

For More Structured Debate
By Ray Engel

When asked to write this essay the request was to argue in favor of “Rules” based debate (as opposed to “No-rules” debate). I have attempted to do just that, ...sort of. I advocate a position that I believe meets the needs and goals for some, but certainly not all, homeschooling families who associate themselves with academic debate. Despite an apparent minority status, I am convinced that “Rules” based debate provides an outstanding educational experience for homeschoolers.

Though it lacks in originality, I feel compelled to open with a little history to provide some perspective and context that might otherwise dribble and splatter through the text in a sorry, confusing manner. Then I cover a few specific issues from the “Rules” perspective, followed as quickly as possible by a conclusion. Hopefully, in the end it all ties together and makes sense.

I am a scientist and an engineer with no prior background in debate. My association with debate started during the last year of HSLDA’s direct involvement in homeschool debate, 1999-2000 when my oldest son became involved. At that time homeschool debate was still just a few years old. While I can’t prove it today, I am convinced that there wasn’t an evidence box that didn’t contain Christy Shipe’s “Introduction to Argumentation and Debate”, and the debaters referenced it regularly.

Life was simple then. Maybe the principles and practices set forth in “Shipe” were not rules, but in their ignorance everyone acted like they were and everything worked just fine. There seemed to be a widespread, if not universal, attitude that HSLDA debate was different than other debate leagues, and that was a good thing. Theory and tactics from the NFL and the college leagues were looked upon with suspicion at the very least. At a parents and coaches gathering at the 2000 National Tournament I was sitting by a person who was a well known figure in HSLDA (and later NCFCA) debate who pointed out a particular person and remarked something along the lines of “...college debate coach,...needs to be watched,...tries to teach things we don’t want.”

What was the net effect of this blissful, youthful ignorance? The debates focussed on the subject of the resolution. Everyone knew that the stock issues were the reason for decision, so you didn’t hear anyone debate this theory or that theory for determining a winner. Everyone understood that splitting the negative was unfair. If someone did so either intentionally or inadvertently, the consequence of being nailed from dropped arguments and likely loss of the round was without dispute.

Lest anyone doubt that changes have occurred in HSLDA/NCFCA debate I present the following explicit examples:

Then:

“At the end of the debate round, you will have to decide whether or not the affirmative team won all of the stock issues. The four stock issues are topicality, significance, inherency, and solvency. If the negative team clearly wins one of the stock issues, the negative team should win the round.” (HSLDA Home School Debate, The 2000 Debate Season Revised Judge’s Manual, Page 14)

Now:

“The policy stock issues paradigm is a way to evaluate whether the affirmative has upheld the resolution. It is designed to provide a framework to help the judge decide whether the affirmative has justified a change to the current system. These stock issues often become voting issues when identified by either the affirmative or negative.” (NCFCA Judging Team Policy Debate Manual, revised 1/03, Page 4)

Then:

“The 1NC speaker must at least generally address every part of the affirmative case. It is unfair to leave a major portion of the case, the plan for example, to the 2NC as the affirmative team cannot respond until the rebuttals. The negative block, the 2NC and 1NR, (back to back negative speeches) may be treated as one speech by the negative team. In other words, they may address different issues in each of these speeches.” (NCFCA Debate Judges Manual 2001, Page 5)

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These examples only hint at the magnitude of the change that has occurred. The explicit, written changes must be viewed from a perspective that understands a concurrent change in attitude has occurred toward this documentation. In our years in debate the documentation has shifted from being treated as mandatory protocol and rules to guidance material to be followed or not at each persons discretion. While “I don’t even believe in the Judge’s Manual” is the statement of one individual, the underlying attitude appears to be widely held within the NCFCA.

So what is the purpose of this long-winded history, beyond the cranky grouching of a grumpy old man? How does it relate to deciding whether “Rules” or “no rules” debate is best? I hope that as I present what I like about debate and why I think “Rules” have a valid place, you don’t think I sound like an alien from another planet, and recognize that I am in fact presenting concepts that were widely recognized and practiced in the early years of the NCFCA.

Having finished the history lesson, I need to digress just a bit more by inserting a philosophical observation or two that are essential to the discussion that follows. Imagine a real, finite, rectangular sheet of metal ready to use to make a bucket or pan to hold water. Try as you might, this material can be shaped into a pan that will only hold a certain amount of water. If you understand a little algebra or calculus, or have just basic common sense, you know there are certain rules governing how to shape this material to obtain the pan that will hold the most water (or whatever else you choose to place in it), but the maximum volume is unavoidably limited by the amount of metal available at the start.

People, like the pan, have limitations. We can only do so much, and most of us do best if we do only one thing at a time, especially learning something new. If you try to put both milk and water in the same pan at the same time you have neither good water nor good milk.

I believe the fundamental basis for being in the “Rules” camp vs. “no rules” is driven by the answer to the question, “Why do you debate?” to which there are two possible responses. You either debate because you want to learn how to focus on the topic at hand (the subject presented by the resolution), or you want to explore the theory of debate itself. Stated a little differently, either “debate” is a formal protocol that provides a framework for exploring the topic, or the current topic is simply the excuse of the moment for pitting one theory of debate against another.

In my house the purpose of debate is to provide an excuse to discuss the issues related to the current topic. It magically turns routine “academics” into a fun and challenging competition. My wife and I can either hand out texts, assign reading, and administer tests or we can get involved in debate where someone else assigns the topic (all those possible affirmative cases) and someone else (the opposing team) gives the tests. Debate is a great deal, and my wife likes it best. While she grades the math and grammar lessons I handle debate class.

Looking at debate as a means to an end rather than an end to itself places the rules of debate in the same general category as the rules for any other competitive activity, such as basketball. The rules of basketball are established so that when a group of people step onto a court there is no question about what is and isn’t allowed, and everyone can move right into playing the game.

Though the basketball analogy is simple, there may be some value in contemplating the alternative. Suppose for just a minute that the rules for basketball were just guidelines that need not be followed. It’s now just a guideline that you can’t bounce the ball with both hands, or better yet grab it and run down the court. It’s just a guideline that you can’t go off the court and into the bleachers (still running with the ball). It’s just a guideline that you can’t have the guy who is six inches taller than everyone else camp in the key. And while we are out there discussing those guidelines during the middle of the game, we can also stand around and ponder why the rim is exactly 10 feet off the ground and the free throw stripe is fifteen feet from the basket, and why I don’t get points for making a basket at the both ends of the court? Maybe such innovation and contemplation might be interesting to some, but whatever else may be going on, a good game of basketball is not.

At this point it is appropriate to bring the illustrations about the pan for holding water and the basketball game together. As almost every debater knows, there is never enough time in a debate round (except maybe for some first year debaters who are absolutely sure the clock has stopped leaving them stranded up there). With the precious limited time available a choice must be made; “What do I talk about?” Every second spent on discussing debate theory is a second that is no longer available for discussing the case. The clearer the rules regarding what is and isn’t allowed and how the winner will be decided, the less time needed for pondering these ideas and the more time there is for playing ball.

Does this mean that “Rules” based debate is “better” or that “No-rules” should never occur? Speaking from experience, such discussions are pointless and endless. So, I will move on without answering my own questions, leaving the reader to ponder the question on their own.

Who are the NCFCA debaters? Or maybe another way to phrase the question would be to ask, “Who should be participating in homeschool debate?” I am personally familiar with five different “Introduction to Debate” classes (three were mine, two were someone else’s). Altogether these classes were attended by 53 debate students. Out of those 53 students, a grand total of 10 actually became debaters. Furthermore, 3 of the 10 were children of the instructors. So, when you look at the general student population, only 14% made the jump to actually taking part in a real debate event (the success rate rises to only 19% if you include instructor’s children). Then, if back up one step and you recognize how difficult it is to get homeschoolers to become debate students, you begin to see what a small percentage of the population of the homeschool community is taking advantage of the benefits of debate.

Now I suspect you are either thinking I am off on a(nother?) pointless digression, or at least wondering what this has to do with “Rules” vs. “No-rules”. Time for one last trip to the water pan. Homeschool debate serves (or is intended to serve) students covering the wide range of 12-18 years old, all of whom have varied interests and abilities. These students are taught some sort of introduction to debate, which I suspect (no research on this one) is basic stock issues 98% of the time. The vast majority of these students have trouble enough with these stock issues, which most debaters only begin to really understand and apply with any effectiveness sometime during their second year in debate, or later.

Unfortunately, in many cases they never get the opportunity to practice applying the stock issues before they are abruptly informed that the stock issues really aren’t that important (or at least aren’t ‘cool’). In fact, stock issues are for infant debaters. What they really need to focus on is advanced debate, such as kritics, parameterization, and whatever happens to be the latest fad. This leap from unmastered fundamentals to “advanced” theory makes about as much sense as Jr. High students going out to play basketball using an NBA 3-point line. Many are going to step back and heave away, to little or no purpose, just to prove they really are grown up. Never mind the fact that they would be doing themselves far more good standing in one place shooting 10-foot set shots over and over again until they started to make the shot more often than they missed. A little John Wooden (google for John Wooden if you don’t know who he is) school of debate might have some value. Two-thirds of his practices were grinding through the fundamentals, and the fastest way to the bench during a game was to try something fancy.

With this essay getting so long that the beginning already seems like ancient history, for both of you who are still reading I can see that it is well past time for me to conclude. As the categories clearly describe, there are only two options: “Rules” or “No-rules”. Most “No-rules” advocates are very serious about this. The imposition of a rule of any sort is an anathema to the very idea of debate as they wish it to exist. There is no compromise on this issue. Any rule of any sort is automatically a contradiction to “NO” rules.

The solution to this impasse is quite simple. It already exists. The way out of this dilemma is for there to be two venues for debate. One venue will serve the “No-rules” community. This group is currently very much at home and in charge of the NCFCA. The other venue will address the needs and interests of those who feel “Rules” create the type of educational environment they are seeking. With the advent of the alternate league run by the Christian Communicators of Ohio (CCO), the foundation of a “Rules” based debate activity has been laid. This league is not currently open to everyone, but I am certain that in time others will follow CCO’s lead, either in association with CCO or separately.

Thus, my conclusion is that the interests of “Rules” and “No-rules” adherents are irreconcilable. Because of this the existence of two different homeschool debate leagues should be viewed as a great opportunity for the homeschool community. These leagues should not be viewed as competing with one another, but as complementary options serving differing clientele. It is my hope that the NCFCA continues to thrive and grow, and that it provides a happy home for “No-rules” debaters for many years to come. At the same time I look forward to the expansion of opportunities for “Rules” debaters, and anticipate the time when such opportunities become available in my part of the country.