

# A Guide for Tournament Directors

by Mike Bietz

Over the course of a season I act as a tournament director of a quarterfinals LD bid tournament, serve as a tab room director at a quarterfinals LD bid tournament, and work in a large tab room at an octofinals LD bid tournament. Additionally, I act as a tournament director of our NFL district tournament. During this year, which seems to have more challenging than others, I have had the opportunity to reflect a bit on what every tournament director should keep in mind while planning a tournament. Certainly each tournament has unique challenges, but hopefully these will serve as some general rules of thumb.

## ***The tab room is not the help desk.***

I have found that it is important to have a buffer between tournament participants and direct access to the tab room. It is important that the flow of information that comes in to the tab room for troubleshooting has been appropriately considered by another adult who has some tournament authority. If a room is locked, the tab room probably doesn't need to know. The head of the help desk should be able to take care of this.

In creating the help desk, it also is important to not have the tournament director as the first line of help, either. The director is balancing many different things that are going on at any given moment.

For example, the tournament director should not be taken out of commission to track down judges.

## ***The ballot table also should not be the help desk.***

Usually the kids that are sitting at the ballot table are not reliable enough to make actual decisions or properly convey problems to the director.

## ***Have someone dedicated to ballot pushing.***

The Glenbrooks does a great job at this, at least in the divisions in which I have helped. Have the tab room print out a list of all the judge cards and give it to the adult that is in charge of ballot pushing. The tab room staff is often troubleshooting or, in the case of some more important rounds, coaching their teams. They should be allowed to do this once the schedule has been released since the tab room staff typically does not have the ability to debrief with their kids after each round. At the very least they should be able to talk to them before they go into their next round. So long as the ballot pusher has all the appropriate data (strikes, who has judged before, etc.) there should be no problem with allowing your tab staff to go out into the tournament to coach their kids. The changes that are made by the ballot pusher just need to be recorded and set on the computer of the division.

## ***Communicate often.***

If disaster strikes, such as it did this year at the Victory Briefs Tournament (VBT) when 15% of our rooms were locked and, since it was winter break, we had no way

of opening them, make sure you are communicating a revised schedule so people can plan appropriately for meals, judge rides, etc. It is important that you admit publicly that something has happened, that it is throwing the tournament off schedule, and that you are confronting and changing a schedule accordingly. You should not be in denial about the disaster and hope the participants don't notice or are happy to just go along with "as soon as possible." Show the competitors and coaches that the tournament is going to try to stick to a schedule, even if it is one that is different from the one originally posted. This will give the participants an opportunity to plan the rest of their day.

## ***Always anticipate problems and implement mitigations.***

Every tournament encounters problems. However, as a tournament director, you should always be anticipating problems well before they happen. Here are some things that you always need to be ready for, from the most obvious to the less:

- Locked rooms
- A ballot that is 30 or 40 minutes late (have runners collect ballots after flight A to get a gauge on who is behind... this also reminds judges to get to the next round. This year I told students to "set your timer" for 10 minutes. At this point 6 students would go out and make sure all the rounds had started. You can get a jump on a problem, if after 15 minutes you know a round hasn't started.)
- You can't find a judge (you might be able to start flight A with one judge in LD, and then give flight "B" to the original judge when

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found.)

- Have enough change for concessions (outsource concessions to parents.)
- A school shows up late (be ready to move kids to flight “B”—if in LD, in policy have someone waiting for them to get them to their room immediately.)
- Computer crashes (have TRPC installed on a backup, and backup your data after each major event—i.e. ballots entered, or schedules released.)
- Photocopier stops working (have additional printer cartridges so you can print out a lot of schedules.)
- Another great way to anticipate problems is to write down all the problems you had from this year’s tournament, so you can anticipate them next year. We, for example, are going to make sure we check the keys we have BEFORE winter break.

## ***Printing, paper and supplies.***

Just bite the bullet and copy enough schedules to distribute. Not only will participants get to their rooms sooner, you also do not run the risk of someone walking and forgetting in which room they are supposed to debate. This is probably more true for flight “B” LD debaters. Also, it is inevitable that someone (or many someones) will take the schedule off the wall to use as their personal schedule. Things run more smoothly when there are enough printouts for everyone.

You also need to make sure you have labels, extra toner (using a laser printer is much more preferable than inkjet), tape, pens, staplers, manila folders, and file folders.

## ***Delegate.***

Don’t be afraid to hire more judges if it means you can surround yourself with a competent staff. While kids are great for running, putting labels on ballots, checking off ballots, etc., having experienced adults in charge of the kids is very important. This doesn’t have to be the tournament director for every task. For example, the tournament director shouldn’t have to tell anyone when it is time to run ballots. You can have someone in charge of the ballot table (this could maybe be the same person that is the ballot pusher). Some things you can (and should) delegate away from your stress (these are all things that can have student helpers, but adults should be in charge):

- Concessions
- Ballot table (pushing and runners)
- Tab room (the director, under no circumstance should be tabbing. I don’t even know records until we get to break rounds.)
- Ballot stuffing
- Judges’/Coaches’ lounge
- Locked rooms (might be able to combine with another job—like ballot stuffing)
- Help desk

## ***Do the right thing.***

Ultimately you need to put yourself in the place of the competitors. This year the VBT ran about an hour and a half behind schedule, because of the rooms. We were able to make up for some of that, but the cost was that we cut into the down-time that we normally would have allowed for meals. As such, we made the decision that we would simply provide free lunch for everyone—we sent someone to pick up pizza (Papa

John’s sold us 45 pizzas for \$6 each if we were willing to pick them up). The goodwill that was made was well worth the \$350 price tag. Additionally, when we got to octofinals (at this time it was about 7:00 p.m.), we had Taco Bell for all the participants and judges—and allowed them to eat in the round. Again, the costs were less than \$5 per person and it kept them happy.

Other things that help the overall experience of your tournament’s participants:

- Water
- Places to sit (I can’t believe how many tournaments we attend where there is nowhere to sit... let alone sit as a team. If you need to rent chairs and tables, just do it.)
- Coffee in the morning
- Have a help desk that is friendly, knowledgeable, and communicative. People want their grievances heard. The help desk needs to be aware of this, and everything should be written down so the director can follow-up.

Of course this not an exhaustive list of things a tournament director needs to keep in mind when running a tournament. Please send your comments to [bietz@hwdebate.org](mailto:bietz@hwdebate.org) about tips that you might have for tournament directors. For students and coaches, what would you like to see changed? What do you like or dislike about tournaments?

## ***About the Author***

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