

Speaker points in debate have the beauty (?) of being entirely arbitrary. When attempts are made to explain what the points might mean or what they ought to represent in aid of quantifying speaker points, those explanations are linked to concepts that are inevitably unquantifiable. There is a range of points, historically from 0 to 30, but that range is seldom if ever is actually used. The present-day de facto range, 25-30, at least theoretically narrows things down, but the common practice of allowing tenths actually makes it worse, although at least it no longer precludes two thirds of the range (1-20) from actual use. Nevertheless, it has been empirically proven that humans are incapable of making 50 quantified distinctions on much of anything, much less something as unquantifiable as speaker points—I mean, just ask someone to explain the difference between 27.3 and 27.4. Meanwhile, definitive data exists demonstrating that various regions of the country differ substantially in how they apply points, including at the circuit level, so even if people were able to manage the 50 tenths possibilities between 25 and 30, they are not doing it the same way.

In other words, speaker points, in practice, are a mess.

The train has already left the station when it comes to circuit-level judging. Few are the regular circuit judges who don't already have a fully developed idea of what points are supposed to mean. That no two judges may have the same idea is beyond the point. These people are convinced that they can, indeed, distinguish between a 27.3 and a 27.4, and they act on this conviction every week. You are never going to get them to change, so don't bother trying.

On the other hand, in many divisions, like PF, we regularly have new judges or lay judges who are trying to do the right thing, and with these folks, while you can't necessarily get them all entirely thinking alike, you can at least provide them with guidelines that they can follow which get them, mostly, on the same track. The more the judges think and act alike, the better the chances of the teams performing the best at your tournament have of achieving the best results.

We need to do two things: limit the possibilities, and add meaningful distinction to those possibilities. One thing you can do is limit the PF judges to half points. This gives them some leeway to make finer distinctions without them getting lost in a meaningless jungle of fineness. Attach milestones to each point, thus:

- 30 — Perfect. You will never see a round as good as this again in your life.
- 29 — Excellent. Definitely worthy of a trophy at this tournament.
- 28 — Very good. Probably worthy of a trophy at this tournament.
- 27 — Average. Unlikely to get a trophy at this tournament.
- 26 — Below average. Should not get a trophy at this tournament.
- 25 — Unprepared.

Tying the points to the idea of earning a trophy makes them more tangible to the judges. Even a parent who has never judged before can have a pretty good idea whether someone is trophy-worthy. And since most folks in the PF pool, while far from overskilled,

nevertheless have at least a little experience, and therefore an easy sense of good and bad in the activity, you will get fairly decent results. And since any judge can understand what you're talking about insofar as trophies are concerned, you don't have to explain it to death.

Nowadays, a lot of tournaments use tenths of a point, even in PF divisions with lots of parents. This is your call. Originally it was felt that this may be too complicated for newish judges, but experience has proven otherwise. Strath Haven's Jeff Kahn developed an analysis of tenths that many of us now use, inserting them directly in the ballots.

Use 10ths of points

29.5-30: I wish I could frame your speeches; your strategic decision-making belongs in a textbook

29.1-29.4: you left no doubt about who won and are better than most debaters at this tournament

28.8-29.0: you were effective and strategic, and made only minor mistakes

28.3-28.7: you hit all the right notes, but could improve (e.g. depth or efficiency)

27.8-28.2: you mainly did the right thing, but left something to be desired

27.3-27.7: you missed major things and were hard to follow

27.0-27.2: you advanced little in the debate or cost your team the round

26.0-26.9: you are not ready for this division/tournament

Below 26: you were offensive, ignorant, rude, or tried to cheat (Judge MUST come to tab)

Whichever scheme you use, tenths or halves, make sure that you include your point scale, and explanations, on the ballot.