

## The "Culture of Qualifying" Revisited or What is the "End" of Forensics?

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A little more than twenty years ago, as a graduate student, I was given the opportunity to announce the awards at the Jackrabbit Jousts Tournament at South Dakota State University. And, thanks to my years in forensics, I think I did a pretty good job. Granted, I skipped over one of the contestants in Persuasion and after announcing first place, I had one "left-over" competitor in the front of the auditorium. Other than that, I think it went well.

Not long after the tournament, a very wise coach asked me a very important question, one that persists in the back of my mind still today. Larry Schoor asked, "Why did you announce how many AFA legs there were in each event? (A common practice at the time.) Not everyone goes to the NIET?"

I was shocked. I thought EVERYONE went to the NIET. Having cut my collegiate forensics teeth in Minnesota and South Dakota, I thought that the NIET was the ONLY national tournament.

Ten years ago, at the last developmental conference, I again asked Larry's question to the greater forensics community. In my paper on the "Culture of Qualifying," I contended that the focus AFA schools place on qualifying for nationals resulted in three problems: pulling slots, hunting for legs and a reduction in the quality of regular season tournaments.

Another ten years have passed, and not much has changed. The "Culture of Qualifying" still exists. And I am left wondering: Where do we go from here?

Media ecologist, Neil Postman, in his book *The End of Education*, claims that in the field of education, too often, we make decisions about what we should do, with little concern as to WHY we are doing it. He challenges his readers to consider the "end" of education; in other words, the purpose of what we do.

I think it is time for us to do that in forensics.

Our first question must be: Why do we have tournaments? Ask anyone, and you will get a variety of answers. Some may include: to get ready for nationals, to earn qualifications for nationals, to give our students practice, to make money, to fund travel, etc.

With our consideration of the purpose of a forensics tournament, allow me a few observations. Initially, the "Culture of Qualifying" still exists. It is perpetuated by the way we talk. You might be won-

dering if someone has a specific event "qualed." Or, you could be frustrated that a particular team is "showcasing" this weekend. At awards, it is not uncommon to hear a tournament director say, "I know you all want to get out of here, so I'll get through this as fast as possible." And while that may be a result of a long, weekend schedule; I contend that has more to do with our conception with the purpose of the tournament (legs/qualifications) than with time and logistics.

The culture of qualifying is also reinforced by our tournament practices and procedures. "Swing" tournaments came into vogue in the 1990s in and around Texas, where schools would generally have to travel great distances for competition. So, when they got together, it made "sense" to have two tournaments, instead of one. But, times have changed. You can try to argue that swings exist to save money or provide multiple opportunities for our students to perfect their performances. However, when we routinely drop slots between tournaments to "get out of the way" of other people trying to qualify, it is more probable that "swings" are the vehicles that drive the qualification machine.

The result is that the "culture of qualifying" confounds the purpose of the weekend tournament. I'm not sure what the purpose of one of our college tournaments should be, but I can tell what it isn't. This past year, I had the opportunity to attend one of the high school tournaments in my state. I won't lie...it had been awhile. I judged a few rounds, ate pizza off a paper plate, played a couple hands of cards while waiting around and I attended the awards ceremony. This wasn't an NFL qualifier and it wasn't the state championships. It was just a regular Saturday tournament. What took me by surprise was the awards ceremony. While I have never been a fan of a long, drawn out event at the end of a tournament, something different was going on. Amidst all the screaming and cheering, it was clear that the gathered assembly was honoring the success of their fellow competitors. They knew the purpose of their tournament. And they liked being there. Do we know the purpose of tournaments? And do we enjoy them?

To fully understand the "culture of qualifying" it is important to begin with a few observations. Initially, there are a lot of collegiate individual events programs in the country. Amidst claims the "foren-

sics is dying,” in the past two years, 253 different teams attended a “national” IE tournament (AFA-NIET, NFA, PKD, NCCFI, PRP). Of those teams, 85 (33%) attended the NIET in 2008. And, only 35 (13%) schools attended the NIET as their only national tournament.

The purpose of this essay is not to indict or impugn the AFA-NIET. In fact, the AFA-NIET is responsible for much of the standardization and progress we have made in individual events over the last few decades. However, it is my claim that the AFA-NIET qualification system, in its current state, is a detriment to the health of individual events, and it should be changed.

For those of you younger than me (most of you), it is important to note that the qualification procedures for the AFA-NIET have changed many times. Here is a quick rundown:

- At first, only 1<sup>st</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> counted for legs.
- Then 1<sup>st</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> counted, but you needed 10 schools and 35 people for 6 legs. Tournaments were HUGE back then, but by Districts, you would have maybe 2 CA and 3 ADS slot qualified....in the whole district.
- In the early 1990’s, it was changed so that only 12 competitors were needed to make 6 legs in an event.
- To manage the size of the tournament, a change was made so that 20 competitors were required for 6<sup>th</sup> place to count as a leg.
- To further manage the size of the tournament, a 66 entry per team cap was placed on each school

Clearly, the NIET is not afraid of change, but Postman’s question rings true: Are we making changes to stay in line with our end (learning objective)? Or, are we making changes...for the sake of making changes. I’m not sure I know the answer. Do you?

So, we are back at the question, what is the end (purpose) of the weekend tournament? I may not have the answer, but I can tell you this: I want a tournament to be a tournament, and NOT just a place to earn a magical combination of qualifying legs. I want to take the time to celebrate the success of our students. I want to enjoy the experience and visit with my colleagues. And yes, as a Director of Forensics, I can make those choices, but the culture of qualifying so pervades what we do, that those choices become more and more difficult to make.

The current qualification system for the AFA-NIET should be changed. And I’m not alone. Twenty years ago, Dr. Roger Aden, then the Director of Forensics at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, proposed eliminating the “leg” system in favor of a double-district system, in which districts would host two qualifying tournaments a year. He knew that the

current formula (top 10%) would be inadequate, but he was certain that could be worked out. It was his goal to shift the focus away from “qualifying” at regular season tournaments.

Hearing his proposal, as a student, I thought he was crazy. I was sure it would kill the weekend tournament. I was positive there would only be two tournaments a year. When the reality is that 66 percent of the colleges who compete nationally, do not attend the AFA-NIET, maybe tournaments would be just fine with out the current At-Large Qualification system. Before you call me a heretic ... let’s look at his proposal again.

A double (or triple, the details can be worked out) district tournament would shift our focus away from earning legs, to improving performances. At the point we are pulling qualified events, we no longer use the tournament as a method to gain feedback to improve performance. Instead, the final round placing becomes the goal and once the correct numbers of placings are earned, competition and comments are unnecessary.

A double district tournament would reduce the requirements to travel to be competitive. You can tell me all you want that every school has a chance to win nationals, but the reality is that it takes a lot of entries. In 1995, the University of Pennsylvania placed 4<sup>th</sup> in Team Sweepstakes at the AFA-NIET with 18 entries. Today, very few teams in the top 10 have less than 30 entries, and most boast a full compliment of 66 slots. When I was coaching at Rice University, I traveled my team to 24 tournaments to qualify 30-40 entries for nationals. The current system rewards schools that have the money to attend more tournaments.

A double district tournament could save forensics programs. As a community we need to face the reality that we are in a major economic downturn. Gas prices alone have skyrocketed, and I would bet that most school’s forensics budgets have not seen increases to meet those expenses. Colleges and universities are going to face tough budget choices and we need to be proactive. No one has proved that swing tournaments actually save teams money. Additionally, a different qualification system could prolong the tenure of our coaches. Many of our colleagues who leave the discipline cite burnout as one of their main reasons for leaving.

A double district tournament would more easily maintain the size of the AFA-NIET. Without the confounding variable of At-Large qualifications, the NIET Committee would have a much clearer idea of tournament size on a year to year basis.

A double district tournament would refocus the purpose of the weekend tournament. Instead of looking for “legs,” students, and coaches, would have more freedom in when and where to enter various events. We could eliminate the words “showcasing” and “pulling slots” from our vocabularies.

Before you freak out, like I did twenty years ago, we all must realize one thing: eliminating the At-Large Qualification system (legs) will NOT destroy the weekend tournament. Two hundred eighteen schools who don't utilize the AFA-NIET as their national tournament found plenty of reasons to attend regular season tournaments. And, on any given weekend, literally thousands of high schools across the country attend tournaments without the motivation of earning a national qualification.

The double district tournament may not be the right answer, but at least we all know the question: What is the end of a tournament?

I urge the AFA-NIET Committee to abandon the At-Large Qualification and replace it with one that best supports the "end" of forensics.