

DEBATE WAS NEVER LIKE THAT, WAS IT?

by
James Menchinger

If Rip Van Winkle, a former debater, woke up from his multiple years sleep, as the story goes, he would have had a had time adjusting to the changes that have occurred over those many years of slumber. Looking back at debate, it didn't seem so strange then but an application of forty years of coaching experience observation suddenly transformed debate 1960's style into something that few former Rip Van Winkle debaters

ponents from ___ and wish to thank them for the opportunity to debate on this significant issue that is of great importance worldwide." Teams with less preparation on the subject could milk this opening preamble much longer and one could generally tell the issue prepared teams from those less prepped by the opening alone.

The fact that the preamble might be waived in later years seemed rude to some coaches and it existed even into the 1980's by those new coaches just starting out. Also, another unusual part of the first affirmative was the case. Almost all cases existed by the declaration of need/plan with hardly a whisper of the originality of cases experienced today. The inclusion of a comparative advantage case almost took the pins from under the most experienced debater with its flip-flop style of thinking. (You mean the plan goes first).

That revolutionary touch of planning brilliance couldn't match, however, the practice of a plan to solve the need for a change with an exhaus-

tive listing of mandates, enforcement methods and funding that would sometimes take almost as long to present as the justification for the change. Items "a" through "m" might have been as common an enumeration of points as one might typically see in a "normal" debate. The fact that a one liner solution today with the statement of "all normal enforcement and funding" completing the text seems to pale in comparison to those years when one practiced hard to get all fifteen plan points into one speech. In the decade of the 60's however, the plan was presented in the second affirmative speech giving more time for that enumeration to occur. However, even that luxury of time could create problems for debaters. For example, in one demonstration debate at Western Michigan University to hundreds of beginning students at an early orientation to the topic) followed by workshops staged by WMU's veteran college woman's coach Deldee Herman), one of the Belleville's top debaters ran out of time or forgot to include the plan in the second speech and with collective gasps of the audience found her team in a most difficult position after the second affirmative.

Another rather unusual change has also taken place for placement of a coaches strongest debaters. While today's strategy almost always has the best at the second negative speaker, the placement in the early decades

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and is constantly changing."**

would recognize today.

As a new coach on the scene in 1961 interning with Portage Public Schools, I tried my best to learn as much about the activity as other coaches. With only a class in college and a few class debates as my learning tool, debate seemed strange to me then with its rules and traditions. Let me explain.

Division of speeches in those early years was quite unique. The first affirmative, unlike today with rapid fire delivery of 50 evidence pieces and a blinding speed that would put auctioneers to shame found the speaking position quite different. While it is true, you could coach the position best even if the person was a weaker player in thought processes, you definitely selected a person who had great oratorical abilities. You chose a speaker who with clarity of voice, a nice appearance and a polished speaking style would launch the first declaration of war against the opponents. Even in the 1970's, I encountered a student from New Jersey at a National Tournament who memorized the first affirmative speech using no notes or evidence to all to guide him. It was all for presentation effect.

The content of the early years may seem lame to the current forces but there began the first affirmative speech with a greeting to the opponents that traditionally came first. "We, the affirmative of ___ greet the op-

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was at first negative. The simple reason was the fact that this speaker would have the hardest job of taking apart the thinking and evidence of the second affirmative who built such a strong case for the change that this surprising new case needed the quickest, most adaptive thinker on the team in this slot. Perhaps today, the thinking is that a first negative speaker does not have to be as strong a thinker or experienced but just a quick speaker.

The practice today of announcing what case would be argued by the affirmative on request by the negative did not exist. Teams like Albion High School with esteemed coach Ethel Fleenor not only refused to hint to which case would be used but refused to debate in public until the District Debate Tournament to hide the case design until it really counted. Imagine, only classroom practices with no outside competition until State Elimination. Consequently, not only would teams be coached to not advertise cases in advance, a resounding "no" would follow any request by the negative to discover the case idea.

The early debates also did not resemble the current cross examination style. Debating in the traditional style of ten minute constructive speeches and 5 minute rebuttal speeches, the cross-examination style of debate did not come into practice until the year 1968 when the Michigan Forensic Association required the use of it in a minimum of two debates in leagues to be eligible for the State Tournament and the Detroit Free Press/University of Michigan plaque. Traditionalists were shocked when the announcement came down from above (Ann Arbor is above?) but eventually Cross-X settled into the scene finding its way into tournaments as all became more use to the intricacies of how to question. Battle Creek Central's James Copeland, currently National Forensic League National Secretary Emeritus, led the way in Michigan with the first tournament to use cross-examination debate.

A little known fact of those traditional debates was the tradition of five minute bathroom/water breaks between the second negative constructive and first negative rebuttal speeches. The negative had the option to continue on or take the break but many clever teams, in order not to give the affirmative less thinking/planning time, opted for not taking the break. (Another strategy that coaches had to employ on the unsuspecting affirmatives.)

Leagues were a strong part of the early decades as well. Perhaps now as they start to decline in importance given the large number of weekend tournaments, they were the foundation of practices and development. The home and away debates were a declaration of the MIFA with the scheduling of teams to face by that organization. The teams would travel to each other's schools once during the year to debate twice. The judges were secured traditionally from nearby colleges and the decisions, like the debates themselves developed some pageantry. The debates were often held before audiences and the placement of the teams in "war rooms" boasting pennants (early form of awards before plaques), plaques, trophies often intimidated the incoming school. Maurice Falls of Jackson High School had just that kind of room and he placed his weakest team in that room to give them confidence (Not that he ever had a weak team). The teams would meet once on the negative and once on the affirmative and then go home. The announced decisions by the speech department judges who almost always voted on speech delivery, even then, were controversial. Besides the debate audiences, popcorn, refreshments were served and it was a pleasure to attend if for no other reason than to try to top the good eats of the other schools. Even the home economics departments would get involved.

Scouting was not allowed by MIFA until the 1980's. If for no other reason, staunch conservatives believed that the placement of debaters in the room to flow the cases of upcoming teams was most unethical. The surprise was in the design of the case and was part of the planning picture of debaters and coaches to the point that the team with the cleverest case should not be heard by the negative until the final round. The negative would have no advantage. However, despite the best efforts of MIFA, students would stand by the door and try to listen or develop allegiances to teams that had just debated the team that was to later be met by the unsuspecting negatives with bargains struck to exchange information or evidence. Even the timekeeper, a regular responsibility of each team and noticeable addition to each round, had to remain with the affirmative team rather than glimpse the case tenets of another affirmative rival team. The practice disappeared later on but not before much soul searching by the coaching community.

By the way, the luxury of the affirmative team timekeeper with a focus on keeping accuracy in the debate time-wise was a pleasure for the judge who had all he could do to listen and flow well. It also gave a team the chance to introduce a novice to debate by performing a necessary job that would give some prestige to the novice as well. The accuracy of the affirmative timekeeper perhaps led to the switching of the timekeeper following the team's judge since the possibility of shaving minutes off of the opponent's team and adding minutes to the "home team" was always suspicion in the minds of some.

The evidence requirements in early years were quite different than today. In the early stages, all evidence was flowed by hand from resource texts. If a notecard was to appear in the small recipe size boxes carried by debaters, it was one that was written in his or her handwriting and given the changes to record in error something from a source text, the chances for errors was great yet the practice continued for quite some time. In fact, the sizes of evidence boxes, no doubt, were the result of the boom of copiers that came into schools abundantly in the 1990's. The early small recipe boxes gave way to larger and longer file boxes (metal or cardboard...shoe boxes worked just fine), and later to briefcases which housed several rows of cards neatly and were easier to carry (not to mention the prestige one felt by carrying the briefcase of a lawyer). In fact, the two briefcase choice by some debaters usually signaled a stronger researcher or negative who needed the extra overkill to attack the affirmative. With the copiers allowing reproductions of whole pages, abandoning the cut and paste method somewhat, came the appearance of notebooks with glossy pages housing everything from the affirmative cases to blocks that took out every argument, next came the purchase of tubs, first small than laundry size made the scene much to the consternation of the coach whose role now was to book a van or trailer to haul the mountain of evidence that was now needed to assure the confidence of debaters at the same time intimidating the team that had not caught on to this method yet.

The suggestion to me from experienced coaches in the 1960's that 12 to 14 evidence cards were more than sufficient to place in a first affirmative speech now seems laughable to the institute debater who practices breathing and rapid delivery just to accommodate the 40-50 pieces of evidence in an opening speech. Some claim that what has disappeared during these rapid reading sessions is the thinking element that captured the fancy of early debaters, coaches, administrators and audiences. (I once viewed a debate where the negative used only one evidence piece to win the

debate, an almost unheard of experience today). Some debaters today even might cherish the earlier practice of reading evidence after a round by the judge. In the 1960's at the pace of the debater (slow), it would seem hard to believe that a judge would have to examine it for content or authenticity but it was common for a while until voted out of practice.

Judging certainly has changed with the standards of passing tests, flowing competence and approval from the community. While judges were from the college scene, most readily anyone who was available with a speech background, the decision that were registered did not always coincide with the issues. The appearance of the individual, her ability to be vocally competent with a public platform physical approach was judged much more in the final equation than the current accent on issues. The early ballots even emphasized delivery with a grid that housed the six elements of good debating: namely analysis, reasoning, evidence, organization, refutation, delivery and sometimes, cross-examination skills. Some judges in the favor of skills over everything else, added up the grid spread of points 1-5 and based the judgments mainly on who scored the most points on occasion, maneuvering the points to justify a decision. Later on, the weight of the skills even created the powers to be to allow the losing point team to win the debate if issues were secure when the trend moved back in that direction.

Certainly the role of the debate coach has changed. While chaperoning students while coaching is still essential, the driving of ones car to a debate has taken on new meaning. It was possible to put four debaters in the car and still get all of the research files and items to debate within the trunk although search for the skinniest timekeeper would still be an effort.

Coaches will remember when most of their time was not spent at the copy machine running off zillions of copies but spent at the chalkboard (I mean, white board) in strategy planning. Taking off from school for four days was not feasible or even necessary but planning weekday league dates (as many as six in a two week period was very common if you wished to do well as a team). Securing judges might have been the biggest challenge then as is

true now but any "live body" sometimes had to suffice with bus drivers getting the change to do more than view the debate if judging became necessary.

The role of the coach was slower than with two hundred debates per debater in a year less common than thirty total debates for one of the best debaters on the team. Debate tournaments began by being only on Saturday with three debates. A coach could be home by 3:00 p.m. and still mow the lawn. Next, a stage debate was added for full audience observation between the top win records for that day's tournament. Following that, four debates with a stage debate was added to cause darkness to be the norm on the way home from a tournament. The two day debates then entered the scene with one or two day tournaments giving way to three or four day tournaments and eventually, the current National schedule for travel. The travel commitments gave new meaning to becoming a tour guide, hotel shopper, supervisor of late night antics and early morning pleadings for debaters to rise up from late night research. (yeah, research only went on).

In conclusion, while the history of this article might seem to indicate debate was strange way back then, the evolution of debate was and is constantly changing. Old Rip Van Winkle would not find many of these changes appropriate but were most common to the era. I even remember one administrator from my home town who following a lengthy career as a principal was cast back into a role as debate coach and when he contacted me as to what helps I could supply him with since he had not debated in forty years said: "Are there still three debaters to each team?" I guess change can be the only thing we can count on in our debate community. Not happy? Go back to sleep for twenty years.

(James Menchinger, a fifth diamond coach, taught and coached at Portage Northern High School (MI). Under James' coaching guidance, many of James' students qualified and excelled at both the district and national level. Currently James is on staff at Western Michigan University as the Coordinator of Student Teachers.)

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