

Lincoln Douglas

Jake Nebel, 2009 NFL LD Finalist

“When I first started Lincoln Douglas Debate, I was totally disoriented. I almost quit after my first practice debate. It seemed difficult and not particularly fun. I loved philosophy, politics, and arguing with my teachers, but I was unfamiliar with competition. Had my first debate not been at camp, I probably would have quit on the spot.

“I couldn’t leave Boston in the middle of camp, so I was stuck for two weeks with my novice lab leaders. I thought, ‘I have to be better than someone, and if that someone is sticking with it, so should I.’

“So I guess you could say that I only decided to stick with debate after my first crush. No, not a romantic crush. A face crush. Since I had never been good at a competitive activity before, the adrenaline was otherworldly. I don’t remember who I crushed, but I remember the feeling. And I guess you could say that my debate career revolved around an addiction to that feeling—victory.

“I soon learned that there was more to debate. I think most debaters are, like me, addicted to victory. If I can offer one piece of advice, however, it would be this: don’t let your addiction become the goal. The addiction is instrumentally valuable because it propels us to improve, to never burn out, and to keep learning. But the friends we meet, the skills we develop, and the knowledge we gain on the way are what really matters; they are intrinsically valuable. I know that’s beating a dead horse, but it’s true, and nobody can repeat it enough. A lot of things have changed in 30 years, so this could be the only timeless truth about LD.”

Jake Nebel is the runner up from the 2009 NFL National Tournament. He is now a freshman at Princeton University and an Assistant Debate Coach for The Greenhill School in Dallas.

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~Jake Nebel

Reflections:

Lincoln Douglas Debate Turns 30

Since Lincoln Douglas Debate made its National Tournament debut in 1980, tens of thousands of youth have engaged philosophy, weighed evidence, and examined their own values in rounds. For many, LD began as a hobby and grew into a passion. Some featured here pursued debate all the way to the national final round. Others continued into college. For many, debate served as a springboard for a career in law, politics, or public service. The following reflections represent only a handful of the lives transformed by LD. Their stories cover an expanse of three decades. Some achieved a national championship; others found personal victories. For each, LD debate showed the way to become a logical thinker, an able communicator, and an ethical individual.

Shalini Ramanathan, NFL LD Champion, 1990



“I’m a sharper, more articulate person because of LD Debate. It taught me how to organize my thoughts, speak clearly, and think on my feet. These are skills I use every day in both my professional and personal lives. It also gave me a sense of community, at a time in my life when I really needed it. I recently ran into a friend from my debate days at an airport, and that sense of having been part of something together was still there—I’m grateful for all the people I met and the lessons I learned through debate.”

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~Shalini Ramanathan

Shalini Ramanathan is the 1990 National Champion from Newman Smith High School in Texas. She holds a BA from the University of Texas and a Master’s degree from the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Management. Ramanathan joined Renewable Energy Systems (RES) Americas in 2007 as a Project Developer and was later named Director of Development for Emerging Renewables. In 2009, she was awarded the position of Vice President of Development for the South Central region.

To view her final round, visit <http://nfltv.org/2010/01/27/1990-san-jose-nationals/>

“Strive to have conversations that are relevant to our personal and political realities.”

~Bryce Pashler

Bryce Pashler, NFL LD Semifinalist, 1994

“In the course of its three decades, LD Debate has significantly reinvented itself a number of times. The last time I saw a debate round in-person was 2002. When I watch videos online of debate rounds today, I find them completely unfamiliar from anything I participated in, and certainly beyond my quickly diminishing abilities of comprehension (after all, I am four years older than LD, and my mental faculties are quickly declining). Each successive “generation” of debaters undoubtedly feels they have reached some previously unimagined pinnacle of intellectual achievement; each previous “generation” undoubtedly feels the standards of the activity have degenerated and the future is lost. Neither is right. The conversation continues; the form and the rules are, in the long run, largely irrelevant. It has and always will be the substance of the conversation that gives the activity life-blood.

“So what will we see over the next 30 years? Here is my birthday wish for LD: that debaters strive to have conversations that are relevant to our personal and political realities; that they strive to make this conversation inclusive and to strike down barriers of entries that prevent the other from participating; and that they strive to make the conversation understandable and part of our wider academic, political, and social communities. I hope that LD will equip students to engage the world and to give voice to those who are currently drowned out in political discourse by the elites, the hacks, the screamers, the tribalists, the talking heads, the game-players. Good luck.”

Bryce Pashler is a graduate of Valley High School in West Des Moines, Iowa, and a semifinalist at the 1994 NFL National Tournament. After graduating from high school, he coached students at his alma mater to a still unmatched three TOC championships and four final round appearances in so many years. Today, he is an associate in the New York office of Simpson, Thatcher, and Bartlett.

Reflections: Lincoln Douglas Debate Turns 30

Steve Davis, NFL LD Champion, 1999



“LD is an evolving event. I remember in 1998, Ben Silbermann and I would look at videos of the National Championship from 5 years before and marvel at how slowly competitors spoke. I recently saw a clip of someone at Nationals in 2009 and could barely understand him for the speed. Format aside, debate taught me quite a bit. Of course, we learned to construct and deconstruct

arguments. We learned to structure thoughts in a compelling way. And we learned to speak articulately.

“But I didn’t realize the deeper benefits of participating in debate until much later. I learned the difference between being articulate and being right, the enormous difference between convincing an audience and convincing the person you’re talking to, and the incredible way that being articulate magnifies your contributions in any setting. The greatest part of participating in debate, though, was the articulate, ambitious people it introduced me to. The people I met on high school weekends have gone on to clerk at the Supreme Court, investigated the space shuttle Columbia disaster for NASA, and started their own companies—and that’s just the group from my state championship! Even a decade later I continue to count debate friends as some of my closest, and that for me has been the greatest reward.”

Steve Davis is the 1999 National Champion from Des Moines-Roosevelt High School in Iowa. He is a Project Leader at the Boston Consulting Group, a global management consulting firm. He has a BA in Sociology and an MBA from Harvard University. His final round is available online at <http://nfltv.org/2009/11/04/1999-phoenix-nationals/>

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Brian Bloss, NFA LD Semifinalist, 2008

“Participating in high school Lincoln Douglas was invaluable to me as a competitor for two reasons: first, it is high school Lincoln Douglas that provides the format the National Forensic Association has adapted to create its own version of the event in college. When I auditioned to compete for Western Kentucky University’s debate team, I was told part of the reason I would be a good fit was that I was familiar enough with the basic LD format and could apply my time in Policy Debate in a single person format. In retrospect, a few high school Lincoln Douglas Debate tournaments provided the key to an undergraduate education. More importantly, having the privilege to go to Western Kentucky gave me the chance to meet some of my closest and dearest friends.

“Additionally participating in high school Lincoln Douglas debate was very useful in my collegiate Parliamentary Debate career. While a large majority of Parliamentary debates have a familiarity with the structure of policy debate cases, they are not necessarily familiar with the value debate structure. Although my participation in high school LD was limited, that limited experience helped me and my Parliamentary Debate partners successfully invoke the value debate paradigm in college when it was advantageous to do so.

“In retrospect, Lincoln Douglas may be one of the best events to help expand a student’s way of analyzing a topic. It is relatively easy to explain how a certain policy will work when implemented, but it is much more difficult to compress a discussion of a philosophical value system and its application to the real world within the time constraints of the event. You would be hard pressed to find another competitive activity for high school students grounded in the spirit of effective and precise communication of complex philosophical ideas and systems. These are the invaluable lessons competitors will take with them long after their time in the activity has come to a close.”

Brian Bloss was a Lincoln Douglas and Policy debater at Coppell High School in Texas under Glenda Ferguson. He went on to debate for Western Kentucky University, finishing 3rd in the nation in Lincoln Douglas Debate at the 2008 NFA National Tournament. He was also a National Parliamentary Debate Association All American Debater. Today, Bloss is a graduate student seeking a Master’s of International Affairs with a concentration in National Security Affairs at the George Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University.

Lincoln Douglas Debate, First Place Winner, 1980

Mary C. Ambrose-Gerak, the first winner of Lincoln Douglas Debate, examined the financing mechanism of the Social Security system en route to claiming the inaugural LD title thirty years ago. Today she lives in Illinois, the Land of Lincoln and Douglas. Originally from Marian High School in Omaha, Nebraska, Ms. Gerak attended the Huntsville tournament as the winner of Nebraska's Girls' Extemporaneous Speaking competition. She remembers enrolling in Lincoln Douglas Debate after her coaches insisted that the Marian team participate in either LD or Policy Debate. She started defeating other "second eventers" and after over a dozen rounds, entered the mainstream Lincoln Douglas competition.

Practicing at night with her Marian debate coach, Mary Lou Kipfel, and speech coach, Ms. Kassmeier, Mary improved quickly in content and delivery. Nebraska coaches such as Alex Pritchard from Creighton Prep also assisted. The topical research in 1980 arrived with Ms. Gerak's luggage from Nebraska in books, newspapers, and magazines. Without the Internet and access to the libraries in Huntsville, her nightly scrambles through documents continued throughout the week-long competition. Resting one's voice and using homemade remedies at night assisted her.

Capitalizing on fresh evidence, organization, and concise delivery, Ms. Gerak earned the first Lincoln Douglas Debate National Championship in 1980. In addition to the trophy and plaques, she received a Phillips Petroleum college scholarship toward her Honors program admission at Creighton University. Her status enabled her to fund her college education by judging at local tournaments on the weekends during college.

A group of debate coaches and Ms. Gerak co-authored a textbook through the University of Kansas entitled, *The Lincoln Douglas*

Debate Experience (University of Kansas, 1981). She acquired skills that she utilized at Notre Dame Law School. At Notre Dame in 1984-87, Ms. Gerak won Notre Dame's Client Counseling competitions (competing at the ABA Regionals), earned fourth place in the Moot Court tournament, and earned faculty selection as a Notre Dame Barrister (awarded to the 18 top trial advocacy students). She taught Legal Writing at Notre Dame as a third year.

During the 1990's, as she practiced at Katten Muchin, one of Chicago's top three law firms, she also taught at night at Loyola and DePaul Law Schools. She now resides in Lake Barrington with her family after a career at major law firms, top 50 corporations, and as a federal prosecutor. She ran a shelter for the homeless, as well. In her own practice as a litigator and employment attorney, she spends nighttime teaching business law classes to adults at the local community colleges. During the spring, she volunteers as a speech judge/coach at the local Barrington Middle School and High School tournaments. She enrolled the local Catholic elementary school for the first time in the District 220 tournament. "The judging criteria and point system are different, but the topics the same," states Ms. Gerak. She attributes her successful career in public policy advocacy to her lifelong gift of communication and advocacy skills from the NFL.



"Spending weekends and summers researching and writing debate arguments propelled me forward in my career pursuits and in life. I hope that all students take time to educate themselves on the intricacies of argument and oral presentation. Lincoln Douglas Debate techniques—reading, analyzing, and discussing important issues in the spirit of our forefathers, Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas—serve as terrific life skills." ~Mary Ambrose-Gerak

Lincoln Douglas Debate Champions • 1980 to Present

Mary Ambrose	Omaha-Marian	NE	1980
Oscar Cantu	San Antonio-Curchill	TX	1981
Melissa Obegi	The Marlborough School	CA	1982
James Kincaid, Jr.	Tulsa-Washington	OK	1983
David Yalof	The Bronx High School of Science	NY	1984
Patrick Bannon	Regis High School	NY	1985
John Werthelm	St. Michael's High School	NM	1986
Bailey Irwin	West Charlotte High School	NC	1987
Anoop Mishra	Homewood High School	AL	1988
Rob Berry	Battle Ground Academy	TN	1989
Shalini Ramanathan	Newman Smith High School	TX	1990
Thomas Marlowe	Chesterton High School	IN	1991
Jay Steed	Providence High School	NC	1992
Matthew Whitley	San Angelo Central High School	TX	1993
Claire Carman	Vestavia Hills	AL	1994

Justin Osofsky	Newman School	LA	1995
Dan Vukelich	Benilde-St. Margaret's High School	MN	1996
Marc Wallenstein	The Greenhill School	TX	1997
Allison Pickett	Vestavia Hills High School	AL	1998
Stephen Davis	Des Moines-Roosevelt High School	IA	1999
Adam Preiss	Danville-Monte Vista High School	CA	2000
Maya Babu	Eagan High School	MN	2001
Oscar Shine	El Cerrito High School	CA	2002
Adam Chilton	Mountain View High School	AZ	2003
Jed W. Glickstein	Edina High School	MN	2004
Tara Tedrow	Celebration School	FL	2005
Douglas Jeffers	Dulles High School	TX	2006
Taarini Vohra	Hockaday School	TX	2007
Todd Liipfert	Houston Jesuit High School	TX	2008
Shivani Vohra	Hockaday School	TX	2009

Reflections: Lincoln Douglas Debate Turns 30

Tara Tedrow, NFL LD Champion, 2005



“Without fail, public speaking seems to yearly rank as people’s top fear. I will always be shocked that some find it less frightening to be submerged in a shark tank than to speak before an audience. With such an awful statistic, you might imagine Lincoln Douglas Debate to be a rather sadistic event. But for anyone who is or has been a debater, you know that the exact opposite is true.

Perhaps things are different in the debate world. For one, it’s a group of students

who spend their weekends and even summers doing an academic activity that requires more effort than most, if not all, of their high school courses. It’s an event where you wake up earlier on Saturday and Sunday than you would on a school days, and dress as if you are heading to another day at the office. Which all goes to show why the top fears amongst debaters probably include forgetting your cases at a tournament or hitting a critical position that has more German sounding words than English.

“But that is what makes debate so special. Debate is unlike any activity you will find at high school. It’s an activity that is thrilling, invigorating and enlightening. To say that debate has impacted my life would be a disservice to the activity and an understatement of its power. Lincoln Douglas Debate changed my life in almost every conceivable respect by providing me with opportunities that classroom academics and sports teams could never create. It gives you the chance to become an advocate- sometimes for positions you find hard to reconcile your own personal beliefs with. But in the process of being conflicted over arguments to run and cases to write, I learned the value of never putting blind faith into a belief and of pushing myself to become more educated and articulate. I was forced to manage my time between traveling sometimes three

weekends a month and staying ahead in school. I was required to think on my feet, expand my knowledge base and speak in front of audiences whose job it is to analyze and criticize everything you said.

“As with any activity, styles change and new lines of thinking emerge. But the essence of debate is not how fast you speak or how outrageous of a position you run, but the lifelong benefits you derive and the friends you make along the way. I will always believe that the best debates are substantive ones, where issues are explored and ideas clash not solely by reading at hyper-speed and putting out as many one sentence responses as possible, but by having an actual discussion of the issues and leaving the judge and audience with a better understanding of your position. But even as LD has morphed into the pseudo-Policy Debate realm, the principles behind it have never changed. It will always remain an activity open to various styles of debate and divergent points of view. Though some may find its Policy aspects more appealing, the traditional lines of debate are still strong and remain formidable. Despite any changes, LD will continue to positively impact the lives of not just those competing, but those who are later taught by former competitors and coaches. To those who continue to compete, always maintain a sense of ethics and an eye toward really gaining rich insight on issues that will inevitably affect your life. And to those who teach, I hope the next 30 years will be full of praise for your efforts at helping students gain the wisdom and skills necessary to one day become their own advocates.”

Tara Tedrow is the 2005 NFL National Champion and the 2004 and 2005 NCFL National Champion. She remains the only person to repeat an NCFL championship and the only person to win both NCFL and NFL in a single year, the closest person to the triple crown. Tedrow is a graduate of Celebration High School and a Presidential Scholar for Debate at Wake Forest University. Currently, she is a Juris Doctor Candidate at University of Florida Levin College of Law, class of 2012, and Curriculum Coordinator for the National Debate Forum. Her final round is available online at <http://nfltv.org/2010/02/24/2005-philadelphia-nationals/>

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