

# HE SAID, SHE SAID

## GENDER ISSUES IN LINCOLN DOUGLAS DEBATE

by  
**James Scott**

It's difficult to know where to begin a discussion of sexism in debate from a male perspective. After all, aren't girls the ones who are supposed to feel the weight of discrimination on their fragile little shoulders? And aren't my fellow guys – chauvinist lackeys all of us, down to the last sorry couch potato – the sole progenitors and beneficiaries of such prejudice and bigotry?

While I certainly won't be an apologist for male pigdom, I do want to relate my own debate experiences with an eye towards convincing you that such emotionally charged generalizations are little better than nonsense.

When I debated girls at local tournaments, where the judging pool was exceedingly random at its brightest moments, I always felt torn. How could I toe the line between condescension and callousness? This was less of an issue at national tournaments, perhaps because it never really entered my mind that experienced, flowing judges would care, but it still happened occasionally. A few times I even felt resentful when I perceived a female opponent intentionally playing the role of the helpless maiden specifically to make me appear overbearing. I couldn't get over the feeling that this was somehow "playing dirty," and that it was just as sexist and insulting to women as a male letting out a wolf whistle at a female opponent standing up to the give a 1AR.

Mercifully, conduct of this sort is

the exception rather than the norm. While blatant sexism regrettably exists, the more frequent feeling among debaters is simply one of general angst reflecting a larger social question. How does the 21<sup>st</sup> century expect a man and a woman, thankfully now the full legal and social equal of each other, to act towards one another? Should we bid chivalry good riddance as simply the more innocuous face of chauvinism?

I would tend to answer yes to that question. But let's not commit the mistake many progressive-minded, well-meaning people make by assuming that one side is clearly right and the other unabashedly evil – even if nothing else is clear, we can be sure that the jury is still out on that one. American culture in general, and debate culture in particular, seem to require of male debaters two contradictory attitudes in their conduct towards female debaters. One dictum commands us to be the liberated men we aspire to be, treating our female opponents no differently than we would treat another male. On the other hand, the same cutthroat aggressiveness that usually characterizes a much stronger male debater demolishing the arguments of another male feels curiously violent when the "victim" is instead female. What appears to be "manly sparring" in one instance looks like abuse in the other. Inexperienced "lay" judges in particular seem more likely to punish guys, whether in terms of speaker points or even the ballot, when they

perceive them as beating up on a "defenseless little girl." I don't claim to have an answer this problem, but it's certainly one that the debate community at large needs to grapple with.

Let me state unequivocally my belief that there should be no gender roles in a debate round. Sexism and sexual harassment are reprehensible, but I merely want to point out that the issue cuts both ways. We can't view a male debater who seems a bit patronizing as merely a pig and a bigot, dismissing out of hand the strong cultural and situational factors that might command such behavior. After all, that's a hard line to walk for a 16 year old, especially when adults don't even have the proper feel for where it should be.

*(James Scott graduated from Katy High School near Houston, Texas, where he debated for four years. As a junior, James earned second at the Texas TFA State Tournament in LD. During his senior year, he finished runner-up at the 2000 Tournament of Champions, was the Texas state champion, cleared at every national tournament he attended, and attended three round robins. James now attends the University of Texas at Austin as a double major in the liberal arts and math departments.)*

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**Allison Pickett**

In the fall of 1994, my debate career nearly ended as quickly as it had begun. Lord knows I was already nervous enough as I stood outside the classroom, waiting for my very first debate round to begin. Never mind the fact that I had three (!) more to do before I could go home and cry, the only thing I could imagine doing after what promised to be one of the most mortifying days of my life. (Yes, ladies and gentlemen, I think I may have had a self-confidence problem.) I was on the brink of emotional meltdown—and then, it happened...

Whew! Hey baby, what's your name? I need your number.

And so it went. For twenty minutes outside the room and then *throughout* the entire round. *No, you can't be a freshman, you've gotta be a junior—or even my judge... where did you get those eyes? Aw, honey, don't be scared, I'm just going to ask you a few easy questions. Could I really cross-examine someone with such beautiful eyes as yours? Did I mention the starring, perhaps better termed leering? I'm not kidding; I was ready to quit debate forever after round one.*

Luckily, I didn't, and I learned a few things along the way:

Gender in debate rounds was

usually subtle, but often important. A seemingly clear concept became anything but in assessing what to wear, how to talk, what to say, whom to imitate... For some people, the choice of a skirt versus pants in the morning was decided on a whim; for me, and for many of my fellow female debaters, what to wear was inevitably a decision about my image as a young woman as well. Makeup or not and how much became more of an issue than I had ever thought it could be. And there was always that question in the back of my head: Am I a debater who happens to be a girl, or am I a girl who happens to be a debater? In no way did I feel paranoia regarding how to project myself in a debate round, but the question of "how much me" would be allowed into the overall image was always there. I often wondered whether male debaters struggled with similar issues.

Surprisingly, I found that I believed they did. Granted, the choice was not skirt or pants, but it seemed to be a decision regarding whether to consider their female opponents females first or debaters first, and it often seemed accompanied by an assessment of the judge's tolerance of how they might want to approach defeating the young woman they were arguing against.

After several years of participation in and a few more in observation of high school debate (or, at least LD), here is what I believe I have learned:

1. The issue, sexism, exists, but

usually in less overt ways than were demonstrated in my first round ever. My senior year in debate, I was probably more assertive than most of the other female competitors that I came into contact with; I am still not sure whether my level of assertiveness worked for or against me. To tell you the truth, it probably depended on the judge. Some judges said that they were tired of girls being (gasp!) "bitchy," so to speak, and that I needed to "tone it down". Others said assertive is good and worth the risk of being labeled as something else. Regardless, though, of the way an individual judge felt about how assertive a female could be, the question was *always* there, and a question I tried to answer every weekend, every round.

2. However, as James and I both believe, it cuts both ways. I was and still am friends with a number of male debaters who ran into trouble dealing with female assertiveness, or a lack thereof. It's not just a problem for women. Many of my male peers simply could not be as assertive against a female as they would against another male because they would be seen as "beating up on poor little Betty" or something like that. So, as unfortunate as the stereotypes are, \*sometimes\* female debaters benefit from the, even if only in a very indirect and ultimately insulting (the assumption that a female could not handle the pressure) way. I personally enjoyed the rounds when guys seemed to challenge me for control of the round beyond argumentation—I thought that that facilitated a lot

of learning that could not be obtained directly from debating the actual “issues” at hand...but lots of times (no, I don’t have an exact number, but I did notice this), I felt as if I was given at least the benefit of the doubt in close rounds sometimes because the guy was perceived as “beating up on Betty,” or in this case, poor little 5’4”ish redhead named Allison. Little did the judge know that I was probably accused of threatening Betty more often than my male opponent for that round ever would be. Sometimes I really wondered if I had lost the issues but won the mental game, and that’s why I won.

3. It may also be most vicious in girls’ assessment of other girls, rather than in males’ treatment of them. (Flagrant exceptions exist, of course, but the point remains valid.) Young women’s in-round actions often led to accusations outside the round, *usually leveled by other females*. There seemed to be a trend, for some (\*some\*) debaters to assume that some females won rounds based on particular bodily attributes and/or how they accentuated them. This may have been true in some (\*some\*) cases, but I believe that this claim was overused, and was often used to speak disparagingly of some talented female debaters who dressed a little more liberally than others. Unfortunately, sometimes we (I am intentionally including myself here) forgot they were talented, and only focused on their “presentation skills.” (These comments were less often directed at male debaters, but perhaps some of that may have been due to the fact that men can’t exactly accentuate their attributes as obviously as women can.) However, the interesting thing, is that female debaters in my experience were much more willing to accuse another female of this “trick” than male debaters were. (Maybe this is because the guys only really said it around each other, who

knows.) Whether or not individuals dressed in certain ways to gain inappropriate favor—and in most cases, I would like to believe that is not why they dressed as they did—they were *almost always* criticized from within the gender for not knowing how to be a proper female debater. In other words, we were part of what was wrong.

4. Many of the “top” (however you would measure that anyway) female debaters were fortunate enough to have strong female coaching, which I believe had a substantial subconscious effect on the attitudes of many young women toward debate. I am *not* saying that female debaters do not benefit from male coaches—what I *am* saying is that it may make an intangible difference to have a direct influence like that that keeps a female interested in and confident in debate as an activity despite the influence of sexism on the activity. This might also be accomplished by having several varsity females for a novice female to “look up to” --I don’t know. Having had Marilee Dukes as my coach, mentor, and role model made all the difference in the world in a lot of spheres; this was one of them.

And this is where we return to the beginning, and why I did not quit after that very first round I affectionately called hell. Fortunately, the (male) judge pulled me aside after the round and told me debate was NOT supposed to be like that, several varsity girls told me that that was not typical, and Dukes...she gave me several good ideas about how to handle such situations in the future...and then she took me aside and literally kept me from quitting. (Whether or not she remembers the exchange I do not know, but I will always be thankful for her intervention.) *Participants in the activity cared, and showed me that sex-*

*ism was not the norm, and that it could be overcome.*

Sexism, both overt and more subtle, is definitely there. It affects both male and female debaters, but I fear that the sexism may create lifelong impressions on some of the females that it may not on most males. Unfortunately, often the young women unknowingly continue the cycle against themselves through paying more attention to the presentation of personality than the talent of some of the more liberal and aggressive female debaters. Luckily, though, even though the debate has its problems with sexism, my experience with the issue shows that the debate community is aware of the problems, and cares about addressing them. My first year that is what made the difference: a judge, several older female debaters, and a wonderful coach addressing sexism, one debater at a time. In September 1994, that debater was me, and for that I am eternally grateful.

*(Allison Pickett graduated from Vestavia Hills High School, AL. As a high school debater she reached the late elimination rounds of virtually every national tournament and participated in every major round robin. She ended her debate career by capturing the 1998 NFL National Championship in Lincoln Douglas Debate. She has also been a staff member of both the University of Iowa and Samford University's LD Institutes. She currently attends the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.*

