

PUBLIC FORUM

by
Rev. B. A. Gregg

When Public Forum Debate (the event formerly known as Controversy Debate, the event formerly known as Ted Turner Debate) was formally debuted at the 2001 NFL District Tournaments through the incentive of a free slot for Districts, the event was an instant magnet to coaches. After all, a free slot for Districts is like offering free prosthetic limbs at a spider convention – you already have enough, but no one would turn down just one more. When the event debuted, we really didn't know much of what we were doing. We knew the times and the topic, but the rest was pretty free-flowing. Some former policy debaters picked up a slot to Districts. Some Lincoln-Douglas debaters picked up a slot to Districts. A few extempers, a few interpers. It was an incredibly heterogenous bunch who had only one thing in common: no one knew exactly what they were doing, but they were doing it enthusiastically.

In 2001, we only knew one thing: this was a debate event that was open to the public and should be focused on the public and was to be judged by the public. In fact, NFL made clear that no debate judge should be judging a round of Public Forum. The purpose of this rule was to make clear and manifest that Public Forum was a debate event to be judged by the Medieval Everyman. Of course, this rule made it very difficult on a number of coaches to find the properly unqualified person to judge a Public Forum round – we debate coaches are a fairly insular people and, like religious churchgoers, only really know primarily people in the congregation.

The next year, NFL allowed anyone to judge public forum, including debate coaches. This was, I fear, the nose of the camel entering the tent. Soon, a tent full of camel and section after section of PF rounds being judged by debate coaches. With this change in the judging pool, I am afraid, we have seen a change taking place in the Public Forum paradigm. Debaters, more and more, are carrying card boxes, small filing cases, Sherpa guides. Speed and clarity is starting to become an issue. Cards, rather

than contentions, are being referenced in the rebuttal. Elimination rounds are starting to have weighing mechanisms and standards. Public Forum has not yet crystalized into as formulaic debate as is LD or Policy, but it is quickly moving in this direction. Of course, there is nothing wrong with becoming more crystallized as a debate event. The only issue comes when Public Forum crystallizes into a debate event that leaves out the public. When Public Forum has evolved into another stock-debate event, a JV Policy or a two-person LD debate, we have lost the vital nature of Public Forum and should just call it, "Forum."

This article is not so much a critique of the event, since events evolve based on marking the winning teams and following their model. Rather, this article is a critique of how tournament directors, inadvertently, are artificially shaping the focus of Public Forum away from the public and are shutting out the audience from the debate.

... "tournament directors should be encouraged to create schedules that allow cross-entry with speech events."

Scheduling of Public Forum

First, in critiquing Public Forum's evolution, we must look at how it this event is scheduled in many tournaments. In the larger national tournaments, Public Forum oftentimes is scheduled at a swing-slot from LD Debate. Such a scheduling encourages double-entry between LD and PF, which is fine, in itself; many national tournaments have huge extemp prep rooms because LD and Extemp can cross-enter. However, when two debate events are offered in swing-slots, the line between hard-flow of LD debate smudges over into the synthetic flow of PF... creating a speed trap to get every point on the flow covered in time.

As well as scheduling Public Forum across from LD, many national tournaments block-out double-entry between PF and Speech events. This blocking-out draws an artificial cleavage between the two disciplines; as many PF Debaters cross-entered as forensicators (a name far more salacious to type than to actually judge). Many strong extempers and orators would elevate the tone of Public Forum and would help speed not supercede delivery.

In keeping in sight that the purpose of Public Forum is public-centered, tournament directors should be encouraged to create schedules that allow cross-entry with speech events. By this single adjustment, elevated discourse would tend to move the pendulum of PF closer to an event more accessible to the public. We can allow this double-entry with a double-check of entries the day before the tournament. If we figure a speech round to be about 90 minutes and Extemp prep to be an additional half-hour at the start of that round, we could easily put a double-flighted Public Forum round during the same time block. If one of the PF partners is double-entered in Extemp, the team should be flighted in PF and the speaker set first in the draw order for Extemp. If one of the PF partners is double-entered in a non-Extemp event, the team should be flighted and the speaker moved to the end of the speaking order in the speech event. If PF teammates are double-entered, and one is in Extemp, then the PF team should be always B-flighted and the non-Extemp partner also needs to be first in speaking order. TRPC does allow speakers to be set for A- or B-flighted throughout the tournament. Of course, through creating the flighting constraints in TRPC, we do create somewhat of a two-pod system with some flow-through of PF teams not double-entered. However, if a tournament has enough size, there should not be too great a skewing of the schematic... no more than if a school entered a large amount of entries into a smaller tournament.

A close coordination between Speech and PF Tab is, of course, in order. Case in point: the 2006 U Penn Liberty Bell Classic allowed

double-entry between speech and PF. However, through not carefully watching the events of the competitors and fighting accordingly, the tournament schedule ran off the tracks and cranked out four rounds of PF in only 15 hours. The 2007 Liberty Bell Classic, however, carefully tracked double-entries and flighted each round accordingly. Not only was the PF field larger in 2007 than the previous year, but there were no late rounds and the tournament ran like a Swiss sewing machine. At our NFL District Tournament, we have allowed double-entry between LD, PF, and Speech. A careful notation on the cards allowed us to properly flight the rounds with very little disruption.

Judge Pools for Public Forum

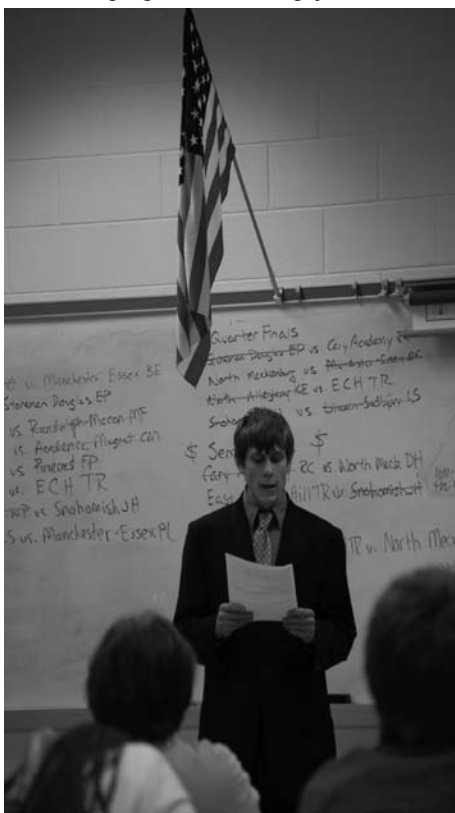
In turning to the second line of analysis in critiquing the evolution of Public Forum, we must look at the judge pools. Most tournaments will have a separate pool for PF, but supplement this pool with LD judges. By definition, many PF judges are PF-centered – either coaches or dedicated parents. However, one could argue that these judges, through being so well-versed in PF debate, are not necessarily the lay judges we would hope to see. Granted, having run a number of PF tournaments at the local and national level, I'm not crying when I see a judge pick up a ballot and turn it back in properly filled out, without me resorting to my patented hand puppet demonstration of what a Public Forum rounds should look like.

But, in thinking about the discipline of Public Forum, when judges have judged so many PF rounds that they become, in this event, experts, isn't that creating a professionalism of Public Forum debate judging that the event should avoid? More, through not sharing the judge pool between Speech and PF (a difficulty, given that these pools are managed usually by two different programs, tab staffs, and tournament religions), tournaments starve themselves from speech judges... the closest thing many tournaments have to a "public, lay debate judge." With a selective pool of judges, either PF judges or LD judges, we are accidentally altering the evolution of Public Forum debate to be far more "debate" than "public."

In addressing this issue of a specialized judging pool, the fix is a little more complex than laying out the schedule. The main reason why the judging pool is problematic is that, for a debate event designed for the

public, Public Forum is one of the most complex ballots to fill out, and the most difficult round to start, for the novice judge. Think of it: It all starts with a coin flip. Winner gets to choose speaking order or side. Loser chooses the left-over option. Then the ballot has a box on the right that just has Speaker 1/ Speaker 3 and the box on the left has Speaker 2/ Speaker 4. Okay, complex. Try that one with sock puppets.

In addressing the coin-flip for NFL Public Forum, I am always torn. CFL simply fixed sides and speaking order. This system is much easier for the novice, lay judge to understand. Contrariwise, this system allows for a flex Con, much like the flex Neg of LD Debate. A flex-Con basically is a series of cards that directly clash with the Pro Case, not developing a case for Neg, just a direct



attack on the Pro. This technique of debate, I fear, moves PF farther from the public and forces the event into a harder flow-orientation. With a coin-toss, the flex-Con is not a viable likelihood that would alter the event, as speaking order and case position would be too random for "stategyery."

However, coin-flip aside, what's still missing? The novice judge. We still don't have the novice judge in the round. And, in a way, it's understandable. Many community judges don't understand that debate judges need to spend an entire day at a debate tournament and may not get

to judge for a number of hours; but when we need you, we really need you. Or, conversely, judges may be judging round after round at a tournament. But, lay judge vagaries notwithstanding, the debate community has a real animus against the lay judge. At a tournament last year, I heard a coach complain on and on that we don't have enough qualified Public Forum judges. If I really listened to what the coach's complaint was, I would conclude that we would need to look harder for the more average Average Joe, for someone to better represent the mediocre people, for a judge whose favorite ice cream was vanilla, favorite color was grey, and favorite musician had something to do with the pan pipes. But what this coach's real complaint was is that there aren't enough specialized Public Forum judges.

As a coach myself, I often second-guess the lay judge if they have filled out the ballot accurately – especially when all the comments on my team were great and the comments on the opponents' were horrific and the opponents still picked up the ballot. Yet we must, as a debate community, figure out how to bring the novice judge into the round more fully and more commonly.

To help us bring more of the public, lay judges into Public Forum, I would encourage that tournaments begin using two-judge panels in preliminary rounds. One judge, a more experienced debate judge, should be on the panel to set up the round (yes, coin-flipping is a skill) and handle the time signals and do all the things we expect debate judges to do. The other judge should be either a community judge or a speech judge to provide the necessary balance to the debate. By having balanced preliminary judge panels, possible through TRPC and judge ratings, we can balance out the schematics and make sure that we are presenting a wide variety in the judge pools for the competitors. At our District tournament, through the financial sponsorship of the American Legion, we have been able to have three-judge panels in Public Forum preliminary rounds for the last four years, allowing us to use community and parent and speech judges, along with debate coaches, to make sure that we had efficiently run rounds that presented the widest variety of judges for whom our PF debaters needed to modify their presentation in order to persuade. At the Big Bronx, we have worked hard to balance out the elimination rounds to always make sure that, on a three-judge panel, we have one

parent judge, one debate coach, and then a wild-card of a college judge, a bus driver, or a debate judge from another discipline. When competitors are told that we will purposefully balance-out each elimination panel, this will force the debate to take the middle-road of communication and persuasion over flow and data dump.

Additionally, in order to be more user-friendly to novice judges, some rethinking of the ballot should be done (yet again!). We have already commented earlier in the article about the complexity of the unlabeled boxes on the ballot. Perhaps we should label the left-hand box, Team A: Speaker 1, Speaker 2. Then label the right-hand box, Team B. The ballot instructions should tell the judge that Team A goes first, then Team B. Additionally, instead of putting a score of 30 points on the team, we should give a letter grade to each speaker. Lay judges may not fully understand a scale of 30 points, but everyone who has gone through the American educational system understands A+ to F. When the ballot goes to Tab, tab staff rescores the ballot on a 99-point scale. At Bronx this last year, we ended up converting to a 30-pt scale, but saw a number of teams getting converted speaker points of 3 or 4. At Princeton, we converted to a 99-point scale for converted speaker points, which allowed a greater spread of speaker points and kept the bottom of the scale at 59 points, roughly the equivalent to a 24 on a 30-point ballot. Yet there were, instead of six points separating perfect from low, there were now 40 points. Students still got a bottom-level cushion, lay judges had an understandable scale, and coaches had a greater feedback of stronger partners within pairings. I would add, however, unless you have a large tab staff with nothing to do (in which case, there is a fire somewhere that is burning unnoticed), putting the 99-point scale on the ballot and allowing the judge to assign the letter grade, with a scale to convert to points would expedite matters in Tab.

Public Forum has come a long way since 2001. CFL has adopted it as a main event. Many state leagues have adopted it as a main event. Virtually every national-level tournament also has opportunities for Public Forum debate. Now, at this juncture as Public Forum is starting to exponentially grow, I encourage tournament directors to think of what we want this event to look like in ten years and realize that, how we set up a tournament, how we create judges' panels, will determine if Public Forum is still recognizable as a public debate event in ten

years or if the NFL will have to develop yet another form of debate to allow debate to be judged by the community and keep the good work of our students ever in the public eye.

(Rev. B. A. Gregg is the Director of Forensics at Randolph Macon Academy in Front Royal, Virginia. In 2006, he received the Best New District Chair Award and is the holder of eight NFL Service Plaques. He is the chair of the NFL Mid-Atlantic District, the nation's largest district.)

