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## Developing Skills & Character Through Homeschool Speech & Debate

By Andrew Pudewa

Welcome to my column: Finishing the Race! It's such an appropriate title for me, as I myself need encouragement to persist in doing good and to persevere to the end. While five of our seven children are now in college, grown, or married, we still have two at home, aged 11 and 14. Often the time seems frighteningly short ("Our youngest will be 18 in seven years! What will we do then?"); at other times it seems like a long stretch still ahead. And there's always the likely prospect of grandchildren living nearby (I'm still having a hard time wrapping the word Grandpa around my youthful self!). So as I pray and seek to provide a modicum of insight and encouragement to all TOS readers, you can be sure I'm in the same place, having similar challenges and doubts, joys and goals, as my wife and I seek to finish our race.

Over the coming months I plan to address a range of topics, including how to nurture a scholar, dealing with dyslexia, keys to great teaching, entrepreneurship, college prep and college options, and even a bit on high school writing! As we travel this contemplative path together, I most certainly welcome your suggestions, questions, and challenges. But this month, as it is the beginning of the competitive speech and debate season for us, I'd like to discuss the value of a formal public speaking program, as well as the truly remarkable culture of homeschool forensics.

Eight years ago, while we were living in California, my daughter number three was 16 and coming into her home stretch. As she had become so proficient at arguing during her childhood, I thought she might do well in a formal setting, where argumentation was more structured and polite.[DR1] Having met many homeschool debaters in my travels to conventions and seminars, I was always impressed with their poise and confident articulation and really felt called to provide that opportunity for my daughter in the short time remaining. Unfortunately, the closest homeschool debate club was ninety miles away, and her participation in that club was just not practical for us at that time. However, I was unwilling to give up the idea entirely, and so with another homeschool parent who was equally enthusiastic about the idea of debate for her two eldest, we started a club in our local area.

Of course, we had almost no clue what we were doing. We ordered up some books from the HSLDA on how to teach and coach debate, got our little group of four teenagers together, and started from the very beginning, learning the basics of debate format, collecting evidence, and building cases. The learning curve was steep. Fortunately, we were able to gain encouragement and guidance by phone from one of the finest

homeschool debate coaches in California, and somehow, by January the four kids were ready enough to venture out to their first tournament in San Diego.

If you have never been to a homeschool debate tournament before, I will tell you point-blank you are missing one of the greatest, most inspiring, truly awesome things happening on the planet. Imagine a hundred or more students aged 12 through 18, professionally dressed, profoundly excited about standing in front of peers and judges, arguing for changes in medical malpractice law in an articulate and knowledgeable way, while practicing in between debate rounds their persuasive or dramatic speeches for I.E. (Individual Events) competition. Now, I must confess I am somewhat of a pessimist by nature and often find the world situation somewhat bleak, but going to that first debate tournament actually gave me hope for our nation in a way I had never before experienced. I saw and heard these young Christian men and women preparing themselves with the writing, speaking, teamwork, and leadership skills so desperately needed in our world today—they were in many ways demonstrating the best of the homeschool world as I knew it. I was profoundly inspired.

Of course, our two teams got slaughtered. They maybe won a single round out of the twelve rounds debated, but oddly they weren't discouraged. If anything, they were more enthusiastic than ever to get back to work, gather and organize evidence, refine their cases, study vocabulary specific to the resolution, and practice delivery skills. We went to a few more tournaments that year, and although none of the four had much of a win-loss record to show, all four of them enjoyed the challenge and acknowledged the value of the effort they put into it. We parents were hooked.

The next year we got serious, starting in August with a "Speech Boot Camp," a two-week public speaking intensive designed to help new students past their initial resistance to public speaking and get used to writing, delivering, and critiquing several types of speeches. (If you're interested in seeing exactly what we did, you can find this course on our website: [www.excellenceinwriting.com/sbc-d](http://www.excellenceinwriting.com/sbc-d).) Although three of our four original students graduated and went off to college, we talked it up and recruited enough new students to double our size; "The Liber" (our club name) had eight debaters, including my daughter number four. It was a much better year, as we had a degree of experience under our belt and knew what to expect. By the following year, our club had doubled in size again; several of the second-year debaters planned to give platform or interpretive speeches; and we were blessed to see tremendous growth in confidence and skills in all of the students, especially those who had been so shy and anxious in the beginning.

While it's inspiring and satisfying to see so many young people develop their communication skills through speech and debate, what's even more exciting for me is to see how homeschool debate culture so actively nurtures character development as well. With a wide age range of debaters (12 to 18 in age), it is not at all uncommon to see a little 12-year-old girl cross-examining a six-foot 17-year-old boy, or vice versa. The supportive, gracious interaction between students of all ages and levels of experience demonstrates that the homeschool debate world is truly one of social excellence. Not only are the kids well dressed, polite, and enthusiastic, but almost all of them are serious about their faith and believe that the real reason they are there is to bring glory to God, to honor Him by striving to honor one another, and to prepare themselves with skills to better speak His truth into a world so desperate for truth. Nowhere have I seen these values so universally embodied by young people as I have at homeschool debate events.

Will debate take time? Yes, possibly a lot. Money? Yes, some, especially for travel. Will it be worth it? Absolutely. I am confident that if you were to ask a hundred homeschool graduates who did debate, "What were the most important or valuable things you did

during your teen years?” they would, in the high 90-percent range, affirm that speech and debate were the most beneficial and formative, even—or perhaps especially—the ones who resisted the idea at first. My kids certainly would.

So, I encourage you to make the effort this year to observe a homeschool debate tournament. With clubs and events all over the country, you can find one, and however far you have to drive, it will be worth it; I promise. Even if you ultimately decide against joining a club or participating in a league, you’ll come back inspired and more hopeful for the future, having seen so many confident, capable, articulate young Christian men and women. And very possibly you’ll come home determined to find—or even start—a club for the 2012–2013 school year. For information about debate clubs and events in your region, check with your local homeschool group and your state organization, and visit one or both of the homeschool leagues’ websites:

- [www.ncfca.org](http://www.ncfca.org)
- [www.stoausa.org](http://www.stoausa.org)

Again, thanks for joining me in our contemplation on “Finishing the Race.”

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