

SOME ADVICE TO NEW COACHES . . . AND MAYBE TO SOME EXPERIENCED COACHES AS WELL

by Larry Smith

I had been teaching five years when I accepted a position at Hoover High, Fresno (CA) in the fall of 1967. The English teacher who was assigned to coach the forensic team knew a good thing when he saw it, a chance to get out of that assignment. He found out I was a speech-theater major and promptly informed me I would be the assistant forensic coach the next year and the head coach the next. To which I replied, "The what?"

That was my introduction to forensics. In college I had majored in theater and speech classes. I knew there was some sort of competitive speech and debate activity, but had never been involved with it, nor had I had any experience with forensics at the high school level in Western Nebraska where the only competitive activities were athletic in nature.

Fortunately by chance of enrollment into the forensic class of some very aggressive students I started my career ignorant of what forensics was all about but blessed with students who wanted to learn. I muddled along and we had some good successes, more because of their natural intellectual abilities and competitive nature than my ability to instruct them. We learned the events together and began to establish Hoover as a forensic force. Some of them went to summer debate workshops over the next two summers and came home versed in the intricacies of debate which they were kind enough to teach their coach.

We had enough raw talent and a few "left over" students with forensic experience to win trophies and even have students in the California State Finals each year. Three years later, in 1971, a debate team qualified to the national tournament at Stanford University, and one of those debaters became the first second event entry to win the national championship in oratory.

In 1996 I was deeply honored to be named to the National Forensic League Hall of Fame. June of 1996 also marked my retirement from 34 years of teaching. Twenty eight years of coaching forensics, over 700 tournaments, twenty eight

California State Finals, and seventeen national finals seemed like a good time to close out a career.

I learned some valuable lessons in coaching in those years, and I'd like to pass along some advice to young coaches. The advice relates to how to maintain your sanity, your professional integrity, and your enthusiasm rather than how to produce winners.

Early in my career I encountered some coaches who were very competitive in nature. Winning contest events was their primary goal. That is not particularly bad provided one never loses sight of exactly what the activity is about.

Education of young minds is what it is all about. I decided very early that I was a teacher first and a coach second. Over the years I have been far more interested in the educational growth of my students than I have been in the number of trophies they earned. True, if I taught them well the trophies would follow. And that did happen.

A trophy is just a piece of wood or plastic that marks some sort of momentary accomplishment... a good day of competing. But that is only one day and one moment of accomplishment. Something learned has value forever.

I was always far more interested in the amount of intellectual growth, emotional maturation, and academic development of each student than I was in a trophy count. The most important feedback I have had from students over the years is for them to come for a visit or to drop a line telling me how much their forensic experience had helped them with their college work or how often they used the skills they learned in forensics to flourish in their careers.

They went on to succeed at many universities such as U.C. Berkeley, UCLA, Stanford, Princeton, Harvard, Claremont-Pomona, Santa Clara, Cal Tech, MIT and countless others. I know that over thirty of them have completed law school (I'm never sure whether that is good or bad), others have become newspaper editors, two have graduated from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, many own

their own businesses and many are in professional services such as teaching and government.

One of my favorite success stories is the story of Lenny Duck. Lenny was one of those kids we all get who don't seem to have much success at any forensic activity. He was also one of those kids who are just tremendously nice kids. He tried everything at high school. Lenny went out for football although he looked like a jellybean on toothpicks in his uniform and sat on the bench throughout his career. He always ran for the class or student body office no one else wanted. He was active and enthusiastic and willing to work at whatever he tried.

But Lenny never made it out of junior varsity division in any of the several forensic events he tried. So I was surprised when the year after Lenny graduated I got a telephone call from his mother. She said she was calling to thank me for what I did for Lenny.

I responded that I didn't think I had managed to do much since Lenny had never won any major trophies. She responded, "Oh, that doesn't matter. You see, because of Lenny's experiences in forensics he is a hero to his friends at Fresno State University because he knows how to effectively use the university library. Lenny knows how to utilize what he researches to write good, compelling essays and reports. Lenny knows how to think and respond well in his class discussions. Lenny has an awareness and an understanding of important issues that are going on in the world."

That was why she called to thank me, and that, to me, was just as important as any trophy any student could have ever won in any tournament at any level.

Most of my students in the 1970's did both individual events and debate. I had a handful who only did individual events. Then Lincoln Douglas debate was introduced in 1979.

I have always gravitated towards the rhetorical events even though my educational background was in theater. I felt students learning to do debate, oratory, extempo-

aneous and other speech events gained tremendously in their academic skills. They learned research, application of research to their writing, writing skills, and critical and analytical thinking. They also learned to communicate their own thoughts effectively in a speech or debate presentation.

With the advent of LD I required that all my students did debate of one type or another. Some who only wanted to do interpretive events I had to coerce into policy or LD. Surprisingly they almost universally took to their choice, after they recovered from their initial reluctance. The most frequent compliment I get from alumni students is how much their debate experience helped them to flourish in college and later in life.

The point of this: teach them skills, make them aware of the real world issues, expand their minds and challenge them intellectually. That is being a good teacher. . . and a good coach. If you guide them to improve their growth, the accumulation of trophies will follow. And you have to do that for all your students, not just a few stars. They can all grow intellectually and academically, even those like Lenny who may not accumulate a shelf full of plastic.

Monday following tournaments the first thing I did in class was ask each student what he or she had learned at the previous Saturday tournament. Whether or not they got a piece of plastic was not the relevant issue at that time.

Never forget you are a teacher first and a coach second.

The second decision I made early in my career was to try contain my ego. Most of us are competitive in nature or we would not be coaching a competitive activity. Unfortunately we all know coaches with the very worst of what could be called Little League mentality. They have to win to massage their own ego, and woe be to the debate team or individual event competitor who does not win.

Never, under any circumstances, did I chastise a student for doing poorly in a tournament. I was disappointed, to be sure, if results were less than satisfactory. I had students who apparently had some sort of competitive experience in other activities who expressed surprise when I did not give them a verbal lashing for their poor effort.

A common question was, "Are you mad at me?"

The answer was always, "No. Why should I be? If you think you did best you could do, then the question is, what do you need to do to have better results next time?"

We all know coaches who are wrapped in their own egos, who have to win, who will do anything to win, including writing speeches for students. These are the coaches who are suspicious of all judges, who question all decisions that are adverse, who challenge every rule, who attempt to bend rules they do not like, and who hyperventilate and agonize over each ballot.

Success is good, no one can dispute that. We all want our students to have successes. Ego involvement on the part of the coach transfers to students, however, and then at tournaments we not only have to deal with those coaches who have inflated ego problems, we also have to deal with students who will not or can not accept poor results.

Failure to succeed at one tournament or another is not a life threatening event, although some seem to think it is. Real life is not without adversity or setbacks. Neither is forensic life. If one's whole self image is dependent on always winning, then something is wrong.

One of my favorite students, a young lady who had never had anything less than an A+ and who never failed at anything she tried found forensic experience a good, value shaping experience.

We all know that in forensic competition there are outstandingly brilliant and talented students. Someone will be designated the best, for that day of the tournament. That is singular. . . only one first place per day.

Kimmy could not deal with not being the best every tournament, and when she did not have a good day (a rare occasion) she was devastated. She finally came to realize that she was not always going to be first or win every debate round. On her last day of high school she came to me and said, "I want to thank you for all you have taught me and all the support you gave me. Most importantly, I want to thank you for teaching me that it is all right to lose occasionally and how to take that loss gracefully."

That is one of the most important lessons we can learn in any competitive activity. None of us

wants to make a practice of losing consistently, but smugness and complacency about one's abilities are easy to acquire if every effort we make is a winning effort. There is no incentive to grow. And without growth, sooner or later we will fail in worse ways than not winning a piece of plastic at some high school speech tournament.

One of my ex students, who is now a very, very successful lawyer, was one who won consistently at high school forensics. (And had a puffed ego as a result.) When he went to Stanford University he told me it came as a great shock to him to discover that every student in every class was a valedictorian, a student body president, a winning debater, the ex captain of a high school athletic team. In those classes some were going to get "A" grades, but some would get "Bs" or "Cs", or maybe even worse. Truly an ego deflating experience for one who always expected to win.

No matter how good we think we are, someone, sometime, will come along on any given day and do it better. Coaches and students need to learn that most valuable lesson. Allowing the heat of competition to influence our sense of self worth should not be a part of coaching. Massaging one's ego should never be the goal of any coach.

If you want to last at this activity and maintain your sanity, your professional integrity, and your enthusiasm, try these two guiding principles: Be a teacher first and a coach second. Keep your ego out of it.

My career spanned 28 years, and I enjoyed them all. Without those two guiding principles, I doubt if I would have lasted more than four of five years. Then I would have missed all the adventures of those 700+ tournaments. You have to admit, crazy as our other teaching colleagues think we are for the time we spend on weekends, it is fun and gratifying if you stay focused on what it is that you are supposed to be doing: teaching and guiding.

A trophy can be thrown away. What is learned in a productive and positive environment will be used a lifetime. Try to remember that.

Your students will benefit and thank you for it.

(Larry Smith is a member of the NFL Hall of Fame.)