

A SYSTEM FOR ALL SEASONS

by Jonathan Judge

Very few are happy with the current system used to measure speaker points in debate. The thirty-point system consistently produces wildly varied point totals, and fails to provide a fair and competitive evaluation of all debaters. This article will argue for the establishment of a ten-point system, which the author believes will minimize many of the problems plaguing the current system.

One compelling reason to adopt the ten point system in varsity debate is that, in many ways, it already exists. When was the last time any circuit judge, or local varsity judge, used all those little boxes to aid tabulation of the final total? Most likely, those boxes were crossed out and a flat total, ranging from 24-30, was written in the bottom box. Furthermore, scores rarely go below 20 these days. Thus, in essence, a *de facto* ten-point system already exists. This certainly begs the question, why have a thirty-point system if you're only going to use the top ten points?

Another reason is that it would help standardize point awards, thus defusing a major issue of contention between traveling debaters and their local circuits, which are often stacked with essentially lay judges. With these judges, comparable performances can receive wildly different point awards. The competence of the judges aside, the thirty-point system is at least partially responsible for the volatility in scores. For a lay judge, 15 out of 30, or half, sure sounds like a decent score. After all, it's right in the middle!

These types of scores complicate matters beyond the round itself, as knowledgeable judges find themselves being urged to "compensate" for some of the lay judges in the pool by providing higher scores. Coaches often are tempted to give lower point awards to teams whose judges are offering ridiculously low scores. After all, how can I, in good faith, give a team a score of "27," knowing that the team's judge just got done giving my team a "21" for a similar, if not better, effort?

The increased use of high-low points (dropping the top and bottom

scores when calculating speaker awards) for tabulation is a temporary solution, but, to use classic debate rhetoric, we shouldn't let it blind us to the fact that the 30-point system is in need of reform.

The root cause of these disparities is the core assumption of the thirty-point system: that debate can be objectively evaluated and scored. It can not be so, for much the same reason that rigid point systems fail when evaluating a high school essay. For example: receiving 4 (Very Good) out of 5 points in all categories should hypothetically give a B, or Very Good, score at the end. It does not. If there are six different categories for evaluation, the essay would be scored at 24 of 30 points (80%), a solid 'C', or average, score in most schools. The same problem exists with debate. Students receiving a 4, or Very Good, score in all categories receive a "24," which is on the bottom of most subjective scales used today. Those receiving a "3", or "Average" in all categories receive a total of 18, which is an atrocious score.

Debate *is* subjective, as is its adjudication. Judges don't admire a debater because s/he's a "5 all the way" in analysis, but because of the **overall impression that s/he makes**. The ten-point system reflects this. Instead of being asked to total up points, the judge is simply asked to offer a flat score, from 1-10, on their overall impression of the individual as a debater.

The whole concept of the "box" system itself is rather suspect. Is anyone else profoundly uncomfortable with a system that allows perfect analysis to count a maximum of 5 points toward the total score? Is refutation really comparable in value to cross-examination, which judges aren't even supposed to consider in their decisions? The situation with lay judges further complicates the matter. How many lay judges using the 30-point "box" system know that much about the categories? My hunch is that very few could, upon demand, draw up a list of needed skills to conduct proper cross-examination, or to offer perfect delivery. Thus, these judges, many of whom have never debated,

end up largely guessing, comparing the debater to a mythical "5" in the category, the likes of which the judge has never seen. What all judges *can* do, however, is make an overall judgment of the debater's effectiveness, and that is what the ten-point system allows them to do. Of course, there are plenty of qualified and experienced coaches currently using the "box" system. All the same, the ten-point system offers them a fairer option.

How then, would the ten-point system work? Here is how I envision it: The series of boxes now used by many to tabulate scores would be eliminated. In their place, a line would be provided for the total points of each speaker. Under this "name area" of the ballot would appear a statement like this:

Please evaluate the overall effectiveness of each debater for this level on a scale of 1-10. In calculating scores, consider various aspects of their performance, including their use of evidence, their analysis and refutation, their organization and their oral delivery.

Please base your score on the following criteria:

- 10 -- Superior;
- 9 -- Excellent;
- 7-8 -- Very Good;
- 5-6 -- Average;
- 3-4 --Below Average;
- 1-2--Much Improvement Needed.

At the discretion of the tournament director, half points may be allowed, as they basically are now.

There are likely to be plenty of objections to this system, so I'll conclude by addressing a few.

Coaches, many of whom are already annoyed by increasingly sparse ballots, have argued to me that they need those categories to isolate specific areas of improvement for their debaters. I disagree. First, keep in mind that those boxes do not exist to provide the coaches with information, and are not being treated as such by judges. They exist to provide the judge with one way to tabulate speaker points. Those categories should be re-

flected within the ballot's written comments. If the category (say, organization) is not mentioned in the written comments, the coach may assume that her debaters are sufficiently organized. If any category is noticeably stellar or lacking, the judge will surely say so on the ballot. The above, included statement should remind judges to provide a comprehensive ballot evaluating many of the skills crucial to successful debate.

The second class of objections deals with logistical matters, two complaints specifically: that the ten-point system will result in increased ties, and, on the other extreme, that judges will go overboard, offering "3/4" points.

Ties should not increase. Remember that the ten-point system

basically reflects the current point spread of judging. Again, I don't believe that we need a point scale greater than ten to evaluate somebody's skill. On the varsity level, the ten-point system may even decrease ties, as it expands the scale from the now *de facto* 7 points (24-30) to 10 points (1-10). Besides, if a true tie does result, then both debaters deserve the recognition.

To those fearful of various obscure fractions appearing on ballots, understand that the further deconstruction of the point system can be simply prevented. Ban it. Say that half points are allowed (as they are in current varsity practice) but that anything else will be rounded off by the tab room. Simple enough. There may be a few who insist on bizarre scoring, but no more than there are now.

Change is difficult, especially when state organizations have reams of ballots in reserve, waiting to be consumed. I confess that I do not know if the ten-point system will ever gain acceptance. Nationally, it will take a catalyst, at least one major national tournament, to take a risk and try the system out for a year. Incremental acceptance is also possible on the state level. State debate coaches associations should seriously consider designating a few tournaments, perhaps only on the varsity level, as ten-point tournaments, and give the system a fair shot.

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