**THE CASE AGAINST COMPUTERS IN PUBLIC FORUM**

**DEBATE IN CHSSA COMPETITIONS**

**By Einar Wm. Johnson**

The issue of whether computers should be allowed in competitions of CHSSA Leagues and at the CHSSA State Tournament in Public Forum debate (“PF”) has been addressed twice by the CHSSA Council in the last two years or so. It was extensively debated and discussed by the Council both times. The last time it was considered, approximately one year ago, the Council voted by a substantial margin to retain CHSSA’s existing rules that prohibit computers in PF.

At the CHSSA Council meeting just held in May another Motion was advanced by proponents for computers in PF. While the more zealous advocates assert having computers in PF rounds is a “no brainer” and advocate it almost as if having a computer in a high school debate competition was a civil right, the reality is that there are rationale reasons why CHSSA rules have not been changed in this regard.

Since proponents for change have essentially made clear they are determined to persist in their effort until the Council yields, at the CHSSA Council’s May meeting, per recommendation of the CHSSA Debate Committee, it was decided further discussion of the issue and a vote on the current Motion would be deferred to September of 2015 to allow a survey of all CHSSA coaches across the State to obtain further pertinent information and views on the subject.

This article seeks to educate the entire CHSSA community to the fact that there are some serious considerations at play as to this issue. It is hoped that this article will reach the eyes of the “silent majority” of coaches that have average programs across the State that are primarily focused on local State competitions and have limited budgets. It is also hoped that at least some of the advocates for change of the CHSSA Rules in this regard will understand that their sentiments are not as universal as the may believe and that they might alter their views and desires as they better understand all relevant factors.

PF is still fairly new to California. It was originated by the National Forensics League (now National Speech And Debate Association) and was promoted as a simpler form of debate that would have better appeal to “lay” audiences and would be more friendly to debaters with limited time or resources. Topics were to be changed monthly for the express purpose of mitigating the possibility of an excessive research burden and to eliminate any perceived need to acquire large quantities of evidence. The specific intent was to provide a significant alternative to Policy and Lincoln Douglas debate which have been heavily influenced by “camps” and college invitational tournaments for decades.

The author was on both the CHSSA Debate Committee and the CHSSA Council when consideration of whether to adopt PF as a CHSSA event began. In addition to those that favored PF, there were also advocates for the adoption by CHSSA of a modified version of collegiate Parliamentary Debate as a CHSSA event. After much effort and discussion both PF (slightly modified from the NFL version) and Parli (modified from collegiate form) were added as CHSSA events.

While the advocacy for PF was not uniform, the primary arguments for it aligned with the NFL’s intent in creating PF in the first place. It was felt there needed to be something different from, and simpler than, Policy and LD debate for both students and judges. A simpler form of debate would allow students to engage predominantly in the basics of argumentation and delivery.

Unfortunately, once camps and coaches that were not committed to preserving these concepts (including some who shift Policy or LD debaters into PF only for qualifiers to try to secure more slots), started to become involved in PF. As this occurred Circuit style practices started to surface, including use of computers at invitationals. Because NFL’s Debate Chair is a Circuit style coach himself, he pushed for computers in PF at National sponsored tournaments and NFL rather quietly followed college invitationals in allowing computers in PF. In this author’s opinion that was a serious mistake that is further contributing to the erosion of the original nature of PF and has ignored and compromised the original intent behind it. It is also believed it was a mistake that occurred both from NFL’s tendency to bend to national trends, whether they improve the activity or not, and the fact that the NFL Council is a much smaller body than the CHSSA Council.

There is no reason California has to follow trends of invitationals or the NFL. Indeed, we would have a fraction of the events we have if we followed NFL’s event catalogue as but one example. The State Tournament still predominately offers a forum with an approach to debate that is more aligned with acquisition of “real world” delivery and other skills in contrast to other forums.

It is often forgotten that this activity is loved and needed by numerous students across the State of California, including the poor and those that attend under-funded and under-staffed public schools. Finding coaches is incredibly difficult throughout the State and entire programs, large and small, can become extinct when a coach retires or resigns. Time commitment alone is a deterrent to starting or continuing coaching, but particularly as to debate the more we make it a “professional” oriented and expensive activity the fewer programs and prospective coaches will embrace it.

With that backdrop here are the reasons why CHSSA should continue to exclude computers from PF debate:

1. The ability to accommodate the addition of both PF and Parli has been an extraordinary task. While an effort is still being made to allow the same number of entrants in all forms of debate, having four forms of debate has tapped State judge pools and room availability. Fewer host schools can be found for State as a result of the latter. This difficulty was knowingly embraced to allow for the offering of four unique forms of debate. If PF is simply made to be the same as all other forms of debate then there really was no point in adding it or will be no point to keeping it.

2. Most programs do not participate in college invitationals or even attempt to make it to Nationals. Many programs exist within public schools that simply do not have the economic or staff resources to justify such efforts. For these programs - - many of which can be large as they are often implemented through formal classes of 30 to 40 students - - the availability of a simpler, less expensive form of debate, is an important and attractive option. If adding more programs so more students can benefit from this invaluable activity is considered worthwhile and important then the offering of a simpler, less expensive, alternate form of debate should be supported.

3. If computers in PF are considered to be so highly important to those that want them in a round, one must view with suspicion the claim that a team possessing a computer has no advantage over a team that does not. Logic would defy that notion. The computer is pushed for to accommodate importation into the round of substantially more evidence. Finding evidence within those files which a student has never had time to read, let alone manually file, is a far easier task with a computer than a paper file. Of course, since PF was intended to limit the research burden and has such significant time limits on speeches the supposed need for either feature simply undermines the objectives of having this alternative form of debate in the first place. It is also hard to imagine that competitors that show up without computers in rounds feel they are on an even playing field with those that do and we should not tolerate even the perception of an undue advantage to those that are more privileged financially. Creating disparities that are likely to be associated with preference for the rich over the average or poor should be avoided.

4. The financial burden of supplying computers for students that are of sufficient quality to be competitive, have sufficient battery power to last a round, that the student would be allowed to take to a tournament, and which would last without maintenance expense or expiration for four years is an expensive undertaking. It is a myth such equipment can be acquired new for $200 complete with all necessary software. In addition, each member of a PF team would need to be equipped and a third computer is usually used to hand over evidence to the opposing team. Furthermore, if the objective is to amass evidence purchased from camps and evidence peddlers then the cost of acquiring such volumes of evidence must be added. The assumption that every high school kid is walking around with a laptop is a myth - - there may be some schools in wealthy areas or with wealthy student bodies where that is true that skew perceptions, but it is simply not generally true.

It is also a myth that schools are going to provide such computers. The only laptops this author has seen in public schools are kept under lock and key on campus and are pulled out only for class use. The public schools do not generally offer adequate, if any, resources for the fundamental costs of running a fully active speech and debate program of significant size, let alone to supply laptops.

The assertion sponsors could provide computers presupposes the average coach can undertake the burden of looking for those opportunities, especially coaches marginally willing or able to head a program in the first place. Certainly this added burden will not help recruit new coaches or support retention of those coaches that have been around for awhile but that remain uncertain about the commitment.

Because the author coaches squads at two schools this author coaches 50 or more students each year (most of whom choose PF over other CHSSA debate events). This author expends from his own pocket about $5,000 each year, or more, to support and grow these programs because there are inadequate public funds to do so. This expenditure does not account for the author’s huge loss of income from trading hundreds of hours of professional time for voluntary, unpaid, coaching. Suffice it to say the sacrifice is made because the author highly values this activity and daily credits a successful professional career to the skills the activity taught him. This author is aware of other coaches expending as much or more out of pocket cash and/or unpaid time that are less able to do so than the author (though it is not easy for the author either). Not too many coaches would be attracted by such a scenario.

The thousands expended by the author, and those like him, are used to acquire basic materials, hire judges, pay entry fees when budgets are depleted and students are tapped (or too poor to contribute in the first place), and travel expenses. Expecting such a massive further expenditure to accommodate those demanding computers for the sake of having them in a form of debate where there is no compelling need for them seems a rather self-consuming notion on the part of those students that expect it, if not demand it.

Furthermore, the argument in response to that economic, burden that students can still compete on equal footing without computers is not only contradicted by the advocacy advanced to allow computers, it also ignores the rather ironic reality that the students that the students that so badly want computers in PF also have an option to simply participate in one of two other CHSSA debate events that permit computer use if computers use is considered of such substantial import to them.

5. The use of computers in Policy and LD has come with a number of complications including flash drive exchanges that prolong the debate, the ability to run more “dumps” and carry even more evidence, and the further erosion of effective speaking skills in debate, not to speak of the added expense.

We either want debate to be for an “elite” group or we want it to be of benefit to all. If we want the latter then we need to resist making the activity more complex and more expensive when there is no need to do so. We need to avoid tunnel vision and look at the needs and circumstances of all participants. Doing so will yield the conclusion that PF should be preserved as an alternative and unique form of debate that any student can engage in under CHSSA rules.

Einar Wm. Johnson has been a practicing attorney for over 30 years with emphasis on high stakes business and estate lawsuits; he owns his own law office. He was a very successful speech and debate competitor in Junior High and High School (including achieving 4th place at State and earning NFL’s Double-Ruby in 1973). He continued with the activity through four years of successful college competition in which he was nationally ranked, including in policy debate. He came from humble circumstances and a debate scholarship helped him obtain his college education. Mr. Johnson was a paid assistant debate coach at Brigham Young University for one year and has coached high school forensics for 16 years. He coaches al CHSA events. He has been a League President (for a few years doing double duty as VP of Debate). He has been a member of the CHSSA Council for 16 years, serving on the Congress and Debate Committees (currently the Debate Committee). He is a two-diamond coach that has qualified hundreds of students for the State Championship and has qualified some students to the Nationals. He has had numerous State quarter and semi-finalists as well as some finalists and a State Champion. He has trained several new coaches and assisted in starting numerous high school programs and played a significant role in assuring all four high schools in the Torrance Unified School District have programs. He heads one of those programs (North High -Torrance) and co-coaches another (West High - Torrance).