THE DEBATE BALLOT AS ARBITER AND TEACHER

A NEW PROPOSAL

by Virginia Sutherland

Discussion in coach's lounges, journals and classrooms reflects major discontent with debate judging. High school student debaters and some college student debaters tend to fault high school coaches and community judges for lack of expertise and knowledge of underlying theory. High school coaches and community judges are appalled at the unintelligible gibberish that passes for speech and the poor delivery that passes for communication. Judges who are less frequently indicted by the complaints tend to blame other judges for failing to properly use the power of the ballot to induce the desired behavior (the behaviorists stimulus-response-reward sequencing). Some in positions of power and out of frustration, attempt to make rules to control what is essentially a democratic process; a process which could only suffer from an imposition of rigid formulations that would, if obeyed, seriously hamper the essential, vital and developmental nature of the process we are endeavoring to reach and practice.

Listening and reading coupled with a rudimentary knowledge of psychology led this writer to believe that the problem could be significantly ameliorated by one rather simple measure: redesign the debate ballot to reflect the behaviors we value most and the relative degree of valuation of each. Below is my proposal. It increases the number of and weights the criteria used to reflect the relative worth of each part of the argumentation/communication process. Enlarging the number of criteria together with weighting and explaining each, should increase the communication between the judge and the debater. Experimentation with the ballot together with feedback as to its usefulness in eagerly sought and deeply appreciated. This writer believes it is crucial that all debaters have copies of the ballot and the explanation of the criteria prior to its use in a given tournament and that all ballots should be completely filled out and returned to each debater in order to maximize feedback and communication. It is further recommended that the information gleaned be used to construct a judges' file, so that debaters may learn to appropriately adapt to their audiences.

(Virginia P. Sutherland, a member of the NFL Hall of Fame, was for many years the outstanding debate coach at Myers Park H.S. (N.C.) and North Carolina District Chair)

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