

IN DEFENSE OF THE NFL (AND DEBATE IN ALL ITS FORMS)

by
Tammie Peters

Debate

I must admit I was rather dismayed when I read Donus Roberts's article, "Controversy: NFL's New Debate Event" in the November 2002 *Rostrum*. Here was one of our most decorated coaches celebrating the new event, Ted Turner Debate, by exclaiming all our other events are essentially a waste of time. Roberts writes, "Policy debate and LD debate have become specialized, filled with code-words that ordinary people do not understand on topics people don't wish to hear. Debaters often talk beyond the speed limit. Extemp has also be-

come a documentation speech, oratory has become interp, interp has become filled with innuendo and explicitness." Say it isn't so!

...."I still believe that each of the events we offer has academic value - or at least each event can be taught or coached in such a way as to promote critical thinking and intellectual understanding...."

While there may be bad seeds in each of our events, I cannot believe that everything we do is so contemptible. While it appears Roberts has lost his faith in what we do, I still believe that each of the events we offer has academic value – or at least each event can be taught or coached in such a way as to promote critical thinking and intellectual understanding.

I realize Roberts's article was designed to garner enthusiasm for NFL's new event, Ted Turner Debate. Personally, I am still undecided about the new event – we'll have to see how it plays out. However, I am disturbed by the apparent "widespread" denouncing of NFL events, especially the debate events. Even Bill Davis's article about argumentation in the same *Rostrum* issue indicated that much of our debate has become worthless drivel. I for one am not ready to let debate in its present forms sink into some evil abyss without a fight. Here, then, are some ideas for those of you willing to join my battle for better debate.

Lincoln-Douglas debate provides one alternative to CX/policy debate. Topics change every two months; thus, there is less of an emphasis on great quantities of research. While still a bit difficult, it is easier for a student to pick up LD mid-year than it is to pick up CX/policy, precisely because the topic continually changes. Additionally, the topics in LD are generated by coaches and competitors; I certainly hope they "wish to hear" debates on topics they submit. Furthermore, many of my LDers have returned from college thanking me for the background in philosophy and logical thinking they developed in the event. In our part of the country, some schools have chosen not to teach CX/policy debate (for a variety of reasons), but they are quite comfortable and successful with LD. Judges who hesitate to judge CX are willing to evaluate LD rounds.

Another debate alternative to CX/policy is Student Congress, one event Roberts doesn't even mention in his article. The specific topics debated change from tournament to tournament and are student generated, hopefully guaranteeing student interest. Since the bills and resolutions can change from week to week, the research required is less extensive than either CX or LD. It is also easy for students (and new coaches) to pick up the event in a very short amount of time. The three minute speech format is attractive to my interpreters as well as my debaters; we have also received positive feedback from observers about the audience adaptability of this event. As for judging, the 0-6 point scale is very user friendly and we often use "lay judges" as scorekeepers. Learning the basics of parliamentary procedure is also one of the most realistic skills we teach students in Student Congress.

NFL also offers Barbara Jordan Debates, another event not mentioned by Roberts. While I have no experience with this event, I understand it was designed for schools with little or no experience or traditions in de-

The Many Faces of NFL Debate

Many of the arguments I've heard about the need

bate and limited access to coaches and other resources. I would also guess that this form of debate was designed for communities with few “debate” judges.

Before I move to the next section, though, I would like to take a moment to defend CX/policy debate. While a year-long topic may seem intimidating to some students, others relish the opportunity to learn about an area truly in-depth. My students’ understanding of mental illness and public health issues has already increased exponentially in the first three months of competition. CX/policy debate is one of the few places where students learn there are no easy solutions to the nation’s or world’s problems – a lesson that would benefit many idealistic high school students. Only sustained research and discussion of a topic can reveal the complexities of the real world. Additionally, the sustained discussion of such recent issues as mental health, weapons of mass destruction, privacy, and education are important issues of our time, and topics are selected by coaches and students who vote for those topics that merit extended investigation.

The Need to Build a Better Mousetrap

In spite of its educational value, CX/policy debate has received more than its fair share of criticism recently. I’ve heard complaints about rapid-fire delivery that is uncommunicative, new arguments like kritiks that seem to avoid the true purpose of debate, and students who avoid doing research and truly understanding the complex issues involved by relying on purchased evidence and camp canned cases. I, too, have witnessed teams engaged in these practices. However, CX/policy debate doesn’t have to be this way.

If coaches and teachers are frustrated with the direction of CX/policy debate, then those coaches need to begin their own rebellions on their teams. Let me describe our team: I teach at a medium-sized school (1300) that is suburban/rural. My students rarely attend camps. We don’t have “extensive financial resources” and must do fundraising to pay for entry fees and bus costs. While we do purchase some evidence, we use it as a starting point for our own research (other very successful teams in the area refuse to buy any evidence). During our debate classes, we focus on critical thinking skills – how various arguments can be answered. As opportunities arise, we deal with economic theory, governmental fiscal policy implications, issues of federalism and the balance of power, as well as specific issues regarding the topic area of that year. We chide our debaters who want to rely on spewing illogical briefs. We practice listening to evidence and challenging its application. We share *Rostrum* articles that focus on communication and common sense argumentation. We work on explaining debate jargon in common terms so our students understand what is going on in a round. We reject the “win at all costs” mentality and focus on making our students think.

And we are relatively successful. Many schools in our area approach CX/policy debate in a similar manner and are successful (i. e. they win) both in Colorado and in more nationally representative tournaments. Fast mouths and lazy minds don’t have to be accepted by coaches who value something else in debate.

But what if that’s what the judges buy? Then change the judges. If a group of coaches is truly frustrated with the criteria used by their CX/policy judges, then those judges need to be re-educated to use criteria more educationally suitable. About 25 years ago, Colorado speech coaches established judge certification, a three-hour class that educated speech critics about the

expectations to be used when judging. Colorado debate coaches had determined that the stock issues paradigm was the most educationally sound approach to debating federal policies; thus, certification has stressed that paradigm. Certification is not required of all debate judges at all tournaments, but it does earn the judges extra pay and only certified judges are invited to the State Tournament. Furthermore, certification has expanded the appeal of CX/policy; when the rules and expectations were presented in a simple, common-sense and user-friendly way, more critics were willing to evaluate CX/policy rounds. And many of those critics have insisted that our students be more communicative in their argumentation – a style which requires students to either adjust or perish. While certification hasn’t solved all our problems, especially in CX/policy debate, it has provided concerned coaches with a tool to better educate our judges.

Other methods of altering the direction of debate judging are also being tried in our area. One group of coaches is trying to design a new state ballot for CX/policy debate, one which emphasizes more concrete issues and downplays some of the perceived “game playing” some students use. At Golden’s tournaments, a note is attached to all CX/policy ballots in an attempt to remind judges of the criteria we, the coaches, believe is most academically sound. Other tournaments are posting giant signs for both students and judges to see that explain the paradigm to be used at that meet.

If coaches are frustrated with the direction of CX/policy debate, then perhaps we, the coaches, should change that direction instead of simply bemoaning its course. There are many ways that we, the educated professionals who are concerned with the academic integrity of debate, can take control of our event back from the destructive influences of those judges who lead our students astray.

There Is No Magic Bullet

Perhaps there is a need for an event like Ted Turner Debate, but I don’t believe it will solve all the “problems” mentioned by Roberts and others. Bill Davis said it best when he said, “Winning is the source of all distortion in debate.” NFL is creating another debate event which involves head-to-head competition and all the perils that implies.

Certainly, when LD debate was adopted by NFL it was seen as an event that might avoid some of the pitfalls of CX/policy debate while adding another dimension, philosophical and value argumentation, to high school competition. I was a member of that first class who tried to qualify to the National Tournament in LD. While it had been in Colorado and a dozen other states for many years, it was new to the District Qualifying Tournament. Certainly, the speaking style was relatively slow when compared to CX/policy. However, when I used Machiavelli to explain the weaknesses in an all-volunteer military force, judges rejected my argument for being too erudite and difficult to understand. Now, though, it is quite common for good LD debaters to nimbly maneuver through the writings of Kant, Mill, Locke, Rousseau, Rawls, Rand and other complex philosophical writers. Some of our judges (and coaches) are intimidated by the level of philosophical discussion in LD debates; perhaps that is the type of “code-words” Roberts criticizes. Initially envisioned as an event that would avoid the weaknesses seen in CX/policy debate, LD developed its own specialty jargon and issues.

Good Student Congress can be wonderful, but bad Student

Congress can be dreadful. In 1989, when Golden hosted the National Tournament, we had the opportunity for Super Session to compete in the State Legislative Chambers – student senators sat in a real Senate chamber as did student representatives. Some of our State Legislators happened to visit the building that day and were incredibly impressed with the maturity and depth of understanding demonstrated by these competitors. But Student Congress is not without its weaknesses. Since the topics continually change and little research is required, practice congresses can become “b. s.” sessions full of unsubstantiated teen opinions. When competition improves and students try to qualify for Nationals, Student Congress can degenerate into a battle of political wrangling, deal-making and back-stabbing. The Districts in our area have tried various methods of reining in student game-playing.

The point that I am making is not that these events should be eliminated, replaced or less valued. Each of the debate events began with great intentions and high expectations. Each has developed its own quirks and drawbacks over time. Adding yet another debate event will not “save” debate; the competitive nature of what we do will shape this new event into something we may not foresee. We need to be careful when adding events; moreover, we need to remedy the events we have already created and return to their academic origins, instead of abandoning them.

The Last Shot

As I read Robert’s article, the words of John Donne came to mind:

Do not go gently into that good night[. . .]
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

I am not ready to give up hope and belief in the events NFL currently offers. I do not believe any of them are hopeless beyond salvation – indeed, NFL’s current events are strong academic opportunities that can be mistreated now and then by misguided young people. Perhaps the National Council is wise in creating a new event and sees a need that I do not see; however, I hope that the sentiments expressed by Roberts, that all our events are worthless and vile, are not the inspiration for the new debate event. I also hope that their motivation for this new event extends beyond the desire to impress a media mogul with an event named after him. If our only motivation is to give up on what has already been created and proven to work in terms of educationally benefiting students, then perhaps NFL deserves to “go gently into that good night” and fade away.

(Tammie Peters is a diamond coach at Golden High School in Golden, Colorado. She has served on the Colorado State Critics certification committee for the past ten years.)

Secretary James Copeland Replies

I believe Mrs. Peters has missed Mr. Roberts' point. Mr. Roberts was not criticizing NFL events as being "worthless, vile" "waste of time" and the other *ad hominem* adjectives used by Mrs. Peters, nor has Mr. Roberts lost faith in NFL or its activities. There is no finer NFL citizen than eighth diamond coach Donus Roberts who pointed out, quite accurately, that no NFL debate events are well suited for presentation to television or live audiences.

The *academic* values of existing debate events may be exemplary but the *public communication* values are wanting.

Modern audiences and local access cable will not sit through an hour long debate where obscure kritiks are spewed at auctioneer speech. Nor are discussions of Kant and Hobbes viable. These may be fine in the classroom or at the tournament, but are not acceptable for the public -- or the student who wishes to learn to speak to the public: juries, the church congregation, the electorate.

Mrs. Peters offers a thoughtful suggestion on how to improve events by certifying judges. But at the end of this process NFL is still left with debate events that are research oriented and academic in nature. What is needed is one event that is aimed at public audiences! In order to build support for speech and debate NFL must attract audiences and the media. Student activities like Quiz Bowl, Academic Decathlon, Cheerleading and Sports dominate the airwaves and draw audiences of citizen's who become enthused about those events. NFL hopes that Ted Turner debate will energize principals, superintendents, school boards, parents and local access cable to support debate.

Ted Turner Debate has been very popular with large numbers of teams competing in early tournaments held in upstate New York, South Carolina, Texas, South Dakota and Missouri.

Mrs. Peters other argument is essentially that there is no need for the new event because everything is wonderful in Colorado. Agreed. With her father Lowell Sharp and the legendary Frank Sferra in charge how could things not be wonderful. (It also helps

that there is not the tension created by national circuit debate teams constantly beating all the local debate teams, which has caused debate in other states to decline).

Unfortunately the Council can't make policy based upon one atypical example. Around the nation as a whole, schools (except for the elite national circuit schools) are abandoning policy debate in droves. The spew and the kritik have decimated debate.

Encouraged by Colorado's success Mrs. Peters ignores the hard facts. Last year six NFL districts had no policy debate at all; eight others had only one or two policy schools. Twenty more NFL districts have four policy schools or less. NFL needs a debate event which will attract schools so students may be exposed to training in both argumentation *and* communication.

If policy debate is widely practiced and well liked in Colorado, fine. Ted Turner debate might not be as useful there. LD never took root in areas where policy was widely practiced. But Turner debate is badly needed in areas where policy debate has declined, and Mr. Roberts saw that need.

Mrs. Peter's misses the point when she poignantly whispers "I am not ready to give up hope and belief in the events NFL offers." Give up? Not! The NFL, the council, coaches and students are not "giving up" on anything! All events are being offered and anyone may choose to select which events meet their needs. No events have been abolished, or even changed. A new event was added for a specific purpose: provide training for students who wish to speak to audiences and the media.

Mr. Roberts and the council, did not "give up on what has already been created". They added a new event! Like Humor, reintroduced in 1977, like L/D added in 1980, like Duo added in 1996 and like Barbara Jordan Debate adopted in 1998, Ted Turner Debate is yet another innovative initiative by the Council to meet the needs of schools large and small and students of all abilities, interests, and commitments.