How to Win a High-School Debate: Talk Like a Cattle Auctioneer

Participants in Lincoln-Douglas debates deliver their points at a cracking 300 words a minute.

By Daniel Kruger
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LEXINGTON, Mass.—For weeks, high school debater Benjamin Waldman rehearsed his argument affirming the resolution that the criminal-justice system should abolish plea bargaining. Now that it was time to speak, he took a deep breath and let it rip.

"...the criminal-justice system is a reflection of and application of the law and imposition of punishment. Plea bargaining was a mechanism for these judges to maintain their vast power and discretion...."

After six minutes of speaking at this blinding pace, topping out at 300 words a minute, the 15-year-old sat down, ready for his foe’s cross-examination.

The tournament at Lexington High School followed a debate format known as Lincoln-Douglas, the name referring to the famous series of joint appearances by two Illinois Senate candidates in 1858, Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas. The similarities are scant.

Where Messrs. Lincoln and Douglas each had an hour for an opening argument, and then an hour and a half to respond to the other debater, Mr. Waldman’s opening salvo was limited to six minutes. A three-minute cross-examination by 17-year-old opponent Alan Liu came next, followed by a seven-minute rebuttal and a few more exchanges. Total speaking time for each debater: 16 minutes.

To impress judges, they had to pack into that brief time arguments of intellectual depth and complexity, complete with citations of legal scholars or philosophers. Any point left unrebutted could be deemed conceded. Every word had to be read aloud for the judges to score it. The result was speed at roughly the pace of a cattle auctioneer.

Part-time debate coach and judge John Staunton trains clients for this sort of contest by having them read tongue twisters and enunciate at high volume to enhance clarity. Mr. Staunton, a former high-school debate champion who is now a Columbia University student, frowns on one popular training technique: speed-reading aloud with a pen clamped between the teeth. That
ds to hone superfast speech, which is known in the debate world as "spreading," a word some say derives from "speed" and "reading."

She knows the risks. "When you're talking quick, your voice gets superhigh," she says.

There's also the problem of the audience. "My mother, actually, she can't even be in the room when I'm spreading because she would laugh too hard and it would distract me," Ms. Sheinerman says.

High school Lincoln-Douglas debate was started in the 1980s as an antidote to what had become the breakneck speaking pace of an earlier debate format. Then LD participants also started talking ever faster, to squeeze in more debate points.

By the mid-1990s, spreading dominated high-school debate's national circuit, which includes about 1,500 competitors.

Mr. Waldman, who is a freshman at Walt Whitman High School in Bethesda, Md., tries to block out everything as he reads his prepared speeches, including the meaning of what he's reading. "When you try to process it, it slows you down," he says.

Debate traditionalists are aghast. "Spreading is a pernicious disease that has undermined the very essence of high school and college debate," says Republican Sen. Ted Cruz, who is enshrined in Princeton University's debate hall of fame. "In no other endeavor in life do you get rewarded for speaking ridiculously quickly, unless you hope to appear in a FedEx commercial."

(A FedEx Corp. spot featuring John Moschitta, a former Guinness fast-talk record holder, became one of the most popular TV commercials ever.)

The National Speech & Debate Association, which says participation in high school debating is up 12% since 2014, made another stab at slowing down the speakers in the early 2000s, creating a team format called Public Forum. As deeper and more comprehensive arguments became winners, this evolved in the same speedy direction, says J. Scott Wunn, executive director of the group: "It naturally is a competitive thing."

Two years ago, the organization introduced yet another format, Big Questions, with guidelines that call for "conversational speaking speed and tone."

In top-flight high-school debates using Lincoln-Douglas, the fastest-growing format, spreading remains de rigeur. At the tournament held at Lexington High, the round of 16 matched two 17-
year-olds, Camille Caldera of Bethesda and Ari Azbel of Orlando, who both had years of practice. Each started competing in the eighth grade, drawn in by an older sibling who showed them how to machine-gun through a speech.

Ms. Caldera honed her ability to both talk fast and listen at a debate camp in the ninth grade, initially boosting her comprehension to 90% of a given opponent’s speech. At the tournament, aided by access to her opponent’s case documents ahead of time, she was able to process Mr. Azbel's arguments as fast as they leapt from his tongue.

“The first thing that goes through my mind is trying to figure out exactly what he’s saying,” Ms. Caldera says. “What exactly is he saying, how exactly does it interact with” her own case?

When Mr. Azbel spoke, his arms sped up to match his blitzkrieg speech. His right hand began repeatedly punching the air. Then his left hand took over, karate-chopping as if he were breaking board after board.

“When I’m in the moment, reading a case, I don’t notice it,” Mr. Azbel says. If he watches a video, “I notice I make ridiculous hand gestures.”

He felt a twinge of unease after his performance at Lexington, thinking the time pressure had caused a somewhat muddled presentation. After a few minutes, though, the judges declared him winner of the round by a 2-1 vote.

For Mr. Staunton, the former champion, debate’s strange skill set has yielded multiple dividends. Not only is he paid to train teenagers to talk even faster than they normally do, but JetBlue Airways Corp. tapped him in 2016 for a commercial on its Facebook page.

In the ad, Mr. Staunton read the names of every city, state and country the airline flies to, 100 destinations, with 282 proper nouns.

In 68 seconds.

Write to Daniel Kruger at Daniel.Kruger@wsj.com

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