

# MAINTAINING THE INTEGRITY OF ELIMINATION ROUND BRACKETS

I have been have been involved in forensics for over twenty years as a student, judge, coach, program director, and most recently, tournament administrator. I am fortunate to have had expert as well as patient colleagues with me during these times and for all the successes, they deserve most of the credit. Over the last ten years, I have helped run some of the largest and most prestigious tournaments in the nation and I have done my best to apply what I learned from my mentors along with some sound judgment of my own. Yet despite the smoothness with which some of these tournaments have run, I am hard-pressed to name one issue related to tournament administration which has caused more frustration, anguish, threats, pleads for change, and harsh words between otherwise collegial colleagues than the issue of whether to break elimination round brackets at highly competitive tournaments.

Over the past two years, there has been a heightened interest in this subject which I believe warrants serious discussion in the forensic community. Because of my involvement in countless tab room, judge lounge, and between-the-round discussions on this issue, a good number of individuals have asked me to share my thoughts on this subject to explain why I do not break elimination round brackets as a tournament administrator.

## *Defining Terms: WHAT IS "BREAKING BRACKETS?"*

**There is a lot of confusion just on terminology surrounding this issue, so for the purpose of the discussion here, let me define a few key terms. The term "breaking brackets" refers to the practice of re-seeding the elimination pairings to prevent competitors from the same school from debating.<sup>1</sup> If the pairings are not broken and two competitors (L/D)/teams (policy) from the same school are scheduled to debate, the school is said to have "closed out that part of the bracket." If debaters from the same school occupy all spots in the elimination round pairings, then the school has "closed out the tournament."<sup>2</sup>**

## *The Tournament Administrator..... MAINTAINING A NEUTRAL ROLE*

As a former high school and college competitor as well as coach, I understand the position of those who support breaking brackets; many of whom I respect deeply as colleagues and supporters of our activity. Believe me, this practice solves and even prevents a lot of intra-team conflicts for the coaches

and team members. Not breaking brackets may cause hard feelings between debaters and put coaches in positions they otherwise would rather not occupy. I have been in both positions as a debater and coach, and believed for years that not breaking brackets was a very uneducational practice. Of course at the time, I was most concerned about my own and later as a coach, my students' interests.

My opinion on breaking brackets changed 180 degrees when I accepted the responsibility of running large national competitions, and with that responsibility, to be as fair and impartial as possible. As a tournament administrator, I feel that my position is not to solve nor avoid team conflicts, nor to favor large teams over small ones. I view my job as being entrusted to run a completely fair and non-discriminatory competition that treats every debater equally (the last three words are very important here).

The individual performances as determined by the collective wisdom of the judges are, in my opinion, the sole determinant of qualification and subsequent placement in the elimination rounds. I learned by hard experience it is extremely unwise to adopt such an interventionist and discriminatory policy as breaking elimination round brackets at important national tournaments.

If the two matched debaters/

teams are from the same school, the issue of what to do is for the coach and the debaters from that school to decide. As the tournament administrator, I offer the school a few options:

- 1. I can advance the higher-seeded debater/team; or*
- 2. I can advance the debater/team based on coach's preference (seniors advance over juniors who advance over sophomores, for example); or*
- 3. I can give the school three judges so the debaters can have a debate; or*
- 4. I can provide the school a room where the debaters debate in front of the coach(es).*

But the decision is in the coaches' and debaters' hands -- NOT MINE. The tournament administrator should be impartial and stay out of internal affairs of teams. Some people have asked why don't I just make it easier for teams with no coach, parent coaches, or spineless coaches by breaking brackets? My reply is it is simply not my business as the tournament administrator because my decision to break brackets affects other coaches and debaters in exactly the opposite way (debate is like physics that way...for every action there is an opposite and equal reaction). As the tournament administrator, I will abide by the coach's decision, but I will not intervene to relieve them of any discomfort of having to deal with their internal problems. My suggestion is that members of teams should all agree before the tournament on a set of clear criteria of who advances in the tournament should members of that school be paired to debate against each other in an elimination round. Deciding upon a policy and living with it can be a valuable experience useful for later lessons in life.

Initially, I viewed the large team "dilemma" of having to decide which debater/team to advance as a disadvantage. After a discussion with my friend Tim Averill, the director at

Manchester HS (MA), however, I now share his view that maintaining the integrity of brackets provides some level of reward for large teams for the depth of their success while still treating all debaters equally. As a director of a large, successful program who, as a tournament administrator, does not break brackets, Mr. Averill points out that as a coach, he actually hopes for closeouts because of the two debaters/teams, one is guaranteed to go to the next round; an important consideration when earning qualifying legs for the National Tournament of Champions. If brackets are broken, then there is a risk that both of his debaters/teams would lose and that no one would advance to the next round. Large teams who break multiple debaters at tournaments are, in fact, rewarded for their depth of success.

### **WHAT ABOUT JUDGE INCONSISTENCY?**

After win-loss record, speaker point rating is the next determining criterion for seeding elimination rounds. Other coaches with whom I have had discussions about this issue point out that seeding is so arbitrary; citing the marginal variance in speaker points which separates top seeds from bottom seeds.<sup>3</sup> My answer is that debate is subjective and that is the nature of the activity. Our activity is more like figure skating than track and field; determining the winners in debate is a matter of opinion more than fact. We all accept that as a condition of participation when we go to competitive tournaments. That said, however, I think that many of the competitive national tournaments such as the Tournament of Champions have the most consistent judging pools in the country. Marginal speaker point variance actually points to a very consistent judging pool;

one which has a narrow range of Z-score ratings<sup>4</sup> and one that indicates that speaker points are indeed useful. Additionally, most tournaments drop the high and low speaker point ratings as the second criterion (after win-loss record), which removes a significant amount of variance. Thus, speaker point variance really is not a legitimate justification to break brackets.

The real question which should be raised is:

"Who is supposed to evaluate the debaters? The tournament administrator or the judges? When we break the top 16 Lincoln-Douglas debaters out of a field of 70 over seven preliminary rounds as we do at the National Tournament of Champions, 735 separate decisions were made by the judging pool to determine the overall seeding.<sup>5</sup> Who will single-handedly intervene to override the collective judgment of those judges? Certainly not I as the tournament administrator! While I am the last to worship elimination round seeding as the "sacred cow" of debate administration, I have yet to discover a better, non-arbitrary way of determining elimination round placement.

### **MAINTAINING BRACKETS IS EDUCATIONALLY SOUND**

When elimination round brackets are broken, an uneven playing field is created. The result is that high seeds hit high seeds early in the tournament and half are eliminated prematurely. Debaters on the "weak side of the bracket" literally walk into finals while debaters trapped on the "hard side" have to bleed every inch of the way just to make it to the next round. I made the horrible mistake as a young

tournament director of allowing myself to be talked into breaking brackets when I directed a huge triple-octos tournament and there were many lop-sided late elimination round debates. No wonder! High seeds were meeting in octofinals and lower seeds were making it all the way to quarters and semis because the bracket was broken twice in double-octofinals and octofinals to avoid conflicts within large teams. The result was, in my opinion, a rather poor tournament that did not showcase the best debaters in the late elimination rounds. Unfortunately, instead of the semifinal and final rounds being “clash of the debate titans” those well-attended showcase rounds were, to be candid, quite embarrassing.

Coaches who have asked me to break an elimination round bracket often point out that closing out that part of the bracket means that no debate would occur, thereby depriving other students from observing and learning from exemplary debate. While their intentions at first might seem quite altruistic, if we take that argument to its logical conclusion, breaking brackets might actually produce the opposite result. While breaking brackets might prevent early elimination rounds from being closed out, it actually results in more closeouts in semi and final rounds which deprives the students who observe such rounds of comparatively

better educational opportunities. As a tournament administrator, maintaining the integrity of brackets means that there is a better chance for students to observe the best debaters in the final rounds of the tournament; something I would also want as a coach and a debater.

### **AN APPEAL FOR UNDERSTANDING AND DIS- CUSSION**

If you support breaking brackets, I will not ask you to change your mind, however, I do ask that you understand and respect the responsibilities a tournament administrator must take in maintaining the tournament's integrity and impartiality. I usually do not take such a strong tone in my *Rostrum* contributions, however, I will speak up energetically on issues which I feel threaten the integrity of the activity and as long as I am directing the tab room at tournaments such as the National Tournament of Champions, the integrity of those competitions will be vigorously defended.

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<sup>1</sup>*This debate assumes the classic "tree" elimination round format and not the NFL "two/three down" matching schemes.*

<sup>2</sup>*For example, if four teams from the same school win their quarterfinal rounds and advance to the semifinal round, the school has "closed out" the semifinal round and the tournament.*

<sup>3</sup>*At some of the most competitive tournaments, the speaker point difference between the top seed (1) and the lowest seed (32) is less than ten (10) speaker points out of 210, only a 4.7% difference.*

<sup>4</sup>*A Z-score is available using Rich Edward's TRM (Tab Room in a Mac) program. It measures the relative variance of speaker point ratings awarded by each judge in comparison to the judging pool.*

<sup>5</sup>*70 debaters = 35 debates X 3 decisions (win/loss as well as affirmative and negative speaker point assignments) X 7 rounds = 735 overall decisions.*