

# Twenty Steps to Prep for Tournament One

## Week One

### **Publicize the Debate Program**

It all begins with visibility. No one can join or support your squad if they've never heard of it. Make posters, signs, fliers, P.A. announcements, school newspaper ads, and most of all spread the good word.

### **Recruit Debaters**

Experienced coaches often say that much of the competitive success of a season is determined at the recruiting stage. You've got to have the ponies to win the race. But, at the same time, no one can predict who will be a very good debater. It sometimes is possible to say who will not be a star, but there are many examples of high school students who emerge intellectually and verbally through debate. So you should recruit very widely and let the season itself help winnow your squad naturally, to sustainable though robust numbers.

### **Hold an Opening Meeting**

This is a crucial meeting, and it should be well publicized and marketed. Play it up for several days; offer snacks or pizza to help boost the numbers. Have a well-planned agenda. If you have Varsity debaters, let your captain(s) do much of the talking and orientation. Don't worry, regardless of how long your debate program has been around, this meeting has nothing to do with teaching students how to debate, or teaching about the topic. This meeting has everything to do with recruiting and motivating, and also about setting a tone and an identity for your debate squad. The information that should be distributed is basic and factual -- tournament schedule, CDL fact sheet, copy of a media article or two, and squad guidelines.

### **Set Rules and Objectives**

The guidelines alluded to in the previous step: begin with a basic set of squad guidelines or squad ground rules, which might include when meetings are held and how many each member of the squad must attend, when tournaments are and how many tournaments per season each member can (or must) attend, what research assignments will be given and what the consequences will be for non-completion, etc.

Objectives should start off very rudimentary and reachable – something like the objective of sending three (or more) JV teams to the first tournament – but then they should steadily get more ambitious and challenging, until you might have as a goal to get at least one JV team to the elimination rounds of a second-semester tournament.

## **Week Two**

### **Create Team Partnerships**

This is one of the more enjoyable tasks at the beginning of the season. Students like the prospect of working with a partner to learn (and do) debate. Policy debate is structured in teams of two, so pairing you should pair your students into partnerships early-on. There are two schools of thought on partner assignment. One says let the students decide themselves, since they ultimately must debate with their partner. The other says that coaches should be able to configure their teams competitively in the manner they see fit. You might pursue a middle ground: ask for each student's first and second choices for a partner, and then you make the actual pairings.

### **Introduce Policy Debate**

You'll need some basic primer material (from, for example, the Policy Debate Manual or the Judge Reference Guide) to distribute and discuss on the speaker order and burdens, speech times, the burdens of both the Affirmative and Negative, etc.

### **Select and Teach a Single Affirmative Case**

It's important that you only teach and coach one of the affirmative cases at the beginning of the season for JV debaters. You will only have the ability to prepare your debaters well on one of these cases. Further, debaters can easily feel overwhelmed at the beginning of the school year, particularly the beginners. You can accelerate JV debaters' development by enabling them to focus more narrowly early in the season. Debaters learn more about debate, typically, from their peers than they do from their teacher; so selecting one case gives you a greater chance for more cohesive sharing of knowledge and information among the debaters themselves.

### **Order and Distribute the Core Files**

Check with the CDL administration or the CDL programming site for the Core Files vendor from which you should order your core files. You should provide each team with their own set, and have a few extra copies of the Core Files on hand. You can set aside the affirmative files for the three cases that you are not starting the year running. But everyone should get and file all of the negative files.

### **File the Core Files**

It is very important that a team file be kept, for a reference resource and as a master copy (to make later sets). Also, the team file demonstrates the filing technique that all members of the squad should follow. Filing must be done as a team, collectively, the first time; no first-year debaters will perform this task correctly without having it walked through for them.

### **Give Summaries Assignments**

Since it won't be possible for debaters to read through and become familiar with the entirety of the negative files by the first tournament, it is desirable to assign each debater on the squad the task of becoming familiar with one or more of the issues in the negative files, and to summarize that issue in writing for the rest of the squad. You should have a checklist of information for each piece of evidence on an issue: a) a one-sentence summary of the card (in the student's own words); b) what is the value or purpose of this piece of evidence, relative to the broader issue/argument in which it appears; c) what is the piece of evidence's best strength; d) what is its biggest flaw or vulnerability? Summarizations can be presented orally, at least on a select set of the files.

### **Establish a Tournament Logistics Procedure**

To help you manage your time, it is a good idea to begin delegating tournament logistics and administration as soon as you can. This is where team officers and other student leaders, parents, and assistant coaches, and even volunteers who know very little about policy debate, can be very helpful.

## **Week Three**

### **Check Files/Review Summaries**

Since it is so important to begin from a set of organized and complete files, it is essential that you check to make sure that each of your teams has a file that is in this condition – i.e., organized and complete. An additional advantage to this initial emphasis is that even students who are finding policy debate baffling – and they almost all do, at first – can file: filing is a rudimentary (though very important) organizational skill. Many students will master it quickly – this will build their morale. It will also help them win debates.

The summaries that you have assigned should be turned in and you should check them. If many of them are reasonably solid efforts, it would make sense to have them presented to the rest of the squad by the students that did them. These presentations can both instill in the students the importance of understanding the evidence closely, and they can help provide some measure of familiarity with the core files to the entire squad.

### **Conduct Speaking Drills**

The most popular debate speaking drill is probably the “pen in the mouth” drill. (This drill is featured in the *60 Minutes* story on UDLs). All of the debaters on the JV squad read the 1AC (or 1NC case attacks or a disad shell) together, with a pen in each of their mouths (horizontally, with the tip and the end out of the mouth, on opposite ends). This helps debaters practice enunciation, while it helps familiarize debaters with the many unfamiliar words

in these briefs. Since there is such a heavy reading component in policy debate, speaking drills that require students to read aloud make very good sense, particularly for beginning debaters.

### **Conduct Mini-Debates**

Mini-debates are one of the debate coach's most productive exercises. All debate coaches should be familiar with this exercise, and all debate coaches should use it liberally. In a nutshell, the exercise focuses on a single "issue" in a debate round – e.g., a disadvantage, a set of solvency attacks, a topicality violation, a critique. It sets up shortened speech times, so that the mini-debate is conducted on that one issue only. The format is as follows:

#### Off-Case Issues

1AC is skipped

1NC – 2 Minutes

2AC – 3 Minutes

Negative Block – 3.5 Minutes

1AR – 1.5 Minutes

2NR – 2 Minutes

2AR – 2 Minutes

#### Case Issues

1AC – 2 Minutes

1NC – 2 Minutes

2AC – 2.5 Minutes

Negative Block – 3.5 Minutes

1AR – 1.5 Minutes

2NR – 2 Minutes

2AR – 2 Minutes

For off-case issues, for example, the shell is read in the 1NC, the 2AC answers are read next, then the debaters have to refute using line-by-line skills (which beginners will only be learning, of course) and analysis, as in an actual debate.

A great deal can be learned through this exercise; in fact, you can use it to focus on one or two of the skills that you feel are most important to develop among your debaters at the time – e.g., flowing skills, word economy, argument or evidence analysis, rebuttal strategy, clash and line-by-line skills, etc. This exercise is extremely elastic – it can be highly useful for the raw beginner and the veteran Varsity debater, while the coach can be looking for and analyzing different features of debate for each.

### **Do Flowing Exercises**

Flowing exercises are kind of the flip side of speaking exercises: they reflect the listening/writing skills that are at the receiving end of the speaking skills so important in policy debate. Flowing – like line-by-line debating – takes time to learn. The best first-year debaters don't flow well (and don't "clash") in the first half of the season. But they do make gradual progress toward understanding and controlling these skills. Flowing exercises facilitate learning line-by-line debating. First year debaters as a rule dislike learning to flow, but

flowing skills, and the line-by-line debating they enable, separate the JV teams in the elims from those who don't advance, by T3 or T4.

### **Reach Out to Parents**

It is important that you reach out to parents – in the form of a letter mailed to the house, and/or a telephone call – early in the year. Parents will be much more supportive if they feel that they have some relationship with the coach, if the team's teacher-leader is a real person to them. You can also alert parents to the schedule (including times that students will be getting back from events), and solidify support in specific ways (signing up to judge at certain tournaments, for example).

## **Week Four**

### **Have Full Practice Rounds**

Early season practice rounds for first-year debaters are not pretty. They are not satisfying in any way. But they are not any the less important. It is a useful rule to require that any one that is registered for tournament competition must have at least one practice round before the event. A practice round is as important before tournament competition as a dress rehearsal is before opening night – and for many of the same reasons. The trick with practice rounds is determining who will judge them all; having a Varsity squad can solve this problem, but absent this option, it is better to have a very inexperienced auditor to hear a practice round than it is not to have a practice round at all. And it's better, if it's possible, to promote the practice rounds as meaningful, to up the ante on them, so that debaters are even more inclined to take them seriously.

### **Convene a Strategy Session**

A few days before the tournament (the first, and the later ones too) you should make time to run down with your full squad exactly what blocks they will run against each of the other cases likely to be run at the tournament, and what blocks they will run against each of the negative arguments that might be run against their affirmative case. You can discuss what the better arguments are to try to win the debates on, though this level of strategic thinking is quite likely beyond the capacity of early first-year debaters. You should make heavy use of the Negative Strategy Guide which essentially provides your debaters with a recommended negative script against each of the Core Files cases. This session, along with the accompanying Negative Strategy Guide, will help make your first-year debaters much more comfortable and less nervous – since they will feel like they have a “game plan” for every likely situation they will encounter.

### **Build Pre-Tournament Morale and Cohesion**

As important as anything else to the achievement of your objectives, will be your squad's morale going in – and coming out – of Tournament One. You want to be in as much control of this factor, as you can be. You cannot really be in control of your squad's performance at the competition, but you can basically control your squad's attitude going into the competition. You might have a looser, socially-oriented meeting the day before the tournament, to underline the point: whatever happens at the tournament, we're all on this debate team because we like each other, we're a unit, we have fun together, and we'll have more fun throughout the debate season, win or lose.