

ZEN AND THE ART OF FORENSICS

by Bob Jones

As an avid (some would say rabid) golfer, I am constantly seeking ways to improve my game. Recently I seem to be at the limits of my physical game -- there's only so much I can get my fifty-year-old body to do. So, spurred by Michael Murphey's novel Golf in the Kingdom, I have sought ways to improve the mental aspects of my golf game.

It was while reading sports psychologists like Dr. Deborah Graham of Sports Psyche Inc. and Dr. Bob Rotella, director of Sports Psychology at the University of Virginia, that I began to fathom a connection between what I was learning about my mental golf game and the game we call forensics.

This connection led me to contemplate the Zen of speech competition. Zen is a "meditation. . . a kind of spiritual discipline which brings about sudden illumination." [Encyclopedia of Philosophy] It is the idea that the journey is where enlightenment is found, not the destination. So, in this context, the Zen of speech competition is contemplation of the process of preparing to be a competitive speaker.

Out of all this thinking and zen-ing came the idea that seven principles Dr. Bob Rotella applies to golf [Golf Is Not a Game of Perfect, Dr. Bob Rotella with Bob Cullen, Simon & Schuster, 1995] could be applied to speech competition as Zen and the Art of Forensics:

PRINCIPLE ONE: A competitive speaker with great dreams can accomplish great things.

Corollary Principle: *A speaker with small dreams or a person without the confidence to pursue his or her dream, has consigned him or herself to a life of frustra-*

tion and mediocrity.

Just like the professional golfer who must dream about winning the Masters or the U.S. Open before he is able to accomplish the lofty goal, the competitive speech student must have dreams in order to be really successful. The dreams may start out small--placing at a tournament--but the dreams must progress--winning tournaments, qualifying to nationals, winning nationals. Without those dreams, a speaker will not do the work required to compete at the highest level.

If an athlete says, "I'll give it my all and I'll accept whatever place I get," it's too easy then to be satisfied being an "also ran." If, instead, the athlete says, "I want to win, to be first," it's much more likely he or she will do the preparation necessary to reach the goal, if not this time, then the time after, or the time after that.

A competitive speaker must also have the lofty goal to increase the likelihood that they will do the necessary preparation to win. If not this time, then the time after, or the time after that.

PRINCIPLE TWO: Potential depends upon the speaker's attitude and how well he or she thinks.

A student of mine is a great example of wasted ability. Belinda had all the skills necessary to be a national champion. She was pretty, smart, a good researcher, a fast thinker, could handle pressure situations, and was completely lacking in real potential. That may sound contradictory--has all the skills but lacks the potential. It is not. Potential depends upon atti-

tude and right thinking. With all her skills, Belinda thought she could breeze through anything, "I'm good, I'm smart, I've done all this research, I don't need to write my cases until the night before nationals." That attitude and that kind of thinking got Belinda an 0-6 record at nationals.

To have the potential to do well in competition means having the attitude that wants to win and is willing to do the necessary work for winning. Tom Kite is one of professional golf's all-time leading money winners. His native skills are no better than a hundred other professional golfers. In fact, as a young boy he wasn't the best junior golfer in his club and professional golfers thought he'd give up his dream of being a top professional once he saw how hard it was going to be. But Tom Kite didn't believe those who told him he couldn't make it. Kite shared certain characteristics of other champions--they are strong-willed, they have dreams, and they make a long-term commitment to achieving their dreams.

If Belinda had wanted to win and been willing to commit to winning, then she would have had the potential to win nationals.

PRINCIPLE THREE: Attitude ultimately wins out over ability.

An athlete can overcome many physical imperfections with a strong positive attitude. There are numerous examples of this, but none so striking as Wilma Rudolph, the world class runner. As a child, Wilma faced great physical hardship. She contracted polio at age four. It was questionable whether she would ever be able to walk. Through hard work and a champion's commitment to ex-

cellence, Wilma overcame the obstacles facing her to become the first U.S. athlete to win three gold medals in the 1960 Rome Olympics.

Speech competitors too can overcome physical limitations through developing a champion's attitude. A speaker of mine a few years ago faced some of the most difficult physical challenges a speaker could have--she was profoundly deaf and her speech was impaired as a result. But Jenny overcame the physical challenges placed in front of her through working harder than other speakers and making a greater commitment to excellence. And although she never achieved her goal of attending NFL nationals, in her senior year she was a double state champion in oratory and dramatic and went on to qualify to college nationals in three events as a freshman and five events as a sophomore.

Physical skills cannot overcome a poor attitude, but the right attitude can certainly win out over physical limitations.

PRINCIPLE FOUR: Positive attitude is very effective.

Corollary Principle:
Negative thinking is one hundred percent effective.

Dr. Bob Rotella, noted sports psychologist, tells the story in his book, Golf Is Not a Game of Perfect, about a star basketball player who has a cold shooting night missing just about everything. With the game on the line in the last minute, the star's team gets the ball for a last chance to win. During the timeout the coach diagrams a play for someone other than the star. But the star convinces the coach that he wants the ball. With time almost gone, the star shoots and the ball swishes in for victory. When talking about it afterwards, the star pointed out that he wanted the ball because he knew he was due--the misses had bolstered his confidence that he wouldn't miss the next one. When he was

then asked about his thinking when he was on a hot shooting streak, he responded by saying when he was hot he knew he wouldn't miss because everything was going in for him.

Can you have it both ways? The answer is yes. Great athletes through their positive attitudes create their own realities. It's the winning golfer who knows that every shot at the hole has a chance of going in and so makes the shot that gives the ball a chance. Thinking positively is effective, but thinking positive is not being overconfident or cocky.

Even the world's best golfer would not bet his house on making a hole in one, but that same golfer will tell himself he's going to make it. The opposite is even more true. If the golfer standing on the tee thinks about nothing but wanting to stay out of the water between him and the hole, I'd be willing to bet I know where the ball is going to go. Right into the water.

Competitive speakers face much the same dilemma: if they think they can't do it (beat this particular debater, perform well for this judge), they most certainly can't. But if speakers believe they can and they've done the necessary preparation, I'd be willing to bet on the results.

Just like a great athlete does, the speaker can create his or her own reality. A reality built of positive attitude, good thinking, and proper preparation.

PRINCIPLE FIVE: Prioritize your opponents.

In a golf match that I play at my club I really have three opponents. Knowing who those opponents are and in what order I have to tackle them is key to victory in the match. My opponents are the game, myself, and the other golfer--in that order. In order to do well in my match I am first challenged by the game itself--the course, its layout, the weather elements.

I must physically and mentally prepare to meet the challenges the game presents. I can do things like check pin placements and make sure my equipment is clean and ready. Secondly, I must make sure that I am mentally and physically prepared to play well. My attitude and thinking must be positive and right. I need to be rested and well warmed up. When these two sets of challenges have been met, I am now ready for the third challenge--my golfing opponent.

A competitive speaker faces essentially the same three challenges. Let's look at the example of an extemper preparing for a tournament. The first challenge is the event itself. In order to do well the extemper should not only know the rules, but understand the conditions of this contest. What kind of questions are likely to be asked? Who are my judges likely to be and what kind of speech will they like? Are my files in order--complete and organized? Do I have all my equipment--files, pens, paper, etc.? These are the types of questions the prepared extemper will first answer. Secondly, the extemper must have met the challenge of his own preparation. Obviously, he needs to be well read, but also well fed and well rested. Too many times good speakers do poorly because they stayed up too late the night before--partying or practicing. Or they have a poor round because they haven't eaten smartly and have run out of energy. Finally, the speaker needs to be mentally prepared--positive and confident. As the golfer says, you need to bring your "A-game" to the match. Only when those two opponents (challenges) have been met can the speaker be ready to face the third opponent--the other speakers.

PRINCIPLE SIX: To improve you must practice. But quality of practice is more important than quantity.

A fellow teacher and golfing friend of mine is just about as fanatical about the game as I am. He practices all the time, far more than I do. Yet, out on the course I fill my pockets with his change every time we play. Boy, does that frustrate him--so, he goes to the range and practices harder. The problem isn't his lack of practice. It's the lack of quality of his practice. For example, he uses a certain type of chip shot close to the green that is only effective part of the time. But instead of practicing a variety of types of chip shots which would make him a more versatile player, he practices this same relatively ineffective shot over and over. He would be a far better golfer with less practice on more types of shots - -but then, I wouldn't win as many bets.

A speech student faces the same problem--too much of the wrong kind of practice can be worse than no practice at all. Consider the student who says her oratory over and over every night and week after week gets the same scores in competition. One practice a night, videotaped and analyzed could improve those weekly scores without nearly the same amount of "practice". Quality of practice is far more important than quantity.

PRINCIPLE SEVEN: Trying harder is not always better. Relax. A speaker cannot improve if speaking is not fun.

When speech coaches gather, besides talking about their students, a topic of conversation is inevitably the topic of "burnout". A speech coach, similar to a quality athlete, has to have a tremendous commitment. Along with that commitment comes the danger of over doing it--and thus the topic of burnout. And as coaches we know to be on the lookout for burnout in our students. There are lots of stories of fresh-

men and sophomore wonders who are no longer competing or competing well by the time they are juniors or seniors.

Dr. Bob Rotella tells a similar story about professional golfer Mark McCumber:

Mark was a fine golfer, but his desire to win and improve was starting to consume him. He was too tense and too serious about the game and life. And he knew it was not helping either his performance on the course or his relationships off it. . . . A player is so intent on performing well that he starts to forget that trying harder is not always trying better. [*Golf Is Not a Game of Perfect*, p. 212]

What McCumber was forgetting is something student speakers and their coaches also forget--speaking and speech competition should be fun. With all the emphasis on winning and all the work required to win, the process often stops being enjoyable.

That is where the principle that "trying harder is not always better" comes in. Trying too hard can indeed be counterproductive. For example, a debate team who in their drive to prepare for a big competition change the style that has brought them success invites disaster. A student who stays up late practicing the night before a competition may think (s)he's working harder. In fact, she may be hurting her chances of performing well the next day. Coaches and students need to remember to relax and have fun with the activity.

These principles of the zen of forensics are not meant to be instruction, but rather introspective. Which of these might improve your performance as a competitor? Which might you integrate into your coaching strategies? Which do you already incorporate in your competitive philosophies and what effects do they have on your success?

Too often we, coaches and competitors, think only of the results of the competition: the scores, the trophies, the sweepstakes points. In the process we sometimes forget the joys and the learning inherent in the process of competing --the idea that zen can teach us that enlightenment is the result of the journey not the destination.

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