

# THE CASE FOR TRAINING L/D DEBATE JUDGES

by Rusty McCrady

We all know the conventional wisdom: Lincoln-Douglas Debate is for the person on the street. It's for plain folk. Any reasonable listener should be able to comprehend the opposing arguments and decide which side won. Therefore, judges in this event need no special qualifications.

While all of the above may in part be true, many an L-D coach has at one time or other dared to mutter the classic complaint: Can't we get better judging at our tournaments? There's no consistency. My debaters are upset. Maybe they are right.

If you read the web pages published by some of the students who compete in this event, you'll see that it isn't just you and some of your competitors who are complaining. The problem of inconsistent, even arbitrary Lincoln-Douglas debate judging seems to be one that exists nationwide.

Two years ago, with the support of our county school system English supervisor (and resultant financial support), we in Montgomery County, Maryland attempted to do something to address this problem by offering our new and veteran judges a three hour Lincoln-Douglas Judge Training session. What follows is a description of the session, and a summary of the results we've seen since we started running these one-shot training courses, both from the coaches in our league and from the judges themselves.

I had discussed the idea of judge training with Joe Gannon, our league's tournament director in 1995, and we wrote up a proposal and submitted it to our county English supervisor. (Her support was crucial; she attended the first session, and has subsequently been enthusiastic about repeating the training as many times as necessary, until virtually all league judges have been trained.) At our first coaches' meeting of the year in September, 1995, I brought up the idea of doing judge training. The idea was passed unanimously, and all coaches agreed to contact any judges they planned to use that year, both experienced and brand new, to invite them to the training.

We ran a three hour session in late September that year, and another in early December to pick up the judges who were unable to attend the first one. Nineteen judges (and novice coaches) attended the first one, and ten the second one. We had similar attendance at the sessions run in the fall of 1996.

At the start we tried to set a collegial tone by an informal introduction of the participants and instructors (Gannon and myself). Then after giving a brief overview of the session, we focused on four main areas: a line by line explanation of our league's ballot; an explanation of value standards and how a debater might apply them to sample topics; a presentation of an actual Lincoln-Douglas debate which the course participants were asked to judge and then discuss their decisions; and finally, a run-down on the do's and don'ts of judging etiquette. During all four segments, Gannon and I fielded a multitude of questions, comments, and concerns--without doubt the most valuable aspect of the session.

Our league's ballot, which will be the subject of a future article, is more detailed than most. It is broken down into the following sections: Affirmative/Negative Constructive Cases; Cross Examination; Affirmative/Negative Rebuttals; and Overall Evaluation. Each section contains between three and nine criteria-related questions to aid the judge in focusing on the important tasks each debater should try to accomplish in each phase of the debate. To be more specific, here is a sampling of some of the questions:

## **Constructive:**

Core value (value standard) presented and clearly tied to the resolution and argument?

Criteria presented for judging value(s)?

## **Cross examination:**

Questions effectively phrased?

Effective response to questions asked?

## **Rebuttals:**

Shows flaws in other side's arguments?

Further develops arguments in original case, not merely repeat-

ing them?

## **Overall Evaluation:**

Was presentation persuasive?

Effective eye contact and other speaking techniques?

By going over the entire ballot question by question and reminding the participants of the timing of each part of the debate and the use of prep time, we elicited a lot of discussion about the effective use of the ballot. At last, all of our judges were literally on the same page!

In the next segment of the training session, we presented two sample L-D topics for analysis, in order to give the participants some experience with what is involved in developing a case in this type of debate. Past NFL topics came in handy here--we knew they were safe to use, and yet we knew they would work well because they were some of our old favorites. Two that we used effectively were "*Limiting constitutional freedoms is a just response to terrorism in the U.S.*" and "*The possession of nuclear weapons is immoral.*" With the first, we instructors came up with appropriate value standards and possible contentions for each side. Then for the second we divided the class up into groups of three and had them do the same thing. To get things started, I had listed twenty possible core values on the board prior to the start of class. Through their involvement in this process we hoped that our judge trainees would gain a deeper understanding of the importance of core values and their linkage to both the resolution and case contentions.

After a refreshment break, we passed out flow paper designed for use in notetaking during an L-D debate, and explained its uses. Then we showed an NFL National Championship Round videotape for the trainees to judge. After we introduced it briefly and reminded them what to watch and listen for, we had them view the tape without interruption--all but the last section where the winner is announced. We asked them to signify by show of hands who they thought had won, and then we asked them to give reasons justifying their decision. (McCrady to Page 23)