

A Coach's Notes¹

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May 31, 2013

What I Would Do on My Summer Vacation

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Introduction

This is the last edition of the 2012-13 CDA season. Previous year's editions can be found through the [Training Materials](#) page on the [CDA web site](#).

These Notes are intended for your benefit in coaching your teams and for the students to use directly. I hope that you will find them useful teaching tools. Please feel free to make copies and distribute them to your debaters.

I appreciate any feedback you have, good and bad. The best comments and suggestions will find their way into subsequent issues. I would also consider publishing signed, reasoned comments or replies from coaches or students in subsequent issues. So if you would like to reply to my comments or sound off on some aspect of the debate topic or the CDA, I look forward to your email.

Summer

We all look forward to relaxing over the summer. Many of you will have jobs of one sort or another. Your teachers are hoping you won't forget everything you learned all year, and you may have a reading list. You may even take a course or two. But you probably have a lot more free time compared to the school year.

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Don't forget your debate skills! While debate camp may be an option for some of you, there is a lot you can do on your own, and a lot more you can do if you get together with your teammates.

Maintaining Basic Skills

If you are a singer, or play an instrument, you already know you have to practice regularly. You don't need to appear on stage, but scales, finger exercises and practice pieces help you stay in tune.

Speaking and listening are the two basic debate skills. You will get rusty if all you do is talk with your friends and send text messages. Fortunately, you can practice by yourself, and you can keep up on current events or get your summer reading done at the same time. Read aloud from the newspaper, magazine or book for ten or fifteen minutes every day. Watch the evening news every day, or better yet, the *PBS News Hour* or listen to *All Things Considered* on public radio. Practice taking notes on a few of the stories each night.

Of course if you do get a chance to speak publicly, take it. If you take a course over the summer, you will probably need to take notes in class. But you can turn many informal situations to good purpose. If you have a summer job as a camp counselor, or a guide, or even a waiter/waitress, you have to spend time talking to people. Think about what you say and how you say it, and see if you can improve your patter day by day. Whatever you spend your summer doing, think about ways you can apply and practice your debate skills. Be creative!

You can find more suggestions in a piece titled [Preparing for Debate](#) on the [Training Page](#) of the CDA web site.

Reviewing Old Rounds

If you just finished a year of debate, you attended as many as six tournaments and perhaps State Finals. You could have 18 or more rounds of debate behind you. Your notes from each round are a valuable record of your performance.² If you have made a practice of reviewing your performance after each tournament, that's great. If you haven't, you now have time to do so, or to go over them again in more detail.

Start with the packet. If you didn't keep your copy, they are all available on the CDA web site through the Schedule, History or Training pages. Take time to read them through at leisure (out loud, if you want to practice speaking!). If there is anything you don't understand, look it up! Between Wikipedia and Google (or Bing or Yahoo!) ideas and facts are pretty easy to track down.

Make a list of Affirmative and Negative points in the packet, then refine them into contentions and supporting arguments. How do they compare to the cases and supporting arguments you actually ran? How do they compare to the cases and arguments of your

² If your notes aren't a valuable record, see the previous section and practice. For most debates the only witnesses will be you, your partner, the other team and the judge. Your notes are the only reliable resource you have to figure out what you did right, what you did wrong, and how to do better. You need to learn to take notes well enough to re-create the round!

opponents? How do they compare to the arguments used by the teams in the final round?³

Then go through each round and review each speech. Did each speaker cover all of the outstanding arguments of the previous speaker, and note the open arguments the previous speaker missed? Did a speaker spend too much time on one argument to the neglect of others? How would you rebalance the speech or add to it to properly cover the required ground?

Consider the questions used by both sides in cross-ex? Did they focus on what the speaker just finished saying? Were they aimed at weak points in the case? Were the answers useful and were they actually used in subsequent speeches? Can you think of better questions?

Finally, did the second speakers fairly summarize the round? “Fairly” is a key point: most debaters tend to present a rather one-sided re-cap of the debate, leaving out a lot that doesn’t fit the way they would like things to be. A fair summary accurately reflects what was said, blending all of the important lines of argument into a consistent explanation of why your side deserves the decision. You don’t make your case by reporting incorrectly or leaving things out. You make your case by weighing the arguments and showing why, on balance, they support your side. You may even have to admit you lost some points. And you should be able to summarize any debate convincingly for either side. Good summaries take a lot of practice, and summer is a good time to do it.

With more perspective, you will see things in each round that you missed, and could improve the next time. It’s hard to talk about or practice debate without examples, and your past rounds are your examples. Don’t dwell on the past: you will never repeat a round exactly. But you will be in similar situations, and you can come up with better ways to handle them.

Researching New Topics

Okay, you’re following the news, and you’ve reviewed your past debates. Another thing you should do is to educate yourself in subjects that will help you with future topics.

There are copies of the packets from the past seven years and a file with resolutions from ten years before that on the CDA web site. There are also lists of motions from a number of parliamentary tournaments. Have you ever taken a look at them? Try sorting them by subject area. Or, for each topic, make a list of the important ideas required to understand the topic. Sort the list and see what comes up more often. It’s reasonable to assume that concepts that have been useful in past tournaments will be useful in future tournaments, even as the resolutions change.

We try to make the topic each month current but non-obvious. However, certain subjects come up regularly: economics, foreign policy, military policy, environment, education, government, human rights, elections, criminal law, Constitutional law, international law,

³ I’ve also said this before: the final round is a great opportunity to practice taking notes under realistic conditions. You can also compare them to the notes taken by your teammates to test your accuracy. And if you don’t take notes, how can you have an opinion on who won? If you are serious about debate, you should take notes every round you see, and then review the round as if it were one of your own.

the legal system and so on. If they don't come up directly in the resolution, they come up as secondary issues.

Could you give a ten minute talk on each of these subjects? Can you name and compare different theories used by experts and apply them with examples? Do you know the difference between demand- and supply-side economics? Or the English and French legal systems? Or a parliamentary versus a presidential form of government? Compare US military interventions over the past 50 years? A good debater should know almost everything, so you have plenty to learn. Most schools aim to make you into a lifelong learner: debate just accelerates the process.

Wikipedia, like any encyclopedia, is a great place to start. Type any of the phrases above into the search box and you will open up a fascinating rabbit hole where you can spend hours exploring the topic. All sources have biases, and Wikipedia is no exception, though often you will see different opinions on a topic expressed in the same article. But Wikipedia articles are usually heavily footnoted and have a list of external sources that you can also find online if you want more depth. You may not be allowed to use Wikipedia as a source in your school papers, but for a broad introduction to most topics it serves very well.

There are also a number of places you can find conflicting opinions on current issues. One of my favorites is the New York Times series, [Room for Debate](#) which presents five or six short comments on a controversial current issue. Not only are they informative, but you can use them for practice cases or debates. They run a new subject almost every day, and there are several years' worth stored on line. Another is [Project Syndicate](#), a web site with commentary from experts on a wide variety of subjects. You want to make sure you read opinion as well as fact and theory. Debate is about learning how to state and defend a position. Newspaper editorials and op-ed articles are useful examples.

Getting Together

While most tournaments occur during the school year, debate has no season, and no prohibition on practicing any time of year. Make plans to get together with your debate partner or entire team at regular intervals over the summer. There is no reason your weekly team meetings shouldn't continue all year long.

Most local libraries have activity rooms that can be used by local groups. The high school debate team ought to qualify. You might speak to the librarian before the end of the school year about whether you can reserve a room one evening a week. (But remember, if you reserve a place to meet, you need to show up!)

You can use your time doing many of the things discussed above: reviewing old debates and old topics; practicing building cases using old packets; making presentations on useful subject areas; discussing tactics for the best use of the preparation period; considering the best types of questions to use in cross-ex. Be creative.

Unlike most competitions, your coach will most likely not be in the room during your debates, and he couldn't give you advice until the round was over in any case. So you really need to learn to coach yourself. Learning to work with your partner and your teammates is a skill you should practice.

Debate Camp

If you type “debate camp” into a search engine, you will find references to a lot of college-sponsored summer programs for high school debaters. Many of them also advertise in the National Forensic League’s *Rostrum* magazine. Sometimes they are called “seminars” or “institutes” but “debate camp” captures the essence.

Most of these programs focus on one or more events sanctioned by the National Forensic League, so none is directly applicable to the style of debate in CDA. But any program that involves speaking, argument and research will help you. Just remember that styles differ, and you must learn to adapt your skills to suit the circumstances.

I can’t recommend any particular program to you. I did go to debate camp the summer before my junior year in high school, but that was a long time ago, and the program no longer exists. They tend to run for one to three weeks, and cost several thousand dollars, though some have limited scholarships available. Like most college run programs for high schoolers, they are also a bit of a taste of college life

If you go, remember that most of your teammates may not. You should try to bring back skills and ideas that others can use. Plan to make a report on what you learned, and how it can improve your team.

Last Thoughts

Debate is hard. Sure, you can come to the tournaments and win some debates without too much effort. But to win consistently, against any opponent, with any kind of judge, and to get to final rounds, requires skill, and skill requires practice. And skills deteriorate if they aren’t used regularly. You don’t need to spend a lot of time, but you do need to spend some time.

Have a great summer! I hope to see you at our tournaments next year.