

NOVICES

For the record, when a tournament I work is offering novice divisions, I recommend language like this: *Novice LD is for students in their first year of high school forensics only.*

Once upon a time, a novice debater was a high school freshman in their first year of debate. There were those who tried to muddy the waters a little, claiming that if they were a freshman novice last year in one kind of debate, they could be a sophomore novice this year in some other kind of debate, but that was pretty sketchy thinking. There's a difference between someone standing in front of the room the first time, and someone standing in front of a different room after a year's experience.

There were reasonable exceptions from the clear cut. I often had debaters who started out in their sophomore years. To me, they were still novices, but I would feel a special drive to get them into open divisions as soon as possible, not so much for any advantage over freshmen, which I didn't necessarily see, but in aid of maximizing their debate experience at the varsity level, if they were up to it. They usually were. Then one year I had two 8th graders who wanted to debate. I saw no reason against it, and they were novices in 8th grade and not novices the year after that.

There have been interesting discussions, and disagreements, about what, exactly, is a novice at a high school tournament in our present age which includes relatively common middle school debate. The easiest answer applies to the situation where the MS debater was quite active. That debater, with many rounds experience, is by no means debating at the level of a novice when that debater enters high school. A year or two of rounds of experience ought to blow away any noob. But what if a MSer has only a round or two back in October of their 8th grade year? That's a bit tougher. Probably that debater doesn't have much of an advantage over a well-prepared HS freshman.

I would like to say that it should be left to the discretion of the coaches, but my experience with coaches leads me to believe that there are a handful that are either craven or just dumber than granite when it comes to things like this. They will conveniently forget prior experience, or dismiss it. This is not just true of the MS example. There are still coaches who don't see a year of LD as prior experience for PF, or vice versa. I mean, if there are novice divisions in LD, PF, Policy and Parli, are you saying that the same student could be a novice in one after the other each year spanning their entire high school career?

It seems like different regions and leagues have different rules on this, and honestly, I don't think there's an overarching solution. Should a tournament aimed at high school students, that calls itself a high school invitational, allow middle school entries? Should experienced middle schoolers be allowed to debate as novices, and how do you define experienced if you're thinking the answer is no? There is always the solution of creating new divisions, as we used to do in the Metro Hudson League with what we called (and which we expected

were, absolutely) first-timers. Or a tournament can add a MS division or two, if they're so inclined. There are work-arounds to some of this, although they might not be available or possible in all cases.

As I say, there's no easy answers here. But it's something that a tournament needs to be clear about if they're conducting anything other than open divisions. Who comprises what division has to be clearly stated in the invitation. Anything less than 100% specific will lead to people coming into the tab room complaining that so-and-so shouldn't be in that division, which, if true, is a problem no one wants to deal with.