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Circle of Champions

Speech & Debate

It's Not Just About Championships

by Chris Mosmeyer

Right after the awards ceremony for the National Forensic League National Tournament this past June, my team had our own awards ceremony at a Denny's just north of downtown Birmingham.

After four years of qualifying students to the National Tournament, we had our first piece of "hardware" to show. I had one student who advanced to the top 60 in U.S. Extemporaneous Speaking. I stood in line at the concert hall, like many of you, and received his plaque without fanfare.

In addition to him, I had four seniors and two freshmen who qualified for the National Tournament, but did not advance in their main event—though four of them advanced a few rounds in supplemental and consolation events. We also had three other students—including one graduating senior—who attended the tournament to watch rounds and support their teammates.

At Denny's after a long week, we proudly presented Anthony with his plaque, but the "awards ceremony" for our team went beyond that. I told the seniors that qualifying for the National Tournament was always bittersweet. It's a significant accomplishment to qualify and

then to compete in the largest academic contest in the world with the greatest students in this activity.

The bitter part is that unless everything goes perfectly, the last tournament for very talented seniors will end in disappointment.

Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday of the National Tournament are always difficult days. It's exciting as we watch students advance in their events, holding their breath to see if they are still on the "up" list. As they get eliminated, our attention turns to "why." I had several discussions with coaches and my captain for next year as to what we could do differently. Like all of you, I would love to win a national championship. I would love to have a student on that stage on Friday night. I'd even settle for having a semifinalist on the stage after the final round!

The reality is, that will take a whole lot of work, a whole lot of luck—and really, a perfect run.

Consider this: there are roughly 250 competitors in any individual event. Those are students who already earned their trip by being among the best in their respective districts. Only six appear on the stage as finalists, and only one

is crowned national champion. Six out of 250 is only 2.4% of already the top competitors in the nation!

To advance to the top 60 is huge, considering that more than three out of every four competitors are disappointed when the first results are posted.

It's those times when I wonder if I'm doing what I should to prepare my students to be among the best in the nation. However, it's times like now—a month separated from the tournament—that I remember there are other reasons to do what I do.

At our Denny's ceremony, I recognized each of my seniors for their significant accomplishments and for the times I'll remember the most. My top two seniors are graduating with the top League degree, and my top three seniors are graduating as Academic All Americans.

I told Elizabeth Fetherman that one of my fondest moments in my entire coaching career is when her name was called at our district meet as being a qualifier in Dramatic Interp after three years of disappointment.

I praised Alyssa Snyder for being a three-time qualifier to Nationals. She had been disappointed not to be a four-year qualifier, but felt a little better when I pointed out that our home state of Texas only had one four-year qualifier and only 21 three-year qualifiers.

I went around the table and gave some words of comfort to each of the students at the table. I reminded them that they all have had some wonderful successes at previous tournaments. More importantly, they have all gained the wonderful experiences and skills of competing in forensics. They are more comfortable speaking in front of crowds than a majority of their peers. They have learned to be confident, to prepare for challenges, to think critically, to accept both defeat and victory with dignity, to

be supportive of a team, to manage their time, and to “not dilly-dally” when they have multiple things to do at once (thank you, cross-entries!).

I could begin next year with a different focus. I could decide that getting a national champion in something is my one and only goal. I could ignore the statistics that show how difficult that will be.

But, if I did that, I would lose sight of why we have this team.

If I stocked my tournament schedule with National Tournaments only, I would first and foremost blow my team budget by October, likely leading my school to cut back on what we do and end our season before it really begins.

If I only scheduled tournaments that posed the greatest challenges for my students, my varsity competitors would be challenged and would be proud when they won. My novice students, on the other hand, would face insurmountable challenges and would likely lose interest in what they perceived to be a losing endeavor.

If I required hours of after-school practices and restricted students from participating in other events, I would lose members of my team. My school is tiny—only 90 students. We have to share. Making such requirements would eventually kill my team.

If I decided to seek out the most difficult district in the state, we might not have as many qualifiers to the National Tournament. I've heard some criticisms from coaches in other parts of the state that our district was not particularly strong—a claim that I would willingly challenge. My response has always been if that's true, then that gives me a good chance of qualifying students. Just getting there is an accomplishment.

If I put all of my effort into getting a national champion, then I would likely

discount every victory up until that final one. My students would no longer be proud of their accomplishments along the way.

Finally, if that was my one and only goal, what would I do when it didn't happen?

I am amazed by the schools that are regularly on stage. I can only imagine how proud the Glenbrooks district must be to have both finalists of Policy Debate in 2013. I marvel at the Leland, James Logan, Apple Valley, Dowling Catholic, Holy Ghost Prep, and so many other schools that regularly win those big trophies. I tip my cap to you, coaches and students.

But, that's not my school. Not yet. Maybe someday.

Right now, I have to run my team to achieve the realistic goals that we have.

We have had some great successes. We have won a lot of tournaments. We have won a lot of trophies.

We've also had a lot of students learn from the experience. A full third of our school competes in forensics.

We've earned our school good publicity in the local media. As a private school, we are always looking at ways to retain our students. Most of the students on our team stay at our school. Not only that, but most of our top students participate in forensics, including Snyder and Fetherman who were valedictorian and salutatorian, respectively, this year.

While I would love to have a great collection of national trophies, to put all of my efforts into that goal would have detrimental results for my team as a whole. Rather than wholesale changes, I have endeavored over the past years to institute a few small changes toward that ultimate goal.

Each year, we evaluate the tournaments we go to and try to make one or two changes that will help the team as a whole. Sometimes, it means

going to a bigger tournament; sometimes, it means going to a new tournament that will likely be small.

Last year, we began regular after-school practices for debaters, but those in football or volleyball or other sports were exempt. The result was a higher winning percentage for our team than ever before.


Next year, we'll continue to look at what we can do to take another step.

I encourage all coaches to consider what is best for their teams. What works for some schools may not work for you. The plan that creates top national competitors may not be the best course of action for your team.

At the national awards ceremony, Executive Director Scott Wunn gave a charge to the seniors. (Incidentally, that's my favorite part of the ceremony.) Before the ceremony started, I told my five seniors it was coming and reminded them to stand, including the senior who had not qualified for the tournament—she also is a member of the League.

Mr. Wunn told the seniors that all of them were used to winning. He challenged them for the next ten years to go out and do difficult things—to do things that would make them come in *fifth*.

It's a great charge. And, competing in the National Tournament is one of those things. A vast majority of those who attended that ceremony didn't win an award that night.

I do hope someday to win the big trophy. Until then, I'll be content to remember that at the end of each year, it's not about trophies, but about what this activity has added to the character of each of my students. 

Chris Mosmeyer is a one-diamond coach at Holy Trinity Catholic High School in Temple, Texas. Holy Trinity has qualified at least one student to the last four National Tournaments.

Careers

Desert Vista High School Seeks Assistant Director of Forensics

Desert Vista High School, a college prep school, in Phoenix, AZ is seeking an assistant Director of Forensics. Duties would include assisting in general team management as well as directing or assisting in at least one debate or speech event/genre. This may lead to a full time teaching position at Desert Vista High School. For information about the school go to <http://desertvista.schoolfusion.us>; for information about the team, please go to www.tstdc.com. Please send all inquiries and resumes to Erik Dominguez at edominguez@tempeunion.org.

Poly Prep Seeks Part-Time Assistant Coach

Poly Prep Country Day School in Brooklyn, NY is seeking a part-time assistant coach with tournament experience/success. At a minimum, this position would require coaching approximately eight hours per week and attending tournaments. Compensation would be on a per hour/per tournament basis. This position has the potential to expand depending on outcomes. Candidates with Interp experience are especially encouraged to apply. Interested candidates should email a resume, cover letter, and references to Brent Adams at badams@polyprep.org.

Ridge High School Seeks Assistant Speech and Debate Coaches

Ridge High School, Basking Ridge, NJ has available positions for both assistant Speech/Individual Events and Debate coaches. Assistant coaches will assist the Director of Forensics with all team activities and duties, with particular emphasis on coaching and judging in their area(s) of expertise. Ridge currently competes in NFL, CFL, and NJFL (New Jersey Forensic League) circuits in all Individual Events, Congressional Debate, Public Forum, and Lincoln-Douglas. The coaching positions are extra-curricular; however, numerous teaching positions, in all subject areas, are currently available. See <http://www.applitrack.com/bernards/onlineapp> for a currently listing of FT/PT, both tenure and nontenure track, positions. Ridge High School is a comprehensive public high school with more than 1,600 students. Appropriate New Jersey certification is required for teaching positions. Substitute certification and security clearance is required for extracurricular positions. Inquiries can be addressed to David Yastremski, Director of Forensics, at dyastremski@gmail.com.

More Employment Opportunities Available Online:
www.nationalforensicleague.org/careers