

Debate Ethos: Becoming the Michael Jordan of Debate

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Abstract: Michael Jordan was the greatest basketball player to ever step foot on a basketball court. He could score, play defense, and set his teammates up to produce. But what made him great transcended tangible things. Michael Jordan had the mindset of a champion. As a debater you can, and should, have that exact same mindset. This article will teach you how to master the intangibles of debate and give you the ability to become the champion that you can be.

Do You Want to Be Like Mike?

Michael Jordan was one of the greatest basketball players of all time for three reasons, all of which can be translated into debate. First, he had an amazing ability to score, or in debate terms, generate offense/reasons to win the debate. He was a solid defensive player, which in debate can be understood as your ability to play defense against other debaters. And finally, he had the intangibles effect, which is debate ethos, the subject of this article.

The characteristics that make up the intangibles are as follows:

1. *Having a winner's mindset.* If you want to be the best, you have to have the mindset of a champion. You cannot go into rounds scared or worried regardless of who you are debating. Confidence is crucial. If you don't think that you can win any and every debate round, then you have put yourself at a strategic mental disadvantage that, believe it or not, makes all the difference in the world.
2. *The "clutch" factor.* The nature of debate makes it such that some rounds are more important than others. If you're going into your last preliminary round and you have to win to break, that round is going to require you to perform your best. Now, that doesn't mean you shouldn't give your best in every round, but the unique situation that you are in dictates something special. Your ability to compose yourself and win these rounds is huge.
3. *The will to win.* Your will to win, or your drive, is of upmost importance. If you do not want to win, or it is not your top priority, you will not push yourself through the hard times that are inevitable in a debate career.
4. *Finally, ethos.* This is undoubtedly the most important part of the intangibles in the context of debate. While you can win basketball games if everyone dislikes you (Kobe Bryant, for example), the same is not true of debate.

The Nature of this Activity or, “Why Do I Care About Ethos?”

The Community

A fact of which I am sure many of you are aware is that debate is a very tight-knit community. Travel to tournaments a few weekends out of the month, and you are guaranteed to run into some of the same people over and over again. At the end of the day, the debate community is extremely political. There are factions, camps that do and don't agree with one another on big issues, and stylistic differences that generate biases amongst the community.

The mere fact that you will see the same students, judges, and coaches on a weekly basis should show you that you do not want to make enemies with these people. Often we will convince ourselves that it's okay to argue with a judge because the likelihood they'll ever judge you again is slim. Even if you're right that they may never judge you again, this mindset still misses the point.

You can't avoid every judge, and the web of friendships in debate is so large that making enemies with one person can have serious, far-reaching implications that you couldn't even begin to imagine. People whom you consider friends may also have close ties with the judge with whom you just argued, and the fact that you were disrespectful to their friend could have serious consequences to your relationship with that friend. Debate is a game, but more than being a game, it is a community in which you have the opportunity to make lifelong friends, so there is absolutely no good reason to isolate people.

The Differences Between Debaters and Judges

Your job as a debater, regardless of what circuit you are on, is to persuade the judge at the end of the round to vote for you. Persuasion is an art that dates back all the way to the ancient Greeks with Aristotle. When you want to win a debate, you have to get someone to vote for you. According to Aristotle, ethos is the most important factor in being able to persuade people. Part of improving your ethos is realizing that there are a few key differences between debaters and judges.

First, for some reason, debaters believe that judges are flawless robots, but judges realize that they are just humans. There is no judge in the world that, in a close debate, won't vote for the debate that they would most want to coach. Everyone wants to believe that judges are completely unbiased and will always make the most objective decision possible. And on the other side, judges claim that they will take the path of least intervention, and only pay attention to their notes or flow.

If you believe this, then you have been lied to. The reason that stereotypes exist, such as, “people are much more likely to give seniors the benefit of the doubt when their career is on the line” is because judges aren't entirely “non-interventionist.” Nobody can divorce themselves from the context of a given debate round completely; thus, it's your job to make sure that you have all the factors that you can control going in your favor.

I believe that often judges know exactly how they are going to vote once the round ends, at which point, they will then use their flow or their notes to map out a decision for the person they believe they will vote for. You will rarely find judges who are willing to admit this, and often they don't even realize that it is

happening, but it is simply part of our human nature to be predisposed to voting for an individual whom we would much rather see win.

This is especially true in close debates where making the “right” decision is almost impossible. If you are a debater that people like, or want to see win, then your odds of winning any given debate are significantly increased in a scenario where the judges are looking for any kind of a tiebreaker.

Second, debaters care about wins, but judges care about making the right decision and educating students. Often debaters want to go for the easy way out, even if that argument is intellectually bankrupt, and this makes convincing the judge that your argument is true much harder because you’re asking him/her to vote on something that is not the best in terms of promoting education.

If you decide that you are going to make an argument that you know the judge is not a particularly big fan of, the key to getting them to vote for you is based on how you frame your argument. This means you may say something like this: “Look, of course you’d rather see a more educational debate on the affirmative’s contention about U.S. hegemony, and the next time you judge me, I promise you will see that, but you can’t ask me to forgo an easy win because of a mistake my opponent made.” And then you can explain the mistake they made, and why the judge should vote on it, even if they’re pedagogically opposed to the argument.

Despite the fact that it isn’t relevant to the judge’s flow or notes, it could make all the difference in the world in determining who the winner of the debate is at the end of the round.

Third, debaters think of arguments as absolute. Once you start judging, for the most part, you realize that arguments aren’t absolute and you rarely think that one argument is clearly correct or vice versa. Most debaters, for example, think that their affirmative case is making an absolutely true argument. You may recognize there are some weaknesses, but at the end of the day you probably wouldn’t (or shouldn’t) be reading that affirmative case if you did not have some faith in the veracity of the argument you were making.

The judge, however, has to pick between two debaters, both of which presumably believe that they are making sound arguments. You will increase your likelihood of winning if you realize that you will never win that your argument is 100%, without a doubt, correct. Debate, and winning, requires comparing your argument to the best possible version of your opponent’s argument. This also means that the debate is almost always closer than you think it is, and rarely does the judge ever see the debate getting out of hand despite debaters tendencies to believe they are running away with the round.

Fourth, debaters often think it is a weakness to admit that the other debater is right, but when done correctly, judges often see this as a positive thing. Debaters are notorious for over claiming their argument and making it seem so much more important, or stronger, than it actually is. This will lose you credibility in the eyes of the judge because it demonstrates that you do not have an understanding of what is actually going on in the debate round.

Being able to admit that your opponent is right on some issues, but still losing the debate, makes you look very strong perceptually and it maintains your credibility with the judge because you are not making absurd claims about how you’re winning every single argument that has been brought up.

Fifth, debaters care way too much about reputation and who it is that they're debating. Judges could care less. In the judge's mind, debaters are just 17-year-olds yelling at one another. This is important for you to keep in mind because you need to realize that regardless of who you are and regardless of whom you are debating, if you win, the judge is more often than not going to vote for you regardless of how important you think you are to debate.

Sixth, debaters are full of adrenaline. Judges, on the other hand, are struggling through each and every round looking for their next chance to catch up on sleep they lost the night before. This means that judges are going to be much more irritable than you might expect. In these situations, you need to make sure that the judge is engaged. If you're funny, incorporate some humor into your speeches. If you aren't funny, do not force humor into debate rounds. There is nothing in this world that is more awkward than a debater who isn't funny trying to make the round humorous for the judge. Be yourself in rounds. If you do that, give the judge something interesting to watch, and just go in and give your best effort; then you won't have anything to worry about.

The People of Debate

You can only benefit from a competitive standpoint by being kind to everyone and making friends in the community. Now, to clarify, I am not saying that you should be a huge suck-up. People will see right through this, and it will work against you. My position is that you should genuinely invest time in making friendships with people, and that these friendships should go beyond debate. You will enjoy debate so much more if you look forward to seeing people at debate tournaments.

You are going to reach a point in your career where you've met your competitive goals, you're tired of traveling every weekend, and you just want to stay home. Having solid friendships in debate will help you overcome this feeling of being burned out, and will give you a strong motivation to continue working hard. This motivation is directly linked to your success as a debate. The amount of effort you put into debate, as well as maintaining a strong will to win, undoubtedly affects your win percentage.

It is no exaggeration that the people who leave debate go on to lead successful lives. You have joined an activity filled to the brim with people poised for success. These are connections that you will always have; you should never burn bridges because you never know what role these people will play later on in your life.

The Results

These things are called the intangibles for a reason—they don't explicitly show up the stat sheet, but that does not mean that they do not produce a tangible effect. You will find yourself in debates that are extremely close and could go either way. You give yourself a huge advantage if you are in a position where people truly want you to win. I can't tell you exactly how many rounds this will help you win. It could be one, five, or 50. I can guarantee that this will help you win rounds, but it is admittedly a bit immeasurable. What I can also promise you is that if you follow the next bit of advice, you will:

1. Enjoy debate much more
2. Be much more willing to work
3. Make lifelong friends

At the very least, there is no feasible disadvantage to implementing these skills. It does not trade off with your ability to improve your technical skills, and nobody dislikes someone who genuinely attempts to make friends.

How to Increase Your Debate Ethos

Don't Panic

If you've ever read *Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*, the phrase "Don't Panic" will be very familiar to you. That phrase is extremely applicable to debate. In debates, no matter what happens, you want to be cool, calm, and collected. It is absolutely fine to be passionate. If you aren't, then you're in the wrong activity, but you should never be angry or irritated. In your mind you must continue to think that you are smarter than your opponent, and that it will be abundantly clear when you are cool, calm, and collected. There is simply never an appropriate time to be rude or abrupt with people.

When you do inevitably panic, continue to act like you are calm. In other words, fake it until you make it. Debate is largely a performance activity, and many judges will vote on what they believe you should know. If you act like you aren't panicked, what you'll find is that eventually your nerves will be settled and you'll come up with a solution to the dilemma.

When you're debating, make eye contact with the judge and smile. When you try and make connections with the judge, speak to them like you would speak to a normal human outside of a debate round. If you treat the judge as different, or make them feel uncomfortable, you're only hurting yourself. This means doing things like looking up at the judge as you are talking so they feel like they're an integral part of what you are saying. When things go well for you, you should be sitting up, and occasionally checking on the judge to see if s/he is giving you any non-verbal signs.

But what if things go horribly wrong? Smile. You made a mistake, it happens. Smile through it all and maintain a positive mindset. When you smile, it makes you feel better psychologically. Sometimes you make mistakes from which you can't recover. There is no point in dwelling on that and having it affect you in later rounds.

Clarity

You should always speak clearly, maintain simplicity, be precise, and enunciate as well as you can. Using complicated words to explain things doesn't make you sound smarter. If anything, it will hinder your ability to effectively communicate with the judge. When you introduce complicated, technical terms, you should define them in the context in which you are using them.

If you want to be the best communicator that you can be, you should know your arguments. When you're writing your files, write those files to win debates. If you know your arguments, you won't be embarrassed by someone who knows more about your case than you do. You should also know the context of your arguments. This means doing things such as reading the newspaper. If you're making arguments about the political environment in Iran in relation to their nuclear weapons program, but you aren't up to date on the

political situation there, you're going to be incredibly behind and unable to clearly communicate what your argument is to the judge.

If You Are a Champion, Act Like It

Vince Lombardi, one of the greatest football coaches of all time, once said, "Act like you've been there before and will be there again." People are going to know if you've been successful; you don't need to tell them. Let your debating speak for itself.

If you're being honest with yourself, you probably can't remember who won the Tournament of Champions, or almost any tournament for that matter, two years ago. But you will remember the people who were classy, played the game the right way, worked hard, and acted like they belonged in the final round. Judges want to vote for these kinds of debaters in rounds where it is close. By acting like a champion, you make the judge your ally. It's very important to be clear here, acting like a champion does NOT mean that you should be cocky. Instead, it should mean that you're the exact opposite. Your success speaks for itself; your mouth should not speak for your success. This is how you alienate people.

Respect all of your judges, even the ones who you don't think are that great. A lot of times someone who voted against you in your second round of the tournament will judge you in a later, more important elimination round. If you were rude to them earlier in the tournament, you are going to make them much less inclined to give you the benefit of the doubt and/or vote for you.

Conclusion

Debate is an activity full of fallible beings subject to the tendencies inherent in human nature. It's about much more than the individual arguments you'll make throughout a round or a tournament. If you are not taking advantage of every opportunity to build relationships, communicate with the judge, or persuade your target audience, then you are putting yourself at a strategic disadvantage. Enjoy debate, realize that it is a game and have fun with it, and also realize that you are surrounding yourself with real people who could very easily become lifelong friends. Whether or not you believe it, approaching debate from this perspective will also help you to increase your skills as a debater and win more and more rounds.