

## **Tournament Best Practices**

### **1. Basic Rules of Engagement**

#### **The Three Things a Tournament Director Has to Keep in Mind**

I have been to every kind of tournament imaginable, big and small, near and far, good and bad. I have probably had every kind of experience imaginable. When I started out, I had no idea what I was doing. (For that matter, there are those who maintain I still have no idea what I am doing.) After a while I got a feel for the kind of tournaments I liked, and more to the point, the kind of tournaments that were best for my students. It wasn't a one-size-fits-all situation. Some tournaments for novices, others for varsity, some for this, some for that. Every coach works it out as best they can.

In the 25 years or so I've been in the debate world, tournaments have come and gone. And some have stayed, almost as icons. The age of a tournament has little to do with its inherent value. Just because a tournament has been around forever doesn't make it a good tournament, nor does it make it a tournament for your team. On top of that, tournaments have good years and bad years, often for reasons over which they have no control. But one thing is clear. You are going to attend the tournaments that you think you ought to attend, for varying reasons. You don't *have* to go anywhere. As an attendee, you can pick and choose.

And this is the first thing a tournament director needs to keep in mind: By running a tournament, you are offering a service. And you are (probably) selling that service. In this regard, you are no different from anyone else selling any other service. It is your job to entice people into wanting to purchase it.

#### **Thing Number One: The attendees of your tournament are your customers.**

At the point where you decide to run a tournament, every decision that follows has to be aimed at satisfying your customers. As the tournament director, you can do whatever you want. But doesn't it make sense to do what your customers want? Granted, we are all linked to education and educational goals, so we'll take that as a given. But your tournament is just one on the annual calendar, perhaps just one on a given weekend, and attendees, inevitably limited by time and finances, can pick and choose. If you like a certain kind of tournament, but all the people you wish to attract like a different kind of tournament, why wouldn't you provide that different kind of tournament? If everyone wants red cookies, why would you try to sell them blue cookies?

Of course, any tournament director does indeed have ideas of how to do things, and there's nothing inherently wrong with mixing things up a bit. The history of the activity demonstrates that there is always change. But are your personal changes warranted? And will they appeal to your customers? At the core, the question is, are you doing something because you want to do it, or because it's best for the tournament? More to the point, will

your customers like it? No tournament lasts forever, unless it satisfies its customers on a regular basis.

**Thing Number One Variation: The attendees of your tournament are more than just customers: they are your guests.**

At a presentation I gave of the idea of attendees as customers, it was suggested that it might be better to think of them as guests. There is merit to this, although I still maintain that, since they're paying money to be there, the customer paradigm is still accurate.

Then again, think of the Disney organization. People who go to their theme parks, while they are obviously customers, are always and officially referred to as guests. This designation is an elevation from merely someone who bought a ticket. Disney tries to treat people in such a way that they forget that they're paying for it. Disney tries to make everyone feel special. Disney tries to provide a magical experience.

How farfetched is it for your tournament to strive to achieve the same goals?

**Thing Number Two: The Number One Goal of a Tournament is to End**

The vast majority of decisions you make in planning for and running a tournament should be aimed at ending at a reasonable time. This means both a reasonable time each day, if it's a multi-day event, and a reasonable time on the last day, so that people can get home without too much hardship. This means no punishing twelve-hours-plus of debating a day. This means efficient tabbing. This means no lacunae, like endless lunch breaks or unwanted award ceremonies, or waiting for lunch breaks and wanted award ceremonies. It means every cog in your tournament wheel has to be geared toward getting it over with. You are dealing with high school students, not robots.

Everybody wants to go home, including you. Make it so.

**Thing Number Three: The Tournament Director is a Manager**

The TD has one job: getting everyone else to do their jobs. The TD needs to be everywhere at all times, always available. Maybe there's a problem with the food. Maybe there's a problem with rooms being locked. Maybe a kid fell down the stairs and broke an arm. Maybe there's a protest against evidence use in PF. These are the sort of things a TD has to take care of, not dishing out debate ziti for two hours or finding just the right judge for the bubbles in round 4.

The TD is the CEO of the tournament, the manager who gets other people to perform the necessary tasks. If a TD is in charge of something, say tabbing, their focus is elsewhere. When something comes up—and it will—the TD has to handle it. If the TD is otherwise engaged, either the thing they're doing gets postponed or bollixed, or the emergency they should be handling gets postponed or bollixed. Neither is the way it should be.

If you're directing a tournament, select people to head up all the areas that need to happen. Tabbing. Food. Judges Lounge. Finding "lost" judges. Help desk for linking to tabroom. Anything else you can think of. You do none of them. Just keep your phone charged, and be prepared to think fast.