



5. Tournaments

Debate teams typically participate in a variety of events such as public debates, civics education, and community activism. Attending tournaments is the driving force of what it means to be on a debate team. Tournaments bring together all of the students in an urban debate league for friendly competition, community building, and fun. The excitement and intensity of competing at tournaments and the thrill of victory is what motivates most debaters to do the hard work necessary to prepare -- read and re-read their evidence, research new arguments, and practice, practice, practice!

The coach's preparation for tournaments minimizes the stress of participating at the tournament, thereby increasing everyone's enjoyment and education. It will also familiarize coaches with the things that they need to do to keep track of their students at the tournament and to help the tournament administrators keep everything running smoothly.

Tournaments vary greatly with regard both to their length and to the number of teams competing. Some begin and end in a single day, while others span two, three, or even four days. The NFL National Championship tournament lasts an entire week.

Regardless of their size and length, however, most tournaments share common features.

Preliminary Rounds

Debaters compete in teams of two. All teams compete in a set number of preliminary rounds, of which there could be anywhere from three to eight. Teams debate an equal number of rounds on the affirmative side and the negative side. Occasionally a tournament will have an odd number of preliminary rounds, in which case a coin is flipped to randomly assign the side for the last debate. If there are an odd number of teams entered at the tournament, one team each round will get a "Bye". During preliminary rounds, a team cannot be paired against another team from their own school or against a team they have debated in a prior preliminary round.

A judge will be assigned to each preliminary round. She will determine which team wins the round, and she will also give each individual debater speaker points on a scale of 0-30 and rank the debaters from best to worst. Most points are assigned in the range of 25-30. At the end of



the debate the judge records this information on a ballot and returns it to the Tabulation Room (Tab Room), where the tournament administrators keep track of it. Usually, the judge will also talk to the debaters after the round and offer them suggestions for improvement. Depending on the rules of the tournament and her personal preferences, she may or may not disclose her decision.

Pairings in the early preliminary rounds are usually made randomly. These debates are referred to as “preset” rounds. As the tournament progresses the Tab Room begins to match up teams with similar win-loss records. This is referred to as “power matching.” Power matched rounds may either be “high-high” where teams with similar speaker points are paired together, or they may be “high-low” where teams with the highest speaker points (but still with a common win loss record) are paired against those with the lowest.

Elimination Rounds

After the tournament’s preliminary rounds are over, the teams are ranked (“seeded”) in order based on their win loss record. Win-loss ties are broken by consideration of speaker points and possibly speaker ranks. Tournaments vary in the way they break ties and seed teams. After the teams are ranked, a set number of teams advance to the elimination rounds. This is referred to as “clearing” to elimination rounds. Elimination rounds are generally seeded, much like the NCAA basketball tournament. The elimination round team with the best record is paired against the elimination round team with the worst record. These elimination rounds begin a single-elimination part of the tournament.

In elimination rounds, some constraints are dropped. Teams may debate teams they previously faced during preliminary rounds, in which case they will switch sides from the first time they debated at the tournament. Teams can also be paired against other teams from their school. In this circumstance the common practice is that they do not actually debate against each other. Instead, the coach chooses which team advances to the next round. Elimination rounds are usually adjudicated by three-judge panels.

Tournaments conclude with an awards ceremony that recognizes the winning teams and also the individual debaters with the most speaker points.

Nuts and Bolts: A Sample Tournament

Shawn and Terrell from JFK High School attend a two-day tournament with other schools from their league. The tournament begins with two preliminary rounds on Friday afternoon where Shawn and Terrell are randomly paired against two teams from other schools. They cannot debate another team from JFK in preliminary rounds. In their first round, they are on the affirmative and they win. Since they were affirmative in the first round, they are negative in the second, and this time they lose. That night the tournament director recorded the win-loss records, speaker points, and ranks of each team and used this seeding to pair Round 3.

On Saturday, Shawn and Terrell have three more preliminary rounds starting with Round 3, which is power matched high-high. Shawn and Terrell debate the team in the 1-1 bracket with combined speaker points closest to their own. They are randomly assigned to be negative, and they win the round. So they now have a record of 2-1.

Round 4 is power matched high-low, and for the sake of saving time the tournament has decided that results from Round 3 will not be taken into consideration. Round 4 is paired on the results from just the first two rounds. This is called “lag pairing”. Shawn and Terrell debate another team that, after the first two preliminary rounds, had the same record as they did, which was 1-1, but this time the points opposite to Terrell. Since they Round 3, they are 4. Once again, they



Round 5 is power but again for the round is lag paired. were 2-1 after their they will debate was also 2-1 then. Terrell have the

points of any team in the 2-1 bracket they debate the team with the lowest speaker points and were 2-1. As this is the last preliminary round, the teams flip a coin for sides. Shawn and Terrell win the flip, and choose to be affirmative. Unfortunately, they lose the debate.

Now, Shawn and Terrell are 3-2 and they have very high speaker points. There are 22 teams in the tournament, and 8 will advance to the Quarterfinal elimination rounds. There are two teams with a 5-0 record, both of whom advance, as do all 4 of the teams with a 4-1 record from the preliminary rounds. That makes six teams for the 8 elimination round slots. There are 7 teams with 3-2 records and only two of them will advance to the elimination rounds. Those two are chosen based on their speaker points, and Shawn and Terrell have the most points.

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Nuts and Bolts: A Sample Tournament (cont.)

Their win-loss record makes them the 7th seeded team, which means they debate the 2nd seeded team in their Quarterfinal round. It turns out this is the same team they lost to in their second preliminary round. Since they were negative in that round, they have to be affirmative this round. Shawn and Terrell pull off an upset against the higher seeded team and therefore advance to the Semifinals. Their opponents are eliminated.

In the Semifinals, they face the 3rd seeded team, who won their Quarterfinal round against the 6th seeded team. This turns out to be another team from JFK, so no debate takes place. Instead, the coach decides that since the other JFK team was seeded 3rd while Shawn and Terrell were seeded 7th, the other team will be the ones to advance. This means that the tournament is over for Shawn and Terrell.

At the awards ceremony they receive a trophy for being a Semifinalist team. Even though they didn't win the tournament, their speaker points were good enough to earn them 3rd and 5th place Speaker Awards – a great showing.



Logistics for Attending a Local Tournament

In addition to everything that must be done to help students prepare their arguments for competition, there are a number of logistical tasks that the coach must complete if the team's tournament experience is to go smoothly:

Arranging for Judging

Most tournaments require a school to provide one judge for every two teams from that school who will be competing. If a school has an odd number of teams, they usually must provide enough additional rounds of judging to cover half of the preliminary rounds at the tournament. In other words, a school registering five teams at a five round tournament would need to provide thirteen rounds of judging: ten to cover their first four teams, and three more to cover their fifth team. If the coach brought two other judges, she might judge three rounds while each of them judged five for a total of thirteen rounds.

Finding Judges

Generally, schools should attempt to provide judges who have some level of knowledge of debate and the topic. Often, though, it is impossible to find enough judges who meet that qualification. Meeting judging obligations can be difficult, especially for large squads. When short on judges, coaches should consider the following options:

Hiring from Tournaments. Some tournaments have a limited pool of judges available for hire by attending schools. However, hired judges get taken up quickly, so coaches should notify the tournament directors immediately - even before they submit their registration - if they desire to hire judges from the tournament. Judges hired through the tournament also tend to be more expensive than those that a coach is able to procure on her own.

Parents of Your Debaters. Parents of team members are not likely to know much about policy debate, and even less about the topic, but they do tend to be ethical and reliable, making them valuable in a pinch. Coaches may be able to convince parents to volunteer their time as a judge by explaining that judging is an essential aspect of the activity their children love so much.

Alumni from Your Team. Former members of the team make excellent judges. Coaches will generally need to compensate them for their time, but they already know something about debate and are often willing to serve double duty as assistant coaches while at the tournament.

Teachers from Your School. A coach may be able to entice a few of her colleagues to come see what a debate tournament is all about and to help out with judging while they're at it. This can also be a good way to get teachers more aware of and involved in the debate team at their school, so that eventually they can help out as assistant coaches or in some other capacity.



Despite great efforts, sometimes the only way for a school to cover their judging commitment is for the coach to judge. Some coaches find judging to be a chore. While judging may not always be the most pleasant use of time, it is a necessary one, however, to help stay up-to-date on the current topic and the latest trends in argumentation. While a coach should try to leave herself some rounds off to watch her debaters, she should also try to judge a few rounds at every tournament in order to develop and maintain her debate skills.

Registering Entries

The coach must provide the tournament directors with all necessary entry information before the registration deadline. Generally, this will include the coach's name and contact information, the name of the school, the full names of both students on each team, and the names of the team's judges.

Many tournaments offer multiple divisions in which students may compete, such as Novice, Junior Varsity, Open, and/or Varsity. The eligibility requirements for these divisions vary by tournament, so coaches should check with the tournament administration about this. For tournaments with multiple divisions coaches must indicate the divisions in which they are registering each team and judge.

Notification of Parents and School

The main office and the parents or guardians of all students who will be competing need to know details about the tournament: where it is, what days it will take place, and how long students will be there. If students have to miss classes, they will also need to get permission from their teachers. The coach should collect and file away all permission slips from parents or guardians and from teachers.

Transportation to the Tournament

If the size of the team warrants, chartering a bus is the easiest way to transport students. Two coaches from neighboring schools might want to cut costs by sharing a bus if their teams are attending the same tournament. Be familiar with the school's policy on transportation before taking students on public transportation or private vehicles.

Coaches are advised to have their teams travel as a group. This may entail having everyone meet at the school or another central location before leaving, but it avoids the confusion and unreliability of requiring students to arrange their own transportation. Coaches who do allow students to travel separately should be sure they are able to communicate by cell phone in case of lateness, emergency, etc.



Feeding the Debaters

Not all tournaments provide all meals for competitors, so coaches may need to make arrangements to get food for the debaters and judges from their school. Tournaments will schedule a lunch break during the day, and most tournaments will at provide a list of nearby restaurants that offer takeout, delivery, etc. You may want to assign an Assistant coach or parent to go bring lunch back for the debaters.

Expectations for Debater Behavior at Tournaments

Expectations should be established before the first tournament, but they are valuable enough to review frequently. Discuss appropriate tournament conduct with their debaters. This includes arriving on time for rounds; treating teammates, partners, opponents and judges with respect; dressing appropriately; taking notes and politely asking questions during judge critiques; and checking in with the coach at pre-arranged times and places during the day, lunch, for instance. Reinforce other expectations as well, for example that debaters will try their best in every round no matter how overwhelmed or helpless they feel.

Confirmation of Entry

Check-in with the debaters the day before the tournament to remind them about their commitment, the time and logistics of departure, and to confirm that they are still able to attend. This also gives the students an opportunity to ask any last-minute questions they may have. If a student and/or team drops out of the tournament, notify the tournament immediately so they can change the pairings and adjust other planning.

Make Changes to Registration

Upon arriving at the tournament, confirm that all of the debaters are present. If anyone is missing, advise the Tab Room immediately so that they can alter the registration and pairings accordingly. Depending on the tournament, additions of new debaters and reconfigurations of teams may or may not be allowed. If they are, the coach should advise the Tab Room of these changes immediately as well.



Nuts and Bolts: Choosing Among Teams on the Squad

Occasionally, coaches are forced to make very difficult decisions that will award a privilege or opportunity to one of their teams at the expense of another one. For instance, tournament policy, budget limitations, or a lack of judges may limit the number of teams that each school can register. Or, a coach might be required to choose which debaters will advance when two of the school's teams hit each other in an elimination round. Consider the following criteria when making these agonizing decisions:

Attendance and Effort. Students who regularly attend practices, show up for optional seminars, and otherwise invest a lot of time and energy into debate ought to be rewarded above those who have made less of a commitment. Such a policy may disadvantage debaters with competing work or family obligations, commitments that occasionally cause them to miss team events. These students may nonetheless be putting their best effort into the activity.

Seniority. Some coaches feel that students who have been on the team the longest have earned the first chance at competitive opportunities. Seniors in particular will not have a chance to go to the same tournament next year. The criterion of seniority has the advantage of contributing to a team culture that values perseverance and being 'in it for the long haul'. On the other hand, if younger students consistently miss out on opportunities they may grow dissatisfied with the activity or be less competitive when it is finally their turn.

Competitiveness. Some coaches may choose to maximize the school's chances of bringing home awards by entering or advancing the team with the best record to or the one that she simply feels has the best shot at winning that round or tournament. Coaches should be careful of encouraging an ultra-competitive win-at-all-costs mentality on their teams and of denying less experienced debaters opportunities to improve so that the team will remain strong.

Equal Opportunity. On some squads, every debater gets the chance to compete in the same number of tournaments. This has the advantage of minimizing team rivalries and emphasizing the fun and educational value of debate over the competitive element. But it may be the case that students who regularly skip practice do not deserve the same opportunities as those who exhibit uncommon dedication and reliability.

In any event, coaches should always keep an eye out for ways in which whatever criteria they use may inadvertently discriminate based on gender, culture, income or some other factor. For example, religious obligations may occasionally cause students to miss practice or other events, and this should of course not be held against them.

Whichever criteria the coach ultimately chooses to employ, she should make the policy clear to her debaters ahead of time and apply it consistently otherwise the coach will be accused of favoritism. If the rule is established ahead of time and well known to everyone, then the decision will be accepted as legitimate and there will be no hard feelings.

Networking

Tournaments are in many ways a coach's best opportunity to meet and build relationships with other members of her local debate community. Most UDL's have occasional coaches meetings, but tournaments are often the best chance a coach has to meet debaters and judges from schools other than her own, and there are several reasons why she will want to make these connections.

Establishing good relationships with judges who appear at tournaments regularly is valuable for both competitive and educational reasons. A coach who knows the local judging pool can help her students adapt their arguments and strategies to their judge each round. Perhaps more importantly, a coach who is friendly with the judge will have an easier time discussing with her after the round about how the debaters performed and how they can improve.

Meeting other coaches and debaters is helpful, too. Teams that are strapped for resources may be able to share evidence, transportation, or scouting information about other teams and judges. Coaches with a good working relationship might want to bring their teams together for some informal scrimmaging. Finally, coaches can share ideas and more experienced coaches can serve as mentors for new arrivals.





Observing Rounds

Sometimes, a school is so short on judges that the coach must judge every round to meet the team's obligations. Other times, other schools will be short on judges and the tournament directors may ask the coach to help out by judging so that other schools will not have to drop teams. Be willing to cooperate in these circumstances because it keeps the tournament running smoothly, and would most likely expect reciprocal action from other coaches were the circumstances reversed.

When possible, however, try to arrange to have a few rounds off to watch the teams from their own schools compete. This will help in receiving the most accurate assessment of their students' abilities, as debaters may behave very differently in high-pressure situations than they do during practice rounds.

Proper Etiquette for Observing

Coaches should always check with the judge and the other team in the round to be sure that neither objects to having an observer. They shouldn't, but if they do that is their prerogative and the coach must respect it. The coach should also be sure that she is not making her own team too nervous or uncomfortable by observing them. The pedagogical value of observing their rounds is high enough that the coach can expect the debaters to get over a small amount of insecurity, but in circumstances where she is truly disrupting their ability to focus on the round, she should respect their wishes.

When observing rounds, coaches should not under any circumstances help or give the appearance of helping their debaters, as this could lead to their being asked to leave or their team being forced to forfeit. Make a conscious effort not to communicate anything to students via body language (i.e. not making faces at bad arguments or gesturing when the speaker has spent too long on one point), and do not speak to the students, even if it is during the other team's prep time and completely unrelated to the round.

Finally, the coach should model appropriate behavior for her students during the judge's oral critique. This means listening carefully and taking notes, asking politely for constructive criticism, and NEVER arguing. No matter how wrong it may seem the judge might be, she is not going to change her decision once she has made it. It is also impossible to learn from the judge and the shared experience of the debate if the goal is to convince the judge is wrong. It is exactly in those debates where it is most inconceivable why the judge voted the other way that one needs to understand why the judge perceived the round so differently.

Through observing the round, coaches will no doubt accumulate a number of comments they want to make to their students. Resist the temptation to share them immediately. This is when debaters are least receptive to criticism. Rather, instruct them to save their flows so that they can

discuss both her comments and the judge's at their next meeting or later in the tournament. For example, if the coach has some comments about the team's performance on the affirmative, hold off until the next time the team is affirmative and work the comments in as constructive suggestions for how the team should approach the next debate.

Keeping Things Running Smoothly at Tournaments

Always know where the students are during a tournament, both for piece of mind and also to be able to find them to inform them of a room or judge change or just to be sure that the team arrives to their rounds on time. Of course, keeping track of ten or more students spread out across a school is no simple task. The trick is to make sure students always know where they are supposed to be.

Most of the debaters' time at a tournament will be spent in their rounds. The coach can always figure out which room their teams are in by checking the tournament pairings. As soon as pairings come out, students should go to their assigned rooms to prepare. This way, they will never be late, and their coach will be able to find them if she needs to give them important last minute information or just wants to discuss their strategy for the upcoming round.



Upon arriving at a tournament, coaches should discuss with their students a place where everyone will meet between rounds, at the end of the day, etc. Generally, tournament hosts will provide a common room for students to assemble, and this is the best place for teams to plan to meet up. When a team has a bye, they should also go to this central meeting place. Typically they will not be allowed to watch other rounds while they are still entered in the tournament.

If some teams are in elimination rounds and others are not, the coach should take a few minutes to assign a task to each of her debaters who are finished competing. They should either watch one of their teammates' rounds in order to lend their support. This should be moral support only, of course - debaters should not help or give even the appearance of actual assistance to their teammates during a round.

Non-clearing debaters could be assigned to scout another round to gather intelligence about a school that their teammates might hit in their next elimination round or at a subsequent tournament. In addition to helping teammates who are still competing, watching rounds also improves the skills of the observing students. Require your scouts to flow debates and debrief them about these rounds later, asking questions about what they saw – ex. discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the teams they observed. Teams in elimination rounds are generally the best ones at the tournament, so debaters can learn a lot by studying them.



After the Tournament

Debaters who win awards will probably want to take them home to share with family and friends. Coaches should encourage this, as it both motivates the students and demonstrates the value of the debate team to their families. However, coaches may want to ask students to bring their trophies to the next meeting so that they can be displayed prominently in the school. They should be returned at the end of the year or when the debater graduates, but until then they can serve as important promotional tools for the team. A full trophy case is a great way to attract positive attention from teachers, students, and administrators at the school.

Collect the ballots that judges write from the previous tournament and read through them. Take notes of any comments you want to discuss with the debaters. While coaches can and should share these with students, who will be eager to see how they did and why in each round, it is important that the debaters return them so that they can be kept on file. The first team meeting after the tournament should be a debriefing session where the team discusses comments from judges, the coach's observations if she got the chance to watch any rounds, and new arguments that were heard.

This conversation is more valuable a few days after a tournament rather than immediately afterward because the increased distance will make students more receptive to criticisms about their performances. Immediately after competing, debaters are still in 'debate mode' and accustomed to fending off criticisms of their arguments, as this is what they have been doing all day. Team Meetings offer an appropriate forum for constructive criticism.



Logistics for Attending Out of Town Tournaments

Urban debate leagues provide a very valuable service by creating numerous opportunities for relatively nearby competition in their city. This makes it cheap and easy to attend tournaments and develop a broad-based program. There are other debate tournaments, however, that draw a regional or national audience. Examples of this are national circuit tournaments, UDL regional championships, or state and national championships. At these events the debaters will face their stiffest competition and be eligible to win significant accolades. Overnight travel is a greater challenge for coaches as well who will face stricter school regulations and greater responsibility.

Registration

Registration is often due considerably further in advance for large tournaments, and accuracy is more important. Whereas a UDL tournament will probably have the flexibility to allow coaches to drop teams on the day of the tournament without penalty, larger tournaments may keep a substantial portion of the team's registration as a drop fee. Many of the larger tournaments to which UDL teams travel require students to qualify, as for a national championship event, or be invited, as for the Barkley Forum at Emory University.

Finding Judging

Meeting judge obligations for large tournaments can be extra difficult for a variety of reasons. For one thing, national circuit tournaments will generally require judges with more experience with policy debate than is possessed by parents or community volunteers the coach can draw from for local tournaments. National championship tournaments often have panels of judges even in preliminary rounds, which means that the judging obligation may be one or one and a half judges per team rather than the usual one. Finally, the coach must find judges willing to travel and give up an extended weekend in order to help out. At the very least, this will probably require a much larger stipend.

School and Parent Notification

Parents, teachers, and the school administration will need to be informed well in advance of out of town events, and their permission may be harder to obtain. In addition to the usual information, they will also need to know how the team will be traveling and the phone number of the hotel where the team will be staying. Additionally, coaches or students should remain in touch with parents throughout the trip. Coaches should make sure they have emergency medical information, medicines, etc.

Transportation

Schools and school districts will likely have strict requirements concerning how students may travel out of town. The coach will need to be familiar with these guidelines. When traveling by



plane, it is wise to arrive at the airport at least two hours in advance of the scheduled departure time as it generally takes longer to get a large group checked in for a flight and through security. One other unique aspect of flying to a tournament is the luggage limitation. Typically airlines only allow two pieces of luggage per person. Bins of evidence must be securely packaged so that they will not come open on the plane as they are being loaded. When traveling to an unfamiliar locale, coaches should be sure to have directions and maps and to leave extra time for getting lost.

Housing

Hosts of some national circuit tournaments provide a limited amount of housing for out of town competitors looking to cut costs. Generally, this involves staying with the family of a member of that school's debate team. The coach will still need a place to sleep, and if her debaters are at another location she will need to know how to get in touch with them. If the entire team is staying in the hotel, students should never share a room with adult chaperones, including the coach, nor should male and female students share rooms. Consider blocking student rooms from ordering movies, room service, etc. Setting an alarm and a wake-up call is the best way to avoid oversleeping - nothing ruins a travel tournament like going through all that effort just to sleep through an important round.

Chaperones

Check with their principal to find out what the school's policy concerning chaperones is. Even if she is able to cover the team's judging obligations herself, a coach may still be required to bring along a teacher or parent to assist with chaperoning. Extra supervision is necessary to ensure that no unauthorized room sharing is going on. The coach's goal should be to return from the trip with as many people as she left with: no less, and no more!

Food

Advise students to bring spending money with them to cover incidental expenses such as food. Some tournaments provide food during the tournament and this should be factored in to the suggested amount for students to bring with them.

Behavior Expectations

Coaches must be crystal clear about appropriate behavior during the trip. These rules may be provided by the school, but will most likely include staying with a chaperone at all times, not leaving their rooms after a certain hour, avoiding alcohol or drug consumption etc.