

In Recognition: Larry Scott Deatherage

In the final days of 2009 the debate community lost one of its remarkable members. Larry Scott Deatherage, an icon within the high school and college debate community for the last thirty years, passed away far too soon and left so many to consider his remarkable legacy.

As the debate community gathers to celebrate his life, we, as representatives of the three largest collegiate policy debate organizations, take this moment to remember a coaching legend. The outpouring of recognition for Scott's contribution have been nothing short of remarkable.¹ We invited those who knew him so well to share their memories to help us author this collective remembrance. Out of respect for these contributions we have attached all of the submissions, in alphabetical order, to this document.

Any effort to appreciate Scott's legacy must begin with his competitive successes. In eighteen years as the Director of the Northwestern University Debate Society his teams won the National Debate Tournament (NDT) seven times. His teams won the Rex Copeland Award for the Top Ranked Debate Team in the nation four times. His students were recognized as the top individual speaker at the NDT five times. Before he retired from college coaching in 2008, he had been awarded the George W. Ziegelmueller National Debate Tournament Coach of the Year Award, the Pelham National Coach of the Year Award and was voted as the 1990s Coach of the Decade. These accomplishments place him without equal in recent memory and in the history of intercollegiate policy debate. It is difficult to draw comparisons to his accomplishments, but Scott Segal noted, "It was with complete sincerity that I would introduce him publicly as the "John Wooden" of college debate." Scott, who was colorfully nicknamed 'Duck' for his unique mannerisms and posture occupied a singular place in modern debate. When asked to assess Scott's place in debate history, Harvard debate coach Dallas Perkins, himself incredibly successful, said, "There is no close second. There is a small handful of distinguished coaches who have won half as much as Duck; none closer. Nobody will ever catch up. Nobody really even dreams of catching up anymore."

Understanding Scott, requires us to appreciate his competitive successes as a result of his commitment to excellence. Luke Hill, who debated for and then worked with Scott, explains

Larry Scott Deatherage is beyond defining in any single story or any single storyteller. He was a loving, passionate, and loyal. He was also a determined perfectionist who would let you know if you had not lived up to expectations. No one worked harder. No

¹ Our evolving media environment has provided many wonderful opportunities for individuals to share their memories. A sampling includes: A thread at the CEDA forums which has eleven pages of posts that have been read almost 9,000 times <http://cedadebate.org/forum/open-topic-any-issue/scott-deatherage/> , A facebook group devoted to "Honoring and Celebrating the Life of Scott Deatherage" <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=222352468035&ref=ts> , Northwestern University's official obituary <http://www.northwestern.edu/newscenter/stories/2009/12/deatherage.html> , A Tribute by the National Association for Urban Debate Leagues <http://www.urbandebate.org/sdremembering.shtml> , Articles in the Chicago Sun Times http://www.suntimes.com/news/washington/1971239.CST-EDT-laura04_article , North by Northwestern <http://www.northbynorthwestern.com/2010/01/62431/letter-to-the-editor-on-scott-deatherage-passing/> , The Daily Northwestern <http://www.dailynorthwestern.com/memory-of-nu-debate-coach-larry-scott-deatherage-honored-1.2129986>

one enjoyed victory more. More importantly no one enjoyed sharing debate with others more. Duck always said that debate saved his life. Thank you Duck for changing my life forever.

In this unique way Scott fused competitive desire and an ethic that he would pass onto all those around him. Longtime friend and colleague Sherry Hall, who has made a tremendous contribution of her own by collecting and organizing many of the tributes to Scott, noted how widely Scott influenced others,

The energy, organization, and level of preparation and focus that he brought to this venture was humbling and unprecedented.... Reading the posts that other debaters have written, particularly people who did not debate for Northwestern, but only knew Scott through summer camps, really gives one a sense of the impact that he had on so many. The number of people who have written that they went back and referred to their notes from a lecture he gave 5, 10 or 15 years ago; Aimi who said that she still has quotes from his lecture taped to her wall and that her brother took some of them from her room and moved them to his room to inspire him when he debated, really demonstrates what a special person he was, what tremendous insight he had into what it took to prepare oneself for success. I think he knew that learning to prepare oneself for success in debate was great training for preparing oneself to succeed in life.

Through these recollections we can begin to appreciate that teaching and coaching for Scott was a passion. It was a way in which debaters share so much. Josh Zive, who competed against Scott's teams, learned to appreciate how Scott approached coaching,

When the Duck talked about his former debaters it was infused with a type of pride and love that is unmistakable to me now that I have become a father. For me, a conversation with the Duck about former debaters was more than a war story, it was ritual in community. Those conversations could remind you of how much you loved your coaches as a debater, and how much you loved your debaters as a coach. I will miss those conversations because the Duck understood something that took me a long time to appreciate---that while personal success in debate is a lot of fun, there is nothing more rewarding than investing your passion into someone else and watching them accomplish things you never could.

Scott found coaching as his passion and he worked tirelessly with his students and on behalf of the enterprise of debate. For Scott, there was something very important and deeply personal about his commitment to teaching debate. Karla Leeper, another of Scott's colleagues, when she directed the debate program at Baylor University noted,

Scott could speak so convincingly about the educational and personal benefits of debate because debate had been such a profound influence on his own life. When Scott talked about debate's ability to improve students' minds and lives he was his own best evidence. His personal passion for debate could turn anyone into a debate fan.

Scott created many fans for debate in his nearly three decades involved with intercollegiate debate. Even those who saw his early years of his debate career noticed some of the traits that

would become part of his legacy. Scott Segal remembers Scott the debater,

Was Scott a persuasive debater? I'd say so. He developed the use of the dramatic pause in debate rounds better than anyone. Playing the hand he was dealt, and realizing that keeping up with the line-by-line was not always the best option for him, he would stare off into that middle ground, and bring the pace to a persuasive halt. Having observed him in a variety of public speaking roles over the last couple of decades, this style became his trademark and an educational tool. Facts...drama, metaphor...pause...facts. I will miss that. And the takeaway? You can always turn your challenges into your successes.

Scott turned challenges into successes as a student at Baylor University (both undergraduate and Masters), then as a doctoral student at Northwestern and eventually on the faculty of Northwestern as their Director of Debate. During that time he not only coached his students, but he reached thousands of high school students with his work directing the Northwestern Summer Debate Workshop.

If Scott's accomplishments provided any lessons, they were found in his constant desire to challenge himself, and those around him, to seek the most of their lives. In this context, it comes as no surprise that at the peak of his career Scott chose to leave Northwestern and embrace a bold new challenge. In April of 2008 Scott became the Executive Director of the National Association for Urban Debate Leagues (NAUDL). In this next endeavor he sought to expand the reach of debate, the activity that he cared so deeply for, throughout high schools. He described what motivated this change,

I have been offered what I consider the opportunity - indeed the privilege - of a lifetime; the chance to help on a national level to build debate programs in the many thousands of high schools across the United States where that opportunity has not existed for a long, long time.

In his brief tenure directing NAUDL Scott applied his trademark work ethic and the results continued to follow. According to the NAUDL, under his leadership the NAUDL launched debate in eight new cities and over 150 high schools, serving over 1,500 schools per year. Many as the students who worked directly with him gained a new appreciation for debate, now Scott helped to make a debate education possible for students in Dallas, Denver, Houston, Los Angeles, Memphis, Oakland, St. Louis, and San Francisco.

In this short window Scott applied himself to the mission of the NAUDL and those around him witnessed the results. For many who had worked alongside Scott for years they observed his new passion and remarkable accomplishments. In the words of those who worked with him we learn about his final labor of love. Lenny Gail, Scott's predecessor at the NAUDL observed,

It was only at the very end of Scott's life and for the one and one-half years during which he was the full time Executive Director of the NAUDL – only after our weekly one on one meetings, our daily telephone conversations, and even more frequent email exchanges – did I for the first time really get to know the Scott Deatherage who I had

seen only from afar for over 25 years. And, I saw it all clear as day: His methods, including his “Monday morning coffee” emails, “the speech,” and his careful deployment of his personal network; his passion for politics, sports, and our mission; and his commitment to academic debate both to the students who had already benefited from it and also to the so many hundreds of thousands more who were still without access to its benefit.

Melissa Wade, herself a pioneer in debate education, recalled how Scott catalyzed support for urban debate even as he kept true to a lifetime of learning.

Scott called me 3 months into his NAUDL leadership role and told me it was the hardest job he had ever had and wanted a phone conference—and needed a hug, not to mention that he could not even imagine keeping up with the email volume. He never caught up to email, but he did an awesome job: 150 new schools, new states, amazing fundraising, and, more than all of this: consciousness raising among the top high school and college debate alumni that the UDL was right; that being a “winner in a rigged game” as Jonathan Kozol would characterize it, required paying forward the debt of debate training. We were planning and working on funding for an annual summer debate camp for UDL kids and teachers in Atlanta with Scott, Will Baker, and me as the staff for teachers; James Roland and Diana Dunker as teachers for the students. It was, however, more than a mingling of the 3 national UDL organizations, it was a reflection of Scott’s capacity to grow from listening to the kids and teachers he chose to serve. We will continue to work on the project in his memory.

Ede Warner, the Director of Debate at Louisville, also noted Scott's remarkable capacity to constantly remain reflexive about his role in debate and how that served as an inspiration to those around him.

Someone earlier suggested they looked forward to what Scott would teach the UDL, but I looked forward to both what he would learn, as well as what he would teach. He was always eager to share those thoughts with me as our paths crossed over the years and our challenge of difference impacted his thinking, his strategy, and his actions. He had a term I learned recently, “revolutionary patience” as I searched to better understand who I was and what meaning that had for how we both learn and teach.

In his final act all of Scott's skills became apparent. He organized, inspired, coached, mentored and spread the values of debate. Those fortunate enough to work with Scott throughout his career noted the powerful legacy he left for others. Griffin Vincent, of Andrews Kurth, identified why Scott's success in expanding urban debate reflected his personal strengths.

Most of all, Scott still had that kindness and ability to make you feel special and to make you feel as if he had all the time in the world to address whatever issue or problem that was important. Scott was a tireless worker for the urban debate movement. He truly believed in the transformative power of debate. For me, overarching that was Scott’s kindness which shined upon and warmed others, asking for nothing in return.

This sense of selflessness is a persistent theme in testimonials to Scott. Lyn Robbins, the Senior

General Attorney for BNSF Railway Company, and whose own tribute to Scott is itself a wonderful testament, captured Scott's essence,

Scott was far more than a debate coach. He was kind. He taught dignity and class. He exemplified hard work. He was a great teacher of sharp thinking and persuasive communication. He was more interested in molding greatness in others than in being on the A list himself.

In the last few weeks, Scott's passing has been felt by countless thousands around the world. In small groups, electronic forums, and ceremonies in Texas and Illinois friends and family gather to celebrate his remarkable life and to console each other that we must take up Scott's charge, the passion for debate, without him. We are honored that he made his life's work the betterment of teaching that we hold so dear. Scott's legacy lives on in the lives he influenced and the programs he developed. Perhaps the only way to truly appreciate this remarkable life is to turn to someone who was Scott's teacher and friend, someone close enough to him to be responsible for coining the nickname 'Duck' , University of Kansas professor and Chair of the NDT Board of Trustees, Robert Rowland.

The outpouring of emotion that has occurred in the last few days makes clear both the universal respect that Scott received and that he changed the lives of many many students. What was it that made him such a life-changing teacher? I think the answer is that in his teaching and his life he enacted the values at the heart of academic debate. He pushed students to find the best evidence, think through the pluses and minuses of all strategic choices, to not accept the conventional wisdom, to practice for all eventualities, and then to choose. He recognized that this approach did not guarantee victory in debate, but saw that it gave his teams the best chance. I think that is exactly the lesson that debate teaches about life. Seeking the best data and balancing competing alternatives will not guarantee that good decisions are made, but there is a much better chance of that happening than otherwise. Scott taught his students and his example teaches all of us how to be citizens in a democratic society, how to make the best choice possible given the constraints of limited time and limited information. And his passion for the activity and for helping his students provides an example to all of us about how to make a difference in this world. If all of us could live up to his example, the world would be a much better place.

Brent Brossman,
President – American
Debate Association

Tim O'Donnell,
Committee Chair –
National Debate
Tournament

Gordon Stables,
President – Cross
Examination Debate
Association