

WHAT I LIKE ABOUT DEBATE

by Bill Gibron

The famous film critic Pauline Kael was once asked the question, "which was easier to review, *The Godfather* or *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*?" (A little background; she loved the former and despised the latter).

"Why, that appalling horror flick," she mused "it was a breeze to deconstruct. Praise takes too much work."

I can honestly say that I agree with her. It is always easier to find fault in something than it is to find a way to sing its accomplishments or benefits. The reason seems simple enough. If something offends your sensibilities, then you have a basis, a foundation from which to start. But if something stirs your heart, or moves your mind, or enralls you like nothing has before, then it is impossible to find a corresponding frame of reference in your mind. You can make comparisons to other moments that have caused the same reaction, but in the end, it is just a point by point match up of other, unexplainable events.

When I started this column a few months ago, I knew I would have little problem filling the space with the wrongs of Debate. After all, this well-spring will not run dry any time soon. As I sit here writing this sentence, a hundred dismal debate practices run through my mind; Speed reading, camp evidence, sleaze tactics, time-suck arguments, T...the list continues on and on. I could write another four years and still only scratch the surface.

But what about the good? There surely must be something valuable and wonderful about Debate that keeps me coaching it year in and out (aside from the fact that I am becoming independently wealthy doing it). There must be some worth. Well, there is. I have said it before, and I will say it again; there is nothing that a teenager can do that will be more valuable to their future life than speech and debate. But more specifically, there are the little moments, the wonderful times and the unexplained joys that come from watching that proverbial light bulb come on in a student's head, to actually see them thinking and speaking on their feet, indicating that they have finally figured it out. It's why most teachers teach (aside from the aforementioned riches). So, what are these moments, these

It's not the trophies or the wins.

It's not the National Championships or the missed opportunities.

It's not the number of NFL points or team size.

It's the times when a smile creeps to the corner of your mouth, almost subconsciously, when you see before you what you've only read about in books, or heard as rumor from other coaches.

It's when forensics becomes forensics.

It's when all the hard work pays off, and the long sleepless nights and caffeine fueled days disappear into a comforting haze of simplicity, this is why and how it is done. *This* is why I coach. And *this* is why I write the column. I want *more* of the good things, and *less* of the bad. I want forensics to be forensics. And when it is, it's *m a g i c*.

little specks of joy? Here we go:

┌ when the Negative team discovers their links are valid, and realizes they now have an inroad into an otherwise squirrely case.

┌ when novice Debaters, who dread doing anything, let alone debating, walk out of a round, thoroughly defeated but desperate to debate again.

┌ when a debater presents to the coach, without any prodding or yelling, and without the benefit of camp files, or coach's input, a brand new block of evidence.

┌ when the 1AC presents not so much a case, but a narrative of a problem and a solution that makes clear, cohesive sense.

┌ when a round becomes so heated and so intense that students forget silly wants like food and water and are focused on one thing and one thing only, debate!

┌ a sly and clever cross examination,

where hints are given as to the direction and use of the answers provided, but skill prevents a clear view.

┌ when sleaze debaters are caught, and punished by their opponents.

┌ when sleaze debaters are caught, and admit it, and move on.

┌ when varsity debaters, who have the chance to literally destroy novices they are facing in a round, instead walk them through the debate, knowing that they win the ballot *and* the moral high ground.

┌ when a team, long the fodder for other varsity teams, finally comes into their own and begins to win.

┌ the look on the faces of debaters, who are convinced that they lost the tournament, when their names are announced as winners.

┌ the look on the face of the novice team when they break for the first time.

┌ the youthful optimism of a new debate year.

┌ the letter, years after the fact, telling you how much debate, and your coaching, meant to that ex-student.

Sure, it's easy to point out the small pleasures amongst the massive defects that currently exist in Team Debate. And it would be easy to argue that the problems far outweigh the fun. But that's not really the truth. On whole, debate is still a wonderful event, filled with hidden riches. Dwelling only on the negative paints an unfair portrait of a much maligned event. Looking at the big picture, the whole picture, one sees the reasons coaches and students stay involved. In all things, it is said, we must take the bad with the good. Just because it seems there is so much bad in TD doesn't lessen the good inside.

So, the next time a team dumps 30 cards on-case in the 2NC, or when they kick out of a TD argument in the 2NR, remember the little moments. When they speed through evidence like you've inherited Superman's ears, or confuse fact with opinion, think of those small wonders. They are the cornerstones of the speech and debate experience.

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