

Judging Debates*

In the preceding chapters, we focused on debate from the perspective of debaters. This chapter focuses on the role of judges and their importance in the debate.

The judge's primary responsibility is to decide which team has done the better job of debating. To do so the judge must focus on the conflicting values and principles associated with the resolution, the manner in which those values and principles are supported, and the manner in which each team responds to the opponent's arguments. Through all of the argumentative exchanges, through the cross-examinations and refutations and rebuttals, each team has tried to persuade the judge that its position is better than the opponent's.

JUDGE RESPONSIBILITIES

Judging is an honor because competition organizers think the individual they asked to judge can make a competent and fair decision. But judging carries with it certain responsibilities: judges are expected to focus on the debate, understand the criteria for judging, and know how to explain their decision, adjudicate ethically, and perform practical tasks vital for the operation of the debate.

FOCUS ON THE DEBATE

Judges must focus on the debate they are witnessing, concentrating on the arguments that the teams present and not let personal bias and opinions or their knowledge of the subject influence them. So, for example, even if the judge is convinced that capital punishment is needed to deter violent crime, she must not hold that against the affirmative team arguing for the abolition of the death penalty. The debaters are debating each other; one of the teams should not have the additional burden of overcoming the silent opposition of the judge. Judges must avoid evaluating the strength of an argument. That is the job of the opposition.

The affirmative team has not broken any rules by presenting a weak argument, and the negative has the responsibility to refute even weak arguments. We want to emphasize this point: *the mere presentation of weak arguments or argu-*

* By Joseph P. Zompetti