

IN DEFENSE OF HANDBOOKS!

by Marty Ludlum

I read with some dismay the article by Jason Baldwin in the November, 1996 issue of the *Rostrum*. I feel it important to respond to his attack because we, as an activity, must come to terms with the purpose of our activity. Mr. Baldwin's major arguments:

1. To quote Mr. Baldwin directly: "Perhaps the most compelling reason to avoid mail-order evidence is that it is a bastardization of anything good that debate may represent." (page 14) Marketers of quotes are described as "ignorant yahoos" who "are not teachers in any normal sense of the term and cheat students out of the most educationally valuable aspects of a forensics background." (page 14) "In sum, mail-order evidence and cases are antithetical to the value of education and the integrity of competition; they are often of dubious origin; and they are, at best, a complete liability. If enough teams quit buying them, perhaps they'll shrivel up and disappear." (page 15)

2. The quality of some handbooks is poor.

3. Students should research on their own.

4. No one needs the stuff, because Jason Baldwin succeeded without it.

5. There is no answer for teams without access to libraries.

As for his issue #1, personally, I have to wonder what makes a 19 year old so bitter about a business which he does not understand. The depth of his lack of understanding will be shown later, as the discussion intensifies, but for now suffice it to say that debate handbooks allow newcomers to join the activity, an activity that has become too exclusive, too elitist, and too competitive, as Mr. Baldwin's comments prove.

As for his issue #2, I must surrender. Debate handbooks, like every other consumer product, from car tires to toothpaste to fast-food, have some high quality and some low quality vendors, and usually price indicates the quality. The only problem with this, specific to

debate handbooks, is that many debaters and debate coaches are buying the products without knowledge of them, and then are surprised with the quality of the product. My best suggestion for that is to stick with a familiar product/established company and they cannot go wrong. Buying something sight-unseen from an unknown company is a risk.

His issue #3 is where the divergence in our ideals becomes obvious. My view, from participating in debate in high school, college, and coaching and teaching in college, is that debate is an activity for everyone, with or without formal (tournament style) competition, and that

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debate handbooks help the new people to the activity. Mr. Baldwin's view, not unlike many involved (a.k.a. obsessed) with the activity, is that debate exists only to the extent of competition (getting a trophy) and the public affairs functions of debates (public debates at school, debates in class, etc.) exist only to justify a teacher's salary.

If put in real terms, I agree with #3, but the real understanding of Mr. Baldwin's statement escapes even Mr. Baldwin. All knowledge should be acquired directly. Read the books yourself. Study for yourself. You do not need debate handbooks, as Mr. Baldwin would say. This position, if valid, extends beyond debate handbooks, but to all knowledge. A student who reads the classics, is self taught, learns a foreign language via immersion, will always have knowledge superior to a person who is spoon-fed information, via a school format.

Understanding this, why do most people (Mr. Baldwin included) attend school rather than search for knowledge for one's self? Because it is easier, and because some-

times it is better to rely on the knowledge of others rather than your own guesses. The same rationale supports debate handbooks.

If Mr. Baldwin is to condemn students who use handbooks, I say he should evenly blame students who read debate textbooks, rather than the original academic articles on which they are based. He should condemn all football players who gain insight from watching films of other teams, rather than playing against them to acquire the knowledge first hand. He should condemn all teachers who buy a teacher's edition of a textbook, rather than spending countless hours reading the student text and developing their own. He should condemn all who attend "schools" and prefer those who search out an academic mentor and tutor under this person for their education. But he does not. In fact, Mr. Baldwin, and all people similarly critical of debate handbooks, condemn debate handbooks for the same reason which they use to justify their own behaviors in other areas.

As for issue #4, my primary comment would be that debate briefs are not designed to buy your way to success. But this ignores a major issue which Mr. Baldwin assumes is carved into stone. Is debate an activity designed solely for competition? Is a debater who only takes the course, and speaks during one in-class debate really gaining anything out of the activity? Mr. Baldwin would say "no," or at least to be consistent with his line of thinking he should say "no". Mr. Baldwin assumes that what is important in debate is competitive success (I won without the handbooks, as you can too!). Mr. Baldwin ignores what I feel is the primary purpose of debate, to train people to speak with an audience on a controversial subject. Notice, you can fulfill my purpose of debate without any concern of competitive success (trophy hunting), and I think if you really read the debate textbooks of the past 50 years, they will emphasize this.

What has occurred alarmingly in the last decade is an attitude of

"winning is everything" to debate. Competition is not a means to an end (such as enlightenment, or confidence in public speaking), competition is the end. Getting a trophy is the ultimate goal. Confidence or understanding are simply road-bumps which must be traversed in order to gain the trophies. In accordance with this view, anything which allows a person to "short-cut" in competition is harmful, since it would allow someone "unworthy" to gain a trophy. Or so would say Mr. Baldwin.

It may be true that Mr. Baldwin never touched a handbook, as he promised in his article. Personally, and from my experience as a criminal defense attorney, I am especially skeptical when someone "confesses" to being hard-working and morally pure in thought. But I assume that Mr. Baldwin is telling

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the truth when he states that he succeeded without handbooks because he did the work himself. This is only further evidence of the problem. How pathetic our activity has become when it appears that its only purpose is to dole out trophies, and then, only to those as morally pure as Mr. Baldwin? Mr. Baldwin is not the problem, and it is wrong to blame him personally. However, Mr. Baldwin, and his comments are certainly a symptom of the problem. The problem is rampant elitism and compulsive emphasis on competitive success.

Why are debate handbooks needed? Two reasons, one of which Mr. Baldwin has already granted. The first reason debate handbooks are needed is that many schools are without access to a library, and buying evidence is their only way to effectively participate in the competitive part of the activity.

I own Power Punch Publications, one of the companies which I assume Mr. Baldwin wishes to go into bankruptcy. As a project this

year, I set up a national map in my office marking each school which purchased our materials. I noticed how few of the towns I could identify. Certainly, I had some cities easy to identify, but the overwhelming majority of customers were from towns I had never heard of.

In conducting my traveling camps, I had the chance to attend many of these small towns. Towns where the public library and the high school library are one in the same, and consist of one set of bookshelves. Since I believe that the value of debate comes from the public speaking, these students benefit from the activity, a way which would be lacking in the absence of debate handbooks.

Mr. Baldwin implies that one can debate without evidence. This is true only in some limited debater-nonsense way of defining "debate". One of the three methods of persuasion (remember, ethos, pathos, logos) is ethos, the appeal to credibility. [A note for *Rostrum* readers, I was self-taught in the communication classics, as you can tell from my educational background. I jumped in communication studies at the Master's level, and had to teach myself the undergraduate communication studies, including the classics.] Mr. Baldwin himself appealed to ethos, citing several quotes in his article. Ethos is an important communication skill, and one which can be acquired through debate, but only if there is some evidence to cite during the speech.

Can one compete at all without debate handbooks? Well, not tournament-style competition without evidence. Mr. Baldwin is being less than sincere when he implies that a student armed with little if any evidence, but good common sense, can succeed in the competitive aspect of the activity. Surely in his high school experience he competed against students prepared as he indicated. Do these students win the trophies? Look to the students at Nationals. Are these students with little evidence, but a great deal of common sense? The problem I have noticed even in novice ranks is that to have a competitive tournament, you need a building with elevators so the students can haul all of their evidence in it. Encouraging students to enter the competi-

tive part of the activity without evidence is academically dishonest.

The second reason that debate handbooks are vital, and which explains why many schools, even those with access to fine libraries still purchase them, is that novices cannot participate effectively without them (novice teachers and students). I was surprised to find that many of my customers were new teachers, reading the handbook for information on the topic, not just purchasing it for the evidence to give to the students, an issue which Mr. Baldwin and those of similar thinking ignore.

Try to remember your first debate experience. New jargon, a new art of note-taking, and, of course, the tremendous fear of public speaking all combine to make the activity difficult for the beginner. I have seen numerous people at the

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high school and college level enter debate class with a thought of competing, and leave after the first attempt, never to return. Debate is a difficult activity to acquire. We cannot ignore that.

How do debate handbooks help? They provide the evidence, a bibliography of other research to find, and narrative descriptions of outlines to cases (like Power Punch uses) or in some instances, complete cases written out. Telling a student new to the activity to "go to the library and find the information for yourself" will not work. The new student will not know what to look for. They are asked to bake a cake, having never seen one before. They can find magazine articles, but cutting and tagging and organizing evidence are not innate skills in humans. They are all taught, and taught in debate classes. New students to the activity cannot do their own research, and even those with adequate research and organizational skills have many other mat-

ters to learn. One must learn speaker duties, speaker order, time limits, ethical rules, how to respond in a coherent fashion, signposting, and is expected to do all of these while speaking in public, most Americans' biggest fear.

I would analogize being new to debate to learning how to dance while being suspended on a rope bridge over a pool of live crocodiles. Mr. Baldwin would comment that "real men can learn to do this while blind-folded." Maybe so, but I doubt it. Debate handbooks allow newcomers into the activity. Newcomers who are discouraged by the dedication the activity takes, and the attitude of Mr. Baldwin, and others, that "since I walked to school up-hill (both ways) in the snow, barefoot" that all students should. Let everyone participate, say I, and if Power Punch goes bankrupt, so be it. Do not worry about me, because my legal career is doing fine (and, in fact, subsidizing Power Punch to keep the prices down).

Mr. Baldwin comments that handbooks harm the competitive nature of the activity. I do not think that Mr. Baldwin has anything to worry about. Being beaten by a novice debater armed with only a handbook is a very small risk. A much greater risk is dying in a bus crash on the way home from the tournament. I do not think that it is much of a concern that a person who is self-taught (in the limited way described by Mr. Baldwin) would lose to a person who is reading from a handbook. And if losing a trophy is the only thing which he values, he has already lost sight of what is important in the activity.

I'll give two examples of how I have used handbooks in my own college teaching to expose debate to new people. I use the handbooks as sources of material for students in the basic speech class. When they approach me, stating that "I can't find anything in the library to do my speech" I direct them right to a pile of handbooks, and give one to them. Regardless of the topic, a person can always find a good informative or persuasive speech topic from the handbooks. I did not think of this myself, I must confess. I had several college professors who bought the high school debate handbooks. I questioned them why they would need them, and they told me

of this use for the books. It has worked numerous times, always successfully.

A second example of the use of debate handbooks outside of debate was when I taught an Insurance class at Cameron University. Yes, I said an Insurance class. In that semester, health care insurance reform had sparked lively discussions in class numerous times. I took some of the handbooks on the old health care topic (1992-1993, if I remember right), and distributed them to the students. I told them each person was to find research supporting their position in the handbooks and prepare a five minute speech. I then had them indicate to me their position and topics, and paired them up pro/con. Some issues had three or four speakers, some just two. Then I had each person respond to the arguments of the opposing side. Basic debate.

No fancy issues of fiat, minute discrepancies of the wording of the topic, discussions over the need to be 100% topical and the effects thereof, just plain debate. Controversy, conflict, response. Now, none of them were debate competitors. In fact, only one person even wanted to do the activity. Most indicated that they would rather be publicly beaten than to have to speak in class. And their performances were nothing spectacular. In fact, by competitive debate standards, they were terrible. Not one person got or deserved a trophy. But they did participate. They were exposed to public speaking on controversial issues, they understood the importance of appeals to authority. For beginners, they did fine. And, isn't that the real purpose behind debate?

Has our activity been so polluted, so blinded by the thirst for competitive success, that we would close the activity to newcomers to ensure the moral purity of the competitors at present? I should hope not. But the comments of Mr. Baldwin, which I have heard countless times from others, make me worry.

(Marty Ludlum is the owner of Power Punch Publications, Inc.)

(Smith from Page 10)

LD 108 () Rebuttal Preparation 55 Minutes**

Ms. Carol Biel, Chesterton HS,
IN

Commentary: The lesson is considerably less structured than all the other tapes. There is a lot of chat and happy talk. Beginning debaters would find it hard to follow, but advanced debaters can glean some real nuggets of preparatory gold from the experiences of the three young men and Carol. Good example of how a squad could sit down to brainstorm a topic.

Content:

- random discussion of strategies
- utilizing research files in preparation for topics
- brainstorming session
- practical tips from LD debaters on how to survive in a round

Some might think it would be an ordeal to sit down and watch (over a period of several days) 20 instructional tapes, particularly if you were not required to do so. I was not required to do so. I'm retired. No one can "require" me to do anything (excepting my wife).

It truly was not an ordeal. This series of tapes, as I noted at the outset of the review, are helpful to coaches and students, experienced and inexperienced. The effort by the NFL to produce these tapes remains in my mind the single most important effort that has been made to retain competitive speech and debate as the most valuable educational experience a high school student can have.

Buy the tapes. Borrow the tapes. Get them any way you can, coaches. They will make your teaching much easier and much better.

(Larry Smith coached at Fresno-Hoover (CA) HS. He is the recipient of the Ralph E. Carey Award for Distinguished Service as a District Chair and was elected to both the California and NFL Halls of Fame.)