

# **A Coach's Notes<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Connecticut Debate Association 2006-07 Summary Edition**

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### **Introduction**

This is the summary edition for the 2006-07 CDA season. It's a bit late, but I wanted to distribute a piece I wrote summarizing what I have observed from the rounds I judged last year. I hope you will find it interesting and useful. I've added some statistics on the tournaments the CDA ran last year. You may find these useful if someone asks you about the CDA and why it is a valuable experience for your debaters. Finally, I've reprised the 2006-07 resolutions in a table for those who want a complete list.

I would appreciate any feedback you have, good and bad. Please feel free to email me with your comments. The best comments and suggestions will find their way into subsequent issues. I would also consider publishing reasoned comments or replies from coaches or students in subsequent issues.

### **Summary of the 2006-07 Season**

In 2006-07 a total of 25 schools participated in one or more of 9 CDA tournaments—there were double tournaments on two Saturdays—with 874 rounds of debate. At our two December tournaments we had a total of 112 teams or 224 debaters, and we averaged 87 teams, 174 debaters and 130 rounds of debate per month. 22 of the 25 schools had debaters who qualified for state finals, where 67 teams competed at the end of March. I can't tell you yet precisely how many individual students participated during the year, but I'm working on it and will update you when I have some numbers.

### **What Are We Doing? Some Comments on Technique**

Every debate is unique, and there are many ways to win. However, there are a number of tactics that I am convinced are likely to both help individual teams win debates, but also improve the quality of the debate. I can only speak on the 23 debates I actually observed

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over the course of the season, but I suspect that they provide a fair sample of what happened in the other 851 debates that I did not see. Those 23 debates include all seven final rounds, which ought to include the best teams in the league.

## **Five Essential Tactics**

I will focus on what I think are five essential tactics that every team should use. While there is much advice one can give to debaters, most of it depends on the resolution and the debate itself. Others, like presenting a case, are too obvious to discuss here. Still others, like the phrasing of contentions or how to conduct cross-ex, are hard to judge and depend on the preferences of whoever is commenting on the debate.

The five tactics listed below, however, are straightforward and easy to observe. You can tell instantly whether a debater has done them or not. They do not depend on the actions of the other team or of your debate partner. They are:

1. First Affirmative Constructive: Provide a definition of terms or a sense of the resolution
2. Second Negative Constructive: Present the Negative contentions and attack the Affirmative contentions.
3. First and Second Negative Rebuttals: Present a unified, eight minute speech that does not repeat itself
4. Second Negative Rebuttal: Summarize the debate for the Negative team
5. Second Affirmative Rebuttal: Summarize the debate for the Affirmative team

I will explain each tactic, and then tell you what I saw in the 23 rounds I judged or observed.

### **First Affirmative Constructive: Define Terms**

The rules of debate provide the Affirmative with the right to make a reasonable definition of terms. Some resolutions are so clear that the definition may hardly matter. However, if the Affirmative does not define terms, they cede that right to the Negative. If the Negative then defines terms in a way that jeopardizes the Affirmative case, the Affirmative then has the burden of showing the Negative's definition is unreasonable. An Affirmative that does not define terms may be giving a valuable gift to the Negative team. Why take that chance?

As I have written elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> you usually do not need to define individual words: a resolution is more than the sum of its terms. It is generally more effective to provide a restatement of the resolution that puts all of the terms in context. The Affirmative has to convince the Judge to adopt the whole resolution, not one or two words in it.

And this leads to a second important reason to define terms: providing the Judge with a sense of the resolution. What is the debate is going to be about? Rather than let the Judge try to figure it out for himself or herself, why not tell him or her what the critical

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<sup>2</sup> See Coach's Notes, October 2006, "Defining Terms and Arguing About Definitions."

issue is going to be up front? A proper definition should signal to the Judge what you intend to do to convince him or her to adopt the resolution.

First Affirmative speakers did well with this tactic, defining terms in 13 out of 16 preliminary rounds, and five out of seven final rounds.

### **First Negative Constructive: Present AND Attack**

The First Negative should do three things. First, they should respond to the Affirmative definition of terms, even if only acknowledging acceptance. Second, they should present the Negative contentions. Most teams failed to do the first, accepting the Affirmative definitions by default. All First Negative speakers did the second.

But the third and most critical thing every First Negative should do in their constructive speech is respond to the Affirmative contentions. Why is this important? After all, the First Affirmative had six minutes to lay out the Affirmative case. Shouldn't the First Negative take as much time to explain the Negative case to the Judge?

There are two reasons why the First Negative should split his or her time evenly between laying out the Negative case and responding to the Affirmative. The first reason is inherent in the structure of debate. Someone has to speak first, define terms, and explain what the debate will be about. This is certainly an advantage to the Affirmative, but it is balanced by the fact that the Affirmative also has the burden of proof. The Negative need not present a case against the resolution, only show the Affirmative has not made one. Since you can never know which path will be successful, the Negative always should do both: present a case against the resolution and also show that the Affirmative has not presented a convincing case in favor of the resolution.

However, I believe there is a second and much more important tactical reason why the First Negative must respond to the Affirmative case in his or her constructive. Consider what might happen if the First Negative fails to respond to the Affirmative contentions. The Second Affirmative can begin his or her constructive by noting that the Negative has not replied to any of the Affirmative contentions. Therefore all of the Affirmative contentions stand by default. Time spent by the Second Affirmative saying this, perhaps 30 seconds. The Second Affirmative can then spend almost his or her entire constructive speech rebutting the Negative contentions. Assuming the Second Affirmative does a good job, at the end of those six minutes the Negative team is back to square one: the Affirmative case stands, the Judge has been reminded that the Affirmative case stands, and the Negative case has been entirely rebutted. It's as if the First Negative Constructive had never happened!

In the 23 varsity debates I saw this year, only nine First Negatives both presented their case and attacked the Affirmative (six out of 16 preliminary rounds and three out of seven final rounds). To be fair to the Negative, I've never seen a Second Affirmative punish the Negative in the way I've just described, but sooner or later someone is going to do it.

Even more surprising, in seven of the 23 debates I observed, the Second Affirmative only addressed the Affirmative contentions in the Second Affirmative Constructive, ignoring the Negative contentions entirely. Four of those were debates where the First Negative ignored the Affirmative contentions in the First Negative Constructive. In other words, in four out of 23 debates at the end of the Second Affirmative Constructive speech, after almost 30 minutes of debate, the two teams had yet to clash! And one of those debates was a final round!

### **First and Second Negative Rebuttals: Coordinate**

The Negative rebuttals follow each other with no intervening speech by the Affirmative. Conceptually the Negative team should treat this as one eight minute speech given by two people. Just as you shouldn't repeat the same argument twice in one speech, the Negative team should coordinate their rebuttals so as not to repeat each other. This is just common sense—if you don't repeat yourself you can present more arguments and provide more detail to support the arguments you do present. In general, the First Negative should reply to any outstanding Affirmative points and the Second Negative should summarize the debate for the Negative side.

In my 23 debates, the two Negative speakers coordinated their rebuttals 11 times, in six out of 16 preliminary rounds and in five out of seven final rounds.

### **Second Negative and Second Affirmative Rebuttals: Summarize**

These second rebuttals are the last speeches in the debate for each side. A significant portion of each speech needs to be devoted to summarizing the debate to the Judge. At the end of the First Negative rebuttal the teams have been speaking for 44 minutes: what has it all been about? It's time to step back from the contentions and figure out what the important arguments are, and explain to the Judge why your team's position on the resolution should prevail.

Debaters often get caught up in the details of the debate. They feel a need to respond to every point made by the other team, whether or not the point is significant. Alternately they will repeat their own contentions without reflection on their importance to the course of the arguments. They forget that the purpose of the debate is to persuade the Judge to accept or reject the resolution. One key to doing this is to look at what has been said by both sides, summarize the important points in dispute, and explain to the Judge why they should be decided in your favor.

This means more than just going over your contentions for the fourth time. Over the course of six or seven speeches the importance of the arguments will shift. Some will fall away entirely. Others will become the focus of debate. You must learn to listen to your opponents, go over your notes, select the critical points, and present them in a way that supports your position on the resolution. You should give the Judge a rationale for deciding in your favor rather than force him or her to sift through his notes to find one.

In the 23 debates I saw, only three Second Negatives and four Second Affirmatives actually summarized the debate in their rebuttals. The other 20 Second Negatives and 19

Second Affirmatives used their rebuttals either to respond to specific points or to repeat their contentions.

## Overall

The table below summarizes the 23 debates I judged or observed. The numbers represent how many times debaters used each of the five tactics described above in the 16 preliminary and seven final rounds. The debaters did best defining terms, 18 out of 23 debates (over three-fourths of the time). The overall percentages are less than 50% for the rest of the categories, and below 20% for summarizing the debate.

	Out of 16 Preliminary Rounds	Out of 7 Final Rounds	Out of 23 Total Rounds	Total %
1 <sup>st</sup> Affirmative: Define Terms	13	5	18	78%
2 <sup>nd</sup> Negative: Attack Affirmative	6	3	9	39%
Unified Negative Rebuttal	6	5	11	48%
Negative Summary	2	1	3	13%
Affirmative Summary	2	2	4	17%

## Does It Matter?

While I prefer the five tactics described above, many debaters and coaches may feel there are other tactics that are better than these five. I can't say that not using these tactics has hurt any team. The performance in the final rounds is only slightly better than in the preliminary rounds so it isn't clear that the top teams are using these tactics consistently. For the record, I try to judge primarily on the arguments, so I don't penalize debaters who fail to use these five tactics.

Nevertheless, more attention to these five techniques wouldn't hurt. They certainly served me well when I debated many years ago. I believe that I have given good reasons why the Affirmative and Negative teams should follow these practices. Are there any good reasons why they shouldn't? If you believe in a different approach, please let me know.

## Exercise

As part of your review of the last tournament's results, have your teams go over their notes and tell you how often they used the tactics described above. Ask them to discuss whether they believe they were more effective when they used them or not. If they aren't using these tactics, ask them what they are doing instead.

## 2006-07 School Year

<b>Tournament</b>	<b>Resolution</b>
October	Christopher Columbus' role in American history should continue to be celebrated in the U.S.
November	Federally standardized, electronically readable driver's licenses & ID cards and their associated federal database should be implemented throughout the U.S.
December	In the U.S. a student's race is an appropriate factor in admissions policies & practices at public elementary and secondary schools.
January	In the U.S. the keeping of animals in zoos should be banned.
February	In the U.S. public high school athletes should undergo mandatory random drug testing.
March 3	The U.S. should actively pursue development and expansion of its nuclear power facilities.
March 24	The U.S. government should pay slavery Reparations to its African-American citizens.