

LEST WE FORGET... IT'S ALL ABOUT THE KIDS

by
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When the Nashville Catholic Middle School Forensic League hosted the very first National Junior Forensic League tournament, the purpose was clear: bring together students from across the nation in the spirit of friendly competition. That is why no special qualifications were required....the rule was bring students from your team who had competed during the year. Students need not have placed or won at a tournament; we wanted students who enjoyed competition and meeting new

Having worked in the tab room at the last national meet and having made periodic visits to the cafeteria where students waited in between rounds, I would like to share some observations.

So many adults, in front of students, were being extremely critical. They did not look at the positive aspects of the tournament (there were numerous). One example of the positive slant is that more awards were given than at the previous national meets. The host school in Ardmore wanted to award as many students as possible. I applaud the efforts to make each middle school student feel special.

Coaches made comments like: "I think maybe students should have to qualify to come to this tournament."

"I have taken so many Tylenol that if I take one more I will have to go to the hospital. I'm sure my blood pressure is sky high."

"We paid thousands of dollars to bring our students here and this is not fair to have biased judges."

This is where, I believe, we have lost perspective. The purpose of a

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national meet for middle school students is to come together in a spirit of FRIENDLY competition. When and where did "friendly" get lost? It wasn't the students, as I know that many of enjoyed making new friends from other schools. They engaged in conversations while waiting for rounds to begin. I wonder how many coaches took the time to get to know other coaches from other schools. What a missed opportunity! I briefly spoke with the coach from Massachusetts and asked about his program as I was so impressed with his students. When we as coaches get so wrapped up in the competition that we are taking 12 Tylenol or more, we have lost perspective!

friends. To support that vision, each student was given a schedule with space on the back for notes, addresses, or autographs. They were encouraged from the beginning to meet at least one new friend. A group picture was taken for posterity of all the contestants. The National Junior Forensic League came together for the very first time!

Since that first meet, I have noticed a distinct change in attitude. It does not come from the host school or the students or even the parents. From my point of view, we, the coaches, have lost perspective! Indeed, the host schools have worked diligently to make everything run smoothly. Perhaps because the second meet in Ohio was held at a resort, the atmosphere became relaxed. It was competitive, but friendly. There were some minor problems concerning rules, but overall the meet ran smoothly. The third national meet in Oklahoma has me so concerned that I felt I had to write the *Rostrum* and encourage coaches to assess their own reasons for coming to a national meet and focus on what is best for all students. I can tell you that the host worked for months preparing for this tournament and as it continues to grow, the national meet will become a daunting task. We want coaches to volunteer to host tournaments, but they won't if they feel that ethics have been lost and the focus goes to winning at whatever cost.

Winning is such a small part of this competition. There are only so many who can win, but students learn far more from losing than winning. They learn how to handle rejection with grace, and that is a life lesson. Whenever I have students who never lose, I truly worry about them. One of the best times to learn to deal with rejection is at a forensic meet. The coach can talk with students and "coach" through this situation. Usually sitting and discussing critique sheets helps a great deal as most critiques have a number of positive comments as well as suggestions for improvement. Just as it is important to win with grace, losing with grace can be a life skill. Everyone has to learn to deal with rejection sometime in

this world, learning how to do this in your youth helps as one enters adulthood. I remember seeing a young man was asked after he had been incarcerated, "What happened to you? You came from a loving, caring family. You were given everything."

He responded, "No one ever allowed me to lose, so when I came across rejection, I simply did not know how to handle it and drugs became a way to escape and not deal with anything, and that led me to where I am now."

A number of parents were so caught up in the moment that their perception of the competition became skewed. I feel, however, that coaches have a great deal of control over the attitudes of parents. If a coach is complaining the parents will join the bandwagon. The coach is the leader and should demand principled behavior especially in the area of honesty, respect, caring and responsibility. If the coach exhibits these values, the team will, and the parents will. We simply have to be ethical as the impressionable minds of those under our tutelage will follow in our footsteps. They will model our ethics.

What can we do to maintain a quality, ethically based national competition?

- The first recommendation is for NFL to form a committee to make simple tournament rules for the national competition. That way, we are all on the same page. For example, I found myself caught up and concerned about a judge who stopped students in the middle of their presentation. This disturbed my students tremendously. I found the coach and discussed the matter only to find that his judges were doing this as a favor since in Oklahoma forensic meets are very strict and will penalize heavily for being overtime. If we had simply written, agreed upon rules constructed by a national team, there would be less opportunity for misunderstanding.

- Make the journey to the competition a true learning experience so that an educational aspect is included. Our team stopped in Oklahoma City to visit the moving memorial for the victims of the bombing of the Murrah Building. Since most of our students were only in first grade when this occurred, the visit was an excellent way to help them comprehend what happened that day and relate their memories of 9/11 to the results of terrorism.

- Coaches need to decide the purpose of taking their team to a national meet. If your sole purpose is to win, I encourage you NOT to come to this tournament. Of course, everyone wants to win, and it can certainly be a goal. Just make sure it's not your only goal. Our students had almost as much fun on the bus (and it was a long ride) as they did at the meet.

- Coaches should try to meet and get to know other coaches. I realize being in charge leaves little time to socialize, but there are those long, waiting periods where going out of your comfort zone and walking over to introduce yourself can be beneficial by the mere fact that you can share your coaching experiences.

- All semi-final and final rounds of competition should have judges who are NOT affiliated with any school. In Nashville, we used judges from the community for the final rounds. This eliminates the bias problems. If you ask far enough in advance, you can find many outstanding judges who would be happy to volunteer. It is critical that the judges are clear about the rules ahead of time.

I am so grateful that schools have enriched my students' forensic experiences by hosting national tournaments. I hope we can provide opportunities for middle schools to gather together for competition for many years to come.

I am encouraged that Kentucky will host this years national tournament in June and I am especially happy that Houston, Texas, has offered to host in 2004. Since I now reside in Houston, I hope to be of help with this tournament.

We all spend a great deal of money to come to the national tournament. The benefits to the students cannot be measured in terms of money. We need to take the focus away from the rules, away from the trophies, away from the parents, lest we forget, it's all about the kids.

(Carolyn Baker has a doctorate in Elementary Education. She began her work with middle school forensic programs in Chattanooga, Tennessee. She founded the Nashville Middle School Forensic League in 1990, where she was the coordinator for the league and coached The Overbrook School team of over 100 students. Overbrook is a Charter School of the NJFL and directed the first National Tournament held in Nashville.)