



# NDCA

## COACHES FOCUS

## How to Compete When You're From a "Small School"

by Joshua Brown

This summer I was talking with two very experienced Policy debaters—one of them I knew, the other I did not. The former attends a school with a well-funded and well-reputed Policy Debate program. To the latter I introduced myself, expecting him to reciprocate, and he did—sort of. He said, "Oh, I'm just from a small school in Minnesota, hi." Not only did he not let me know what school he attends, he couldn't even bring himself to share his name.

Now, I may just be attributing more significance to this encounter than it deserves, but having been around debate for almost 20 years, I can tell you this is an experience that plays out, in one form or another, at nearly every tournament: before a debate, while I'm making my decision, while I'm chatting in the cafeteria between rounds, and so on. There is a whole host of people walking around debate tournaments who think they are somehow not good enough to be taken seriously—and then, only because of where they go to high school.

What I have set out to do here is share some ideas by which these students (and their coaches) might overcome this problem and compete as best they can at the highest levels.

But first, let's be realistic. It is a challenge. There are a whole host of factors that can make it difficult to do well at big tournaments if you are from a small program—factors such as inferior coaching and less

of it; more time spent fundraising; fewer tournaments; and judges who don't respect you. You're probably thinking, *why wouldn't* the debater referenced in the above anecdote be shy about introducing himself?

Before I talk about more concrete steps you can take, there is a very important psychological move you need to make: To some extent, you need to get over it.

When I told one of my colleagues I was writing this article, he said, "Why? You don't coach a small school. What would you have to say about it?" I immediately fired back by discussing numerous material barriers my students and I face in competing and coaching. He responded, "Yeah, but you all have won things; you've been working at this a long time. What are you complaining about?"

I realized that I had gotten used to telling myself a certain sort of narrative about my team—that we were a small school; that we have trouble raising money; that we don't have a big university with a big debate program just down the road; that no one else in my school knows or cares what debate is.

What my students and I have trouble seeing sometimes is that we can be—and have been—successful, as has almost everyone involved in the world of debate. Otherwise, they probably wouldn't have stuck with it. And it hasn't always been *in spite of* being small. Sometimes it's been *because of* it. As Zora Neale Hurston once wrote,

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***“At every tournament, you can probably have four or five informal encounters with people who can help you get better at debate—so long as you take advantage of it.”***

“The game of keeping what one has is never so exciting as the game of getting.”

After you’ve given yourself this pep talk, you will be in a better position to deal with some of the more material challenges you may face. I’ve isolated a few tips to deal with each one.

### **Overcoming Coaching Disparities**

Again, these can be more perceived than real. Don’t be too jealous of the other team when five college students are filling their ears or their flash drives pre-debate. Precious little of that work really has its intended effect, especially if the students themselves had no hand in its production. If you need to do your own work, your work will be better for it. You’re going to be in a position of doing almost all of your research yourself. That’s a strength, not a weakness. You will know it inside and out. Don’t think it’s misguided just because you, from a “small school,” produced it. You love debate and you’ve put all this time in; you’re probably really good at research.

Admittedly, you’ll need to pick your spots a little bit more: focus on a few core arguments with a controllable research base, rather than trying to have a super high-tech, hyper-specific strategy against every affirmative. Branch out later when you’ve proven yourself with your pet arguments. And don’t worry so much about following the trends you see the big

schools following. Trust your own intelligence and work ethic. There’s a lot available just from Google searches. Lexis-Nexis and all the rest are way less important than they used to be.

***“Don’t worry so much about following the trends you see the big schools following. Trust your own intelligence and work ethic.”***

Also, take advantage of informal help as you find it. I cannot emphasize this enough. Sometime this year, you’re going to be judged by a really good college debater or another school’s head coach. Maybe they don’t work for you, but they may help you if you show interest. Write down their comments given after the debate. Take the offer of an email address or Facebook friending and actually follow up with them. Don’t be shy; far too many high school debaters are devastatingly shy in settings like this. Debaters all love talking and writing about debate. They might not give you their team’s high-quality files, but they will often point you in the right

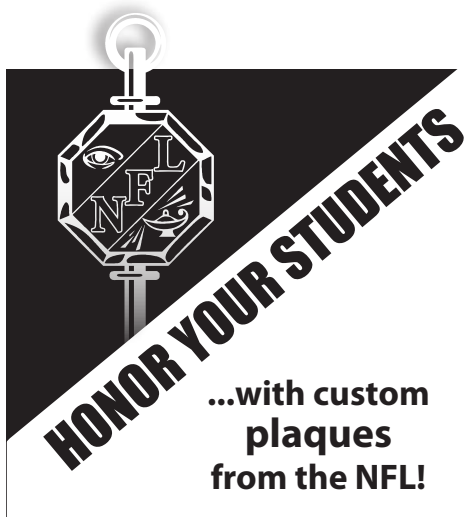
direction, and next time they judge you, you may even have a better reputation with them.

At every tournament, you can probably have four or five informal encounters with people who can help you get better at debate—so long as you take advantage of it. Even if you can get someone to come with your school and judge just once, you can sit with them on the bus and pick their brains. There are lots of people out there, and many of them are friendly.

And, just so other coaches don’t kill me, thank your overworked, inexperienced, doesn’t-even-know-what-TOC-stands-for coaches, too. They are trying their best, and they want to help you to succeed in every way they know how. Let them know you appreciate their efforts, and they’ll try harder, and that will help you more, in a virtuous circle.

### **Surmounting the Fundraising Barriers**

First, get involved in fundraising. You may find it frustrating that some kids go to schools where money is no object, but you do not. Stop viewing fundraising as a necessary evil and start seeing it as a life skill you are in a unique position to acquire. Help your coaches find grants; try to get school board policies changed; build networks around your school and your community; sell candy bars and baked goods; hold some public debates and get your school’s teachers to offer extra credit to

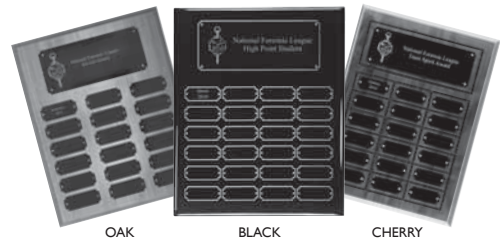


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attend them; rake some lawns; shamelessly (but respectfully) beg whomever you can for the money that will help you compete. You know debate is worthwhile, or you wouldn't be working so hard at it. The more fundraising you do, the more people are now involved in a wonderful educational activity—and that doesn't help just you, it helps small schools everywhere.

Second, stay idealistic. This may not help you right now, but when you're finished with your debate career, remember what it felt like to be one of the "have-nots." If you find yourself, later in life, in a position to help debaters' fundraising efforts, do it. If you end up "giving back" by judging or coaching, give back to a program that will really benefit from your help in a unique way. Also, for right now, find other people who were in your situation once, and talk with them. They will want to help. They will know others who do as well. They will remember the mental state you're in, and they will remember wishing someone else could have helped them.

#### Acquiring Your Own Reputation

First, try to see things from the judge's perspective. Most judges

care way less about who you are, and who your opponents are, than you may imagine. Many college debaters only turn up at a few high school tournaments each year, and do not keep track of who's doing well. They don't have the hierarchy built up in their minds that you might. Maybe you know that your opponents have 27 TOC bids and have never lost a negative debate; the judge may have no idea. To most judges, you're just four high school students in a room with whom they're trapped for the next two hours. Take advantage of the relative anonymity this provides.

Focus on the work you've done, not the useless question of "how good" they are. I've coached many students who have emerged from rounds against "monster" teams and said things like, "they weren't that good." Figuring that out *before* the debate can be the difference between winning and losing.

Debate your best; don't defer to your opponents in cross-examination because they sound arrogant. Don't think that because they under-covered one of your arguments that it's because it's a bad argument. And maybe they've done way more research than you;

maybe they speak faster and more clearly than you. But you can do all the other things that can lend you ethos during a debate. Don't steal prep, be nice to the judge and to your opponents, speak with confidence, and all the rest.

The best way to acquire your own reputation is to keep showing up, keep trying as hard as you can, and continue learning, researching, speaking, and everything else I've said above. If you make a bit of a name for yourself, so much the better. Everyone loves an underdog, after all.

In conclusion, when you walk into that big national invitational this year, don't be scared. Take heart. Know that you have done the work. You have cut the cards, you have taught yourself, you have raised the money, you are building your own reputation. And next time someone introduces themselves to you, shake their hand firmly, and proudly announce your name *and* your school, no matter how "small" it is. ■

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