Coach at Huron HS, (SD) for 14 years. His debaters have won the Lincoln-Douglas Debate State Championship 6 times. He has qualified 9 students to Nationals in Lincoln-Douglas debate. Mitch has twice been recognized as a Distinguished Teacher in the U. S. Department of Education's Presidential Scholars Program.)*