

2. Running The Team

Getting a team off the ground is often the most difficult part of coaching. Once the infrastructure for the team is in place, the coach has to keep the ball rolling while helping students get the most out of the activity, both competitively and educationally. While this may sound relatively simple, there are many aspects of actually running the team that takes thought and effort.

Recruitment and Retention

The first year's group of students is always the hardest to assemble. Once they are established as members of the team, they will attract friends and younger siblings in future years. Others will join the team as they observe the fun and success experienced by its current members.

Coaches also face a battle against attrition, however. High school students are often busy, and debate requires a serious commitment of time and energy that not all of them can or want to make. Some will join the team not realizing how much work it will be, and decide it is too much for them. Jobs, responsibilities at home, schoolwork, personal relationships, or other extracurricular activities will cut into time students once had for debate. Still others will simply lose interest and quit.



While some of these factors are unavoidable, there are many things a coach can do to keep students interested in the debate team. The most important principle is to keep participation fun. While no one enjoys losing, it's an inevitable part of competition of any kind. If the most successful members of the team are the only ones enjoying themselves and getting individualized attention from the coach, they will be the only ones who will stick around. Winning has only a very loose connection to the educational benefits of



debate, and it is quite possible for a student never to win a round and still receive great benefits from participating.

Make sure the students understand the value they are receiving merely from participating. Winning isn't everything. Focus their attention on areas of improvement from one tournament to the next. Often, improvement can be measured in certain ways that do not involve the judge's bottom line on the ballot. Are the debaters more prepared? Do they use less preparation time in their rounds? Are they asking better questions in cross-examination? Are they completing solid research assignments? These are examples of areas where students can gain a sense of accomplishment regardless of their record at a tournament. In the end, however, students who are not as successful as they want to be will need encouragement from their coach and from the other members of the team if they are going to stick it out through a long losing streak.

Student retention is one of the many benefits of team unity. When a debate team works as a family, practices and tournaments are more fun for everyone and members remain committed. A debater whose partner is also a friend is less likely to skip a tournament because she will not want to let her friend down. Ideally, debaters will enjoy participating on the team so much they will help with coaching and judging even after they have graduated.



Nuts and Bolts: Building Team Unity

Team unity doesn't just happen on its own; teams actively cultivate it by:

Working together. Conduct brainstorming sessions at the Team Meeting where everyone discusses a popular argument and collectively works out a strategy for answering it.

Sharing evidence. Photocopy or print multiple copies of research done by any member of the team and distribute it to everyone.

Celebrating together. If everyone on the team contributes to the work effort and shares evidence, then success by any member of the team is a victory for everyone and should be treated that way.

Practicing together. Assign everyone on the squad to watch an after-school practice debate between two teams on the squad. Discuss the round afterward. Emphasize fun and education over winning in these rounds so as not to cause intra-squad competition. Don't announce a winner of the practice round; just discuss what was good and bad about each team's performance.

Dressing alike. Team t-shirts or jackets with varsity letters can be a great way to build morale, celebrate successes, and reward students who stay on the team for several years. Students can dress alike at tournaments or during travel.

Watching and scouting elimination rounds. If one team from the squad is in elimination rounds, everyone else should lend their support by watching the round or scouting other elimination rounds.

Teaching each other. Build a team culture where older and more experienced students pass on their knowledge to younger members of the team. This is especially helpful when the coach is not an expert in debate herself, in which case varsity debaters may know more about the topic. Assigning older debaters to mentor younger debaters inspires and educates both parts of the working relationship.

Respecting each other. Insist that all members of the team cooperate constructively, resolve their differences peacefully, and generally get along. The role model provided by the coach in this regard is crucial by always treating students fairly and respectfully.]

It is necessary to provide a word of warning about team unity, though. It can go overboard, and become 'clique-y', which will turn off new recruits. Make an effort to recruit a variety of students rather than a pre-established group of friends. If the team is all men, make an effort to recruit women, and vice versa. The same idea is important for racial composition of the team in certain situations. Work diligently to keep the team atmosphere welcoming to newcomers. Participating in events other than tournaments, such as public debates or other forensics activities, can broaden the team's horizons.



Weekly Meetings

The team should meet after school at least once a week – we’ll call it the Team Meeting. For the sake of establishing a memorable routine it is best for the Team Meeting always to be at the same time and place, if possible. Even if the team moves quickly to the school library or computer lab, students should still begin the Team Meeting in their usual classroom and then leave to go to another location. This reinforces the idea that debate is a regular commitment to be kept and prevents students from forgetting to show up or showing up in the wrong place (intentionally or unintentionally). Team Meetings should also end at a standard time so that parents will know when to expect their children to be home.

Some coaches have separate Team Meetings for junior varsity and varsity debaters. This has the advantage of allowing targeted lessons based on student experience levels. A drawback of separate Team Meetings is the disruption of team unity and preventing younger students from learning from their more experienced counterparts. A better idea might be to have one meeting for everyone, and a second meeting, either on another day or for an extra hour afterwards, that is required for varsity students and optional for junior varsity debaters.

Setting the Agenda for Weekly Team Meetings

Debaters tend to be social by nature, even more so if the coach has done a good job of cultivating team unity. Although this should generally be encouraged, it can make Team Meetings slow, inefficient, unproductive, and annoying to everyone involved. Establish a clear agenda and objectives for each Team Meeting. This will focus the students’ energy.

Brainstorming. Especially at the beginning of a new season or after a long break, teams should discuss how arguments have changed and what they will need to be prepared to debate.

Strategizing. Lead a discussion of the pros and cons of different affirmative cases or develop strategies for answering a new affirmative case or negative off-case position being run in their league. Assign at least one member of the team to keep a list of the arguments you discuss. At subsequent meetings you can return to this list to check on progress.

Researching. The team might visit the computer lab or library in order to research a new argument. Or, they might settle down with scissors and tape to process and brief evidence.

Learning. Of course students should always be learning, but the coach might set aside an entire practice to teach a new skill, concept, or argument. This could include a lecture and a follow-up activity.

De-Briefing. After a tournament, the team should share their experiences to learn what worked, what didn’t, and what arguments are out there which hadn’t previously been considered.

Establishing Partnerships

In policy debate, students compete in teams of two. A debater's partner is her closest ally and learning companion on the team, so it is important for the two of them to get along. They don't have to be best friends. Debating with someone you consider your best friend has both advantages and disadvantages. But whether or not debate partners are best friends they must be able to work together constructively.

There are several ways to assign debate partnerships on a squad. One method would be to allow the students to pair up on their own without interference from the coach. A second method would be for the coach to determine partnerships unilaterally. There are approaches in between these extremes. Debaters could be permitted to offer input, which the coach would accept unless there are unusual circumstances. A coach might have a policy to accept any mutual partner requests. Finally, a coach might allow debaters to indicate one or two members of the squad that they would essentially "veto" or prefer not to have as a partner. There is no right way to assign partners.

There are some factors to consider when evaluating partner decisions. Many students will join the activity knowing who they want their partner to be. There's nothing wrong with that. Debate is a voluntary activity that should be enjoyable, so there is often no need to force students to work with someone they don't want to work with.



While it is a good idea to give students input in their partner assignments, there are a few criteria to keep in mind about what makes a good partnership besides cooperation. The most obvious is ability level. If a varsity debater convinces her best friend to join the team as a novice, the two may want to debate together. While this could be an educational experience for the beginning debater, it could also be an intimidating one: she will have to start right off debating in the varsity division and will always feel like she is holding her partner back. Also, for competitive reasons, the coach might prefer to have her strongest debaters partnered with each other.

Another consideration is argument or style interest. If one debater likes debating disadvantages and counterplans and the other prefers critiques, they may frequently disagree about negative strategy. Then again, a coach may favor the notion that their abilities will complement each other well. As long as the coach helps them to negotiate their disagreements, this could well turn into a very productive partnership.



A final important factor to consider is the extent to which each student is invested in the activity. Debaters interested in attending every tournament and going to summer institutes should not be partnered with those who are doing the bare minimum. It isn't fair to the hard-working student, and it will quickly create a substantial ability gap and personality conflicts.

Generally partnerships are established at the start of the year based on input from debaters and a series of practice debates. During the early sessions the coach can listen to all the debaters to determine compatibility. The coach may want to try different combinations in these practice sessions.

Once partnerships are determined at the start of the year a coach might have reasons to revisit their decisions. Debaters may grow apart in terms of their compatibility or interest in traveling to tournaments. Coaches should be willing to consider changing partnerships after a few tournaments. Often repairing teams might permit two debaters to attend a tournament they otherwise might not have been able to, if their original partners could not participate that weekend for some reason.

Nuts and Bolts: Troubleshooting Partner Assignments

Problems will inevitably arise among partners, but the coach should be hesitant to break up team assignments once they are established. The time that the debaters have spent getting to know each other and learning to work together will be wasted. Working through difficult relationships is an important life skill. Following are some common problems that may arise and solutions the coach should explore before breaking up a team:

Problem 1: Strategic disagreements. Partners frequently disagree about which arguments to make or extend during a round.

Solution: Help them make these decisions as much as possible before the round begins and then encourage them to stick with what they've decided. At the very least, discuss the criteria they should use so that they have some common ground to resort to when making these decisions. Finally, there should be a firm rule that in the event of a dispute that cannot be resolved quickly, the debater giving the last rebuttal has the final word, as she is the one who will have to sell the team's case at the end of the round. This works best when one partner is the last rebuttalist on the Affirmative and the other on the Negative, so that they will share this power equally.

Problem 2: Personality conflicts. The partners have had a fight or are otherwise angry with each other.

Solution: If the students cannot resolve the problem themselves, the coach or a mature member of the team can play the role of mediator. As a last resort, the coach could separate them for one tournament as a cooling off period.



Problem 3: Imbalanced Partnership. One partner feels like the other is holding her back or constantly making mistakes in the round.

Solutions: Watch the team debate together and talk to their judges. If there is some truth to this claim, discuss with the better debater methods for helping her partner to improve. Encourage her to focus on the skills

that her partner does possess. Even if she is generally stronger than her partner, the partner may still surpass her in some ways. They should be encouraged to learn from each other. In the end, though, substantial differences in ability may be a valid reason to separate a team, especially if caused by one student working much harder than the other. If, on the other hand, the coach does



Nuts and Bolts: Troubleshooting Partner Assignments (cont.)

not feel that there is actually a noticeable ability gap, she should discuss the issue with the complaining debater. Debate tends to inflate egos, so it may be necessary to bring this student's head out of the clouds by pointing out areas in which she needs improvement and emphasizing ways in which her partner makes valuable contributions to the team.

Problem 4: Romantic involvement. Debate partners spend a lot of time working closely together, and among high school students this can easily lead into romantic involvement. This isn't actually a problem in itself, but it can create some real headaches. Debate partners often spend a substantial amount of time alone together, and the coach must be able to trust that they will behave appropriately while they are on her watch. Break-ups, of course, are likely to lead to a host of problems.

Solution: As long as the coach makes her expectations concerning conduct clear and feels that she can trust the students she doesn't need to play a heavy-handed role here. Following a break-up, however, she will probably want to separate the debaters, at least temporarily. At least one of the two will probably be uncomfortable around the other, interfering with their ability to work together at best and creating opportunities for sexual harassment at worst.

Problem 5: Chronic absenteeism. One student routinely misses practices or competitions, leaving the partner hanging.

Solution: This may require breaking up the team. It is simply not fair to the student who works hard and shows up regularly to miss out on opportunities to compete because of an unreliable partner. Hopefully, coaches will nip this problem in the bud by communicating expectations about attendance early and often. Try making clear to the unreliable debater the impact that she is having on her partner, but if this doesn't work re-assign the debaters so that the harder-working student is not adversely affected any further. Students who are not meeting attendance expectations may need to be temporarily suspended or barred from further involvement with the team.

Student Leadership

There is a lot of work involved in running a debate team, and while the coach is ultimately responsible for all of it, she shouldn't try to handle every detail. Ultimately, the team exists to benefit the students, so there is every reason to expect members of the team to pitch in to help keep it running smoothly. Leadership roles are also potentially valuable additions to your students' in term of college or job applications.

Often, a team leadership structure will develop on its own. Students most taken by the activity will invest more time and energy into improving their skills and may naturally want to share their expertise with less experienced students who look up to them. As these students also have the most vested interest in the continuation of the team, they will probably be most willing to help out with less fun tasks such as fundraising and record-keeping. Coaches should keep an eye out for such a developing dynamic in order to nurture it in productive ways.

The coach may choose simply to appoint these natural leaders to positions of responsibility or to hold elections. The results will probably be similar. If the coach has noticed emerging leaders, the students most likely have as well, and will tend to formalize the roles that those students are already playing.



In the rare circumstance where a natural leadership structure does not emerge, if no students are willing to take on these extra responsibilities, or if a leadership-based system of sharing responsibilities proves divisive, the coach may choose instead to delegate responsibility on a case-by-case basis and require all team members to pitch in. On a large team, students might be assigned to committees for recruitment, fundraising, etc. Be upfront about these requirements when students are joining the team. They will be much more cooperative if they do not feel as though the coach has pulled a bait-and-switch on them.



Leadership Positions

If a coach chooses to assign formal leadership roles to students they should be well-defined to avoid conflicts and insure that the students know what is expected of them.

Captain. The Captain should generally be the most experienced or accomplished debater on the team. It is also vitally important that the Captain be hard-working and responsible. Honoring these qualities will cause other members to aspire towards them. The captain is the team's policy debate expert, and her responsibilities could include guiding team strategy and brainstorming sessions, recruiting and training new members, coordinating the team's research, and keeping track of information about judges and other teams.

Secretary. The Secretary must be a student that is mature and reliable. The Secretary is generally the organizational mastermind of the team. She could be responsible for keeping track of press clippings, competitive records, NFL points, and any other non-confidential data gathered about the team. She could also be assigned to record the results of team brainstorming sessions and any other activities requiring a written record.

Treasurer. The Treasurer must be a responsible student who is competent in math. Though she should not be given complete responsibility for team money, she could spearhead fundraising initiatives, track the team's budget, and handle the money at bake sales, car washes, or other events where students are taking in small sums of money and making change.

Community Liaison. The Community Liaison should be charismatic and outgoing, as she will be the public face of the team. She could announce team successes or meeting reminders over the school's intercom, lead recruitment drives, speak at public events, and forge relationships with coaches and debaters from other schools. She could also organize other public relations efforts such as flyers and school signs announcing team accomplishments.

Nuts and Bolts: Record Keeping

There is a large amount of information that coaches will need to keep track of for legal reasons, to make their jobs easier, and to help their teams improve.

Budget. Schools or leagues that provide teams with discretionary funds will want to know exactly how that money is spent. Save receipts, and keep a careful record of where the team's money comes from and where it goes. Some schools and leagues have very specific requirements concerning budgeting, so the coach should check on this at the beginning.

Student Contact Information. Coaches will need to be able to get in touch with students quickly, frequently, and through a variety of media. Collect all home and cell phone numbers, mailing addresses, e-mail addresses, and class schedules so it will be easier to find them during the day. It is also very important to know how to contact the students' parents or guardians, especially in an emergency, so collect that information as well.

Academic Data. Assuming that relevant privacy laws do not prohibit its collection, data concerning students' GPA, standardized test scores, etc. can be very valuable in tracking and demonstrating the educational value of debate. Coaches are advised to check with a supervisor or union representative before collecting this data. Consider asking students to waive their privacy rights so the academic data can be released, especially if the debate team has a GPA requirement for ongoing participation.



Debate History. Keep a record of which students were at which tournaments, who their partners were, who judged them, who they debated, and how they did. Saving old ballots will allow them to track student improvement and identify strengths and weaknesses. If the school is a member of the National Forensics League (NFL), there is a very specific way in which debaters' competitive records must be tracked and reported in order to earn NFL points. Details about how to do this are available from the NFL.



Nuts and Bolts: Record Keeping (cont.)

Backfiles. “Backfiles” are the files that your debate team has accumulated over time that they have used previously. Have a system where you save the backfiles from previous topics because the same arguments may resurface on later topics in slightly different form. This might be a good task to assign to your team Secretary. For example, even if Weapons of Mass Destruction is no longer the topic, nuclear terrorism may continue to be a popular disadvantage impact scenario, and old case attacks could become Affirmative answers. Backfiles also represent countless hours of work on the part of students, who may want to use it later in conjunction with a school research assignment or college application.

Permission Slips. The school will likely require that the debaters receive explicit permission from their parents and/or teachers concerning travel to debate tournaments. Coaches must find out when they are required to collect permission slips and then diligently save these documents.

Emergency Medical Forms. Any time they are off-campus together, the coach bears primary responsibility for the health and well-being of her team. She must know about any medical conditions and have the appropriate forms and medications on hand in case of an emergency. She should also have emergency contact forms for every student.

Supporter Information. The coach will also want to keep records concerning how to get in touch with alumni, community volunteers, judges available for hire, and all other supporters of the team. Keeping a notebook or computer database of this information will allow organized and easy access. In addition to knowing how to contact these people, the coach should maintain a record of what each person is interested in or qualified to do.