

## *REVIEW OF PROFESSIONAL RESOURCES*

*Jack Kay, Editor*

*Debate Tournament Administrator*, computer program for tournament scheduling (IBM-based), by Stephen C. Wood and Joseph B. Miller, 1990.

As a society we have come to depend on computers to a degree unthought of ten years ago. The danger in this rapid proliferation of reliance on the computer is that we come to expect the computer to think for us rather than imposing our will on the computer. As a consequence, computer software is often written which directs us to accept the assumptions of the author of the software about how to perform a given task rather than permitting us to manipulate the program so that we can perform that task as we see fit. Fortunately, a debate scheduling program available on the market avoids the temptation of telling us how to run our tournaments; and instead, it challenges us to use the computer as a tool to impose our assumptions about tournaments on the computer.

DEBATE TOURNAMENT ADMINISTRATOR by Stephen C. Wood and Joseph B. Miller is available for IBM based computers through Kendall Hunt Publishers on a site license basis for \$150.00. This software was previously reviewed in the NFJ by Pettus and Dittus (Vol. VII, #2, p. 145-149). My purpose is to examine the features of DTA, correct some misconceptions created by the Pettus and Dittus review, and to reach some conclusions regarding the assumptions of the DTA program and its utility for debate tournament directors.

Let me begin by saying that I have worked with DTA for a number of years as the program was tested and revised by Professor Wood. I have used it for over a dozen tournaments and authorized its use at the 1991 NFA Lincoln-Douglas debate competition. The program offers an excellent menu driven means to schedule teams, assign judges and tabulate results. It has excellent documentation with a well-written manual which explains the function of the program and makes application to common problems encountered in the tournament setting. The manual will permit those with little or no computer experience to run the program effectively, which is a great advantage to directors who are novices at running tournaments or operating computers. The program provides customer support with access to the authors directly for problem solving and trouble shooting. The program has undergone a number of evolutions and the latest version is available for a modest update cost for those who were previous purchasers. The key to using this program is to run simulations using old tournament data so that you can

become familiar with its operation before you try to use it on an actual tournament. The manual wisely urges new users to back up data frequently and initially to employ a manual back up as well. This seems prudent until the user feels comfortable with the program's operation.

What the manual only begins to tell you is the philosophy which underpins this program. As I mentioned before, this program challenges you to run your tournament your way using a computer to do manual tasks efficiently and rapidly. After having worked in a number of tab rooms, it seems to me that no two tournament directors run their debate tournaments exactly alike. When I think of a random round, I may mean a truly random pairing except that teams from the same school cannot meet. I may also mean that I would like all the teams paired geographically so that all the teams from one school are on the same side or I may want them spread. These simple decisions can be made by a computer program, but that eliminates the director's instinctive decision making ability. DTA opts not to make these decisions; instead it allows directors to make these decisions for themselves. The program will generate a random round and then ask you if you want to make changes. While on-line, the director can swap one or all the teams until the criteria for a viable pairing have been satisfied. The same feature exists for power matching and for assignment of judges. While I consider this the great advantage of DTA, those that expect to push a button and have the computer do all the thinking will be disappointed.

Perhaps this basic difference of opinion regarding the application of computer software lies at the heart of my rejection of the Pettus and Dittus review of this program. If I might summarize their criticisms of the program, these criticisms focus primarily on failures of the program to make decisions which the program purposely asks the tournament director to make. In their analysis, Pettus and Dittus employ a single six round, four team simulation. It is my contention that the utility of a program can only be judged by considering its operation in a wide variety of circumstances. One might also question the validity of a test that involved only four teams. The analysis continues with a suggestion that the program does not allow for mid-tournament drops. The program considers this to be a decision of the tournament director. In some cases it may be appropriate to edit the school code to call the team which is being dropped a "BYE," while in other cases it may be best to delete the team altogether. Either option is available through manipulation of the program's edit team information section. Pettus and Dittus also took exception to the fact that if rooms are changed each round, the program requires the operator to edit the room list. The implication is that this must be done "by hand," but in actuality the room edit function allows you to change the rooms while on-line. This may be somewhat confus-

ing the first time through the program, but after a few simulations, it is a very easy task.

The previous review, then, examines the DTA feature which allows for entry and review of results for each round. The complaint here is that "Entering results is easy with DTA, perhaps too easy." The specific criticism is that affirmative wins require a return key punch, but that any other key will record a negative team win. While this is true, in my experience a routine double check of all round results (which the manual also suggests) would reveal any errors. The review also suggests that changing an errant decision "creates some unique problems... later in the tournament" but they fail to specify the nature and extent of those problems and, as a user, I have failed to detect any problems if the abort procedures in the manual are followed. Pettus and Dittus do acknowledge the program permits and encourages the printing of result information after each round, and we agree that the printed tabulation sheet which includes all team and school names as well as win-loss, rank and rate information, sub-totals for all these categories, plus team opponent and side "is an excellent plus in using this program."

Pettus and Dittus take great exception to the round and judge scheduling features of DTA. As I explained before, this is a basic philosophical difference in user expectations of a program. If you tell DTA to power match without side constraints and the top two teams are from the same school, DTA will pair them against each other but it will tell you there is a scheduling conflict and allow you to determine how that conflict should be resolved. This means you must check the pairings that DTA generates, but a prudent tournament director would double check any pairings anyway. Judge assignments are made by assigning the first judge on the judge list that has not judged one of the teams previously, and that is not from the same school as the teams involved in the debate. If the operator overrides the program and inserts a judge in a given debate the program does not check the school or prior judging conflicts. This allows the director of the tournament to override the provision of a team being judged twice when the judging pool is limited or when the team debated on the opposite side. I should also note that DTA does not automatically switch teams to opposite sides if they are scheduled to meet for a second time. This permits the tournament directors to determine if they indeed want a pairing with a second meeting or would prefer to swap opponents to avoid a second meeting.

Pettus and Dittus do have some legitimate criticisms of DTA. They rightly note that all round postings are printed in top to bottom order and that to correct this requires either an on-line shuffling of the order or a manually prepared posting. They also note that instead of the commonly used high-low within brackets, DTA offers a high-low pairing

option. The reason for excluding the bracket pairing is that the tournament director would have to establish where the bracket was to be applied. Since that decision must occur outside the program anyway, the program allows the operator to install brackets by using the swap routine in the high-low pairing option. DTA also assumes that once elimination rounds begin that off-line scheduling will be done. DTA will rank teams so the operator knows which teams will advance, but it does not pair the elim rounds or assign judges or print elim results. I am told that the authors of the program will make accommodations for this in future versions of the program. The review also makes some curious statements regarding the provisions for breaking ties in speaker awards. The review states that "In this program, ties were broken based on dropping high and low points only once, then going to ranks." What is curious is that in keeping with the program's philosophy, it does not break ties but permits tournament directors to break them as they see fit.

In summary, I found DTA to be an effective and helpful tool for scheduling and tabulating tournaments. While it has some flaws, if you accept the essential premise that this is a program to allow you to schedule the way you want, then the program operates efficiently. The tabulation accuracy alone makes the program worthwhile, and the speed of tabulation is, as one would expect, impossible by manual means. The program requires careful reading of the manual and prior simulation exercises before actual tournament use, but once that is accomplished the program is easily mastered. Those willing to learn the program and employ it in the spirit in which it is written will find DTA to be an excellent tool. For those who want to turn on the computer and have it run your tournament, you will be disappointed and frustrated. Fortunately in a consumer economy, the choice is yours.

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