

# TOP TEN DEBATE COACHES OF THE CENTURY

by  
James Copeland

At the 1959 National Tournament Founder Bruno E. Jacob proclaimed H. B. Mitchell the "Foremost Debate Coach" in America. And justly so.

Mr. Mitchell's debate teams had reached the final round of the National Tournament an unprecedented six times, including three national championships. Seminole High School (OK) was first in 1956, 1958 and 1959; second in 1938, 1951 and 1955. Five times in the same decade was an H. B. Mitchell Seminole team in the final round. Out of 12 teams (state or district winners) who qualified for nationals from Seminole - six made the stage!

H. B. was an interstate debate champion in high school (nationals, nor NFL had yet been invented) and was voted "Outstanding Debater" in college.

Mr. Mitchell summarized his own debate career in his book *Here's the Question*: It is only the coach who has the desire and the willingness to "pay the price" who will succeed. Successful debaters....are the product of an expert and interested craftsman.

The National Tournament began in 1931. Sixty-one national debate final rounds have been held since then. (No debate championship was conducted during the WWII years, 1942-1945 or from 1946-1950 when the National Principals Association banned debate for being "too competitive"). If Mr. Mitchell is the foremost debate coach of the earlier nationals (1931-1969) Ted Belch is the foremost coach of the later ones (1970-1999). Ted's teams won the nationals in de-

bate in 1981, 1997 and 1999 and finished second in 1996. Belch's debate teams have also won TOC and NCFL titles as well as major invitationals like the MBA Southern Bell Forum, Emory's Barkley Forum and St. Mark's. Belch, still coaching at GBN, is pursuing H. B. Mitchell's record.

If Mitchell and Belch are the top NFL debate coaches of all time the runners-up must be Hall of Fame coaches C.E. "Pop" Grady and Esther Kalmbach. In third place "Pop" coached three teams to finals -- all winners -- in 1937, 1939 and 1941. Fourth place Kalmbach, NFL's top woman debate coach, coached winners in 1971 and 1972 with a second in 1966.

In fifth place would be Hall of Fame Coach Steven Davis who directed teams to three final rounds from three different schools: Glenbrook-North (IL) won in 1974, Alexander-Ramsay (MN) was runner-up in 1978 and San Antonio-Churchill (TX) second in 1988. Davis is still coaching at Vance High School in Charlotte, (NC). Also in fifth place would be R. S. Cartwright of Elgin HS (IL) who coached the 1938 winner with runners-up in 1934 and 1937. NDCA founder David Baker whose St. Mark's team won in 1990 and placed second in 1987 and 1992 is also tied for fifth. Baker still coaches at The St. Mark's School of Texas.

Interestingly, Mitchell coached five finalists in nine years and four in five years. Belch coached three finalists in four years, Grady three finalists in five years and Baker three finalists in six years.

Only Kalmbach and Mitchell coached back to back winners; Mitchell in 1958 and

1959 and Kalmbach in 1971 and 1972; although several coaches had teams in the finals two years in a row.

In eighth place are coaches whose team won twice: P. Eric Brannen Jr. of Westminster (GA) in 1998 and 1991 and the duo of Alex Pritchard and Aaron Timmons Jr. from Greenhill (TX) in 1996 and 1998.

Honorable mention listing must go to David Johnson of Houston-Bellaire (TX) first in 1979 and second in 1984 and to Frank Sferra of Mullen High School (CO) with two seconds: 1968 and 1971. Both Johnson and Sferra are Hall of Fame members and still actively coaching. Johnson has qualified the most debate teams to nationals: 36.

And don't forget Bristow (OK) coach Joe C. Jackson whose team won in 1939 and lost in 1940.

Special recognition must be accorded to coaches who have placed in *both* debate and L/D at Nationals. Aaron Timmons Jr. with two champions in policy also has a winner and runner-up in L/D. Marilee Dukes of Vestavia Hills (AL) scored a policy win in 1992 and L/D wins in 1994 and 1998. Hall of Fame coach Richard Sodikow had a debate finalist in 1983 and an L/D winner in 1984.

No coach has closed out debate at NFL Nationals but one coach, James Copeland of Milwaukee-Marquette (WI), come close with two teams in semis in 1974.

There are many ways to select the greatest coaches of the century just passed: teaching ability, victories on the national circuit, state championships, successful students in later life, etc. But if the standard is success in debate at Nationals, the above list chronicles the all time greats.