The Waitlist — Why You Need it and How to Manage it

"If men were angels, no government would be necessary." When James Madison wrote these words, he was no doubt thinking about the debate community. If everyone were a good actor working for the best results for all, you could just open the door to your tournament and let in everyone who shows up. Unfortunately, in the real, angel-challenged world, if you did that you'd be potentially letting in a whole bunch of devils. Hence the use of a waitlist is a must. Waitlisting probably isn't necessary for local one-day tournaments where all entrants are welcome, e.g., novice scrambles, or where there's no question about space limitations, meaning that everyone is welcome, and they'll all debate, somehow, even if it's both teams from the same school doing it in the custodian's closet. We're mainly talking invitationals here.

Managing the waitlist—and the tournament numbers in general—in a rational, intelligent fashion, is one of the most important obligations of the tournament director. There are best practices proven over time for this, and adhering to these practices will make for a more satisfying tournament experience from start to finish. That's what we're going to discuss here.

There are three chief reasons for waitlisting entries:

1. Waitlisting all entries gives your customers breathing room for signing up.
2. Waitlisting all entries allows you to manage the slots in the various events
3. Waitlisting all entries gives you time to analyze sketchy entries.

Breathing Room

Once tournament registration went electronic, popular tournaments without waitlists could easily run out of space within minutes. People just put in a lot of hopeful (and often jokingly bogus) names, and suddenly the tournament was filled. Famously Bronx Science, among others, opened registration at midnight in the middle of summer, and shut down the next morning. East coast coaches stayed up late that night so as not to get shut out, or had their students who were on vacation at Disneyland and hence on Pacific Time handle the registration chores. But signing up quickly hardly seems like the best way to determine who attends your tournament. If you are limited to, say, 100 entries in a division, the first schools will claim them all with TBAs, even if you limit them to 5 or 6 (or whatever) slots each. Even if you eventually sort things out, not using a waitlist can be shutting out your regular and reliable tournament customers, making it more difficult for them to manage their entries. You need to be on top of this.

Over time we've settled on a process that says dealing with the waitlist should begin two weeks to a month after registration opens. The process aims at giving everyone plenty of time to get signed up and to be treated equally, as compared to a first-come, first-served approach, which rewards the unimportant characteristic of signing up the minute registration opens.

Practical Management of Waitlists

1. All entries in all divisions should be set up as waitlist only.
2. Allow two full weeks to a month for schools to register, so that people don't feel unnecessary pressure to sign up at some artificial deadline.
3. One person manages the waitlist. Too many with their fingers in the pie can be problematic. If a tournament is *that* big, at least coordinate on questionable entries.
4. After the breathing room time elapses, you start clearing the waitlist by letting in an equal number of entries for each school. First, decide how big the division should be. Then on tabroom's waitlist page, arrange the entries by school. Admit 1 from the first school, then 1 from the next school, and so forth down the list of schools. Then admit another one from each school, going on until you reach your limit. This distributes the slots fairly and reasonably.
5. Check the waitlist every day after that, because people will drop, especially closing in on your Delete TBA date. Keep the numbers at the limit, and keep them fair and square, giving every school equal access.
6. You might want to make exceptions. For instance, at the college tournaments I run, where a few schools from the other side of the country regularly attend every year, I might give them more slots starting out—knowing that local teams will catch up later—because of their need to make plane reservations. If virtually all of your entries are flying in, of course, you wouldn't need to make such an exception. One tournament I run supports a local high school program financially and gives them special treatment. Another tournament rewards the local high school that provides them extra building usage. These and some other exceptions can be handled early on, and transparently. No one will reasonably object to them.
7. The fact that someone writes you a lot of emails asking you for extra slots or early slots or any other sort of special treatment does not obligate you to grant those slots. While you can make an argument for supporting an economically challenged school in your neighborhood, you'd be harder pressed to argue in favor of granting the most slots to the most annoying people. (And by the way, there is no law on the books of which I am aware that obligates you to reply to every annoying email you receive. I think it was either Adam or Eve who first pointed out that no amount of niceness ever cured annoying.)

8. On the other hand, be helpful to newcomers. There are always a few people for whom this is the first time. Make sure you clearly communicate your process as you go, and if necessary, take these novices by the hand. The debate/tournament experience can be daunting. Be an undaunter.
9. There is always a decent droppage at the point where registration closes and fees are frozen. You can continue to let in people after the drop-dead date, but keep in mind that in the final post-freeze run-up to a tournament people may not really want any waitlist slots they're still holding, so don't inadvertently charge them for those slots. In other words, give them the option to not accept them.
10. Keep in mind that it is important that you stick to team limits. Just because a school has 10 LD teams doesn't mean that your tournament has to accept them all. The best tournaments run with the most diversity in the number of schools attending. When one or two schools have more entries than any other schools, it can seriously unbalance the pairings; while there are settings in tabroom to monitor this, they are obscure and complicated and don't always work. Worse, if a school is particularly strong in a division, they can completely dominate the top brackets. You may be tempted to let in a lot of entries from a big school and not worry about imbalancing your field, but don't do it. It's not worth the money. A balanced field is a happy field. If all your competitors, in every prelim, are hitting a team from Big Local HS, they are not going to be happy. Plus, your judges from BLHS will be worthless. Yes, you need to be flexible, but having an imbalanced field diminishes the quality of your tournament.

Sketchy Entries

Who is allowed to enter your tournament is entirely up to you. That said, it is interesting to read what the NSDA has said about non-school-based memberships:

> To best serve our students, strengthen the creation and sustainability of programs, and establish continuity from middle school to high school, the Board of Directors voted at the Fall Board Meeting to require school affiliation for all memberships beginning with the 2016-2017 school year. Any high school, middle school, home school, or virtual school recognized as an accredited public or private school by the state in which those schools compete may join the National Speech & Debate Association. All current non-school-based clubs and organizations are encouraged to work with the Association and area school districts to create speech and debate programs through their students' schools.

Independents
In other words, inclusion is limited to bona fide high schools. Most tournaments follow this guideline, as they follow NSDA rules in general, extending it to exclude

any students who are not officially representing their high schools. These so-called independent entries are often unaccompanied by an adult empowered to act on their behalf in cases of emergency, and at times have been discovered to be competing in direct violation of their school's authority. On the other hand, some schools allow their students to travel independently, and to officially represent them, usually with a parent or a reputable local coach as chaperone.

It is usually easy to detect in tabroom who are the questionable entries. For a start, look at the email address of the person who signed up the independent. The same name as the student (perhaps even the students themselves)? Dot com vs dot edu addresses? Is there one entry and no judge listed?

You want to use the time before you start accepting entries to distinguish between the good and bad independents. Usually, requesting an official notification from the school is good enough, and not a problem for bona fide school-supported albeit team-free competitors. The point here is, of course, if an issue of any sort arises, you want the issue to be addressed by a school administrator. Anything else simply doesn't make sense. Keep in mind that when a kid falls down your stairs and breaks a leg, it will be a lot different if that kid is without an adult chaperone when it comes to handling the emergency, and without the backing of school when it comes to liability. And don't think that emergencies don't happen. In the fall of 2016, we had students taken to the emergency room from four tournaments in a row, at which point I stopped counting. What if one of those tournaments was yours?

Keeping this in mind, it is important that an adult oversee all onsite registration the day of the tournament. In the rush to get things started, it's easy for a sketchy kid to slip in, especially if it's your kids running the registration table. One of the most important things a TD should do is eyeball everyone who comes through the door (or give this job to a trusted adult associate). No adult? No tournament. End of story.

Camps/For-Profit Programs

The non-school-based clubs and organizations, on the other hand, are an easier call. Arguments can presumably be made in their favor, but I won't be making them, as my experience with clubs is heavily studded with, to be kind, what I will call shenanigans. The same paradigm applies as above: when there are problems, who do you want to deal with? A school administration sharing an understanding of your school's situation, or a for-profit organization that has its own goals and ideas?

The point here is not to denigrate non-school organizations. As the NSDA suggests, the clubs should be working with their local schools to build bona fide teams. Just as your high school's football team only plays other high school's football teams, so

your high school debate team should only play with other high schools' debate teams. The logic is undeniable.