

**AFA-NIET:
THE CULTURE OF QUALIFYING
AND ITS EFFECTS ON FORENSICS**

The Problems

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1. The Problem of Pulling Slots

In my region, it is quite common for a competitor, once they have qualified for the AFA-NIET, not to compete with that event again until nationals. Countless reasons can be given to justify this practice: it offers other students the opportunity to earn legs; it gives them time to work on their events at home; it gives them a chance to compete in other events. While all of these can be valid reasons for making that decision, we begin to walk a dangerous line when we, as coaches and students, begin to expect competitors to stop competing after they have qualified an event.

Background

For those unfamiliar with the qualification procedures for the AFA-NIET, let me offer a brief explanation. The AFA-NIET sponsors competition in eleven different individual events. Students may qualify for the national tournament by earning three "legs" (final round placings) in an event which, when totaled, equal 8 or less. Legs are earned in the following ratio:

2 - 3 contestants (per event)	1 leg
4 - 5 contestants	2 legs
6 - 7 contestants	3 legs
8 - 9 contestants	4 legs
10 - 11 contestants	5 legs
12 or more contestants	6 legs

This system is designed to reward our best competitors with the opportunity to compete at the National Individual Events Tournament.

The Culture of Qualifying

It is my concern that we have created a culture that is primarily focused on qualifying for a national tournament rather than on the pursuit of excellence in performance. This "culture of qualifying" is just like any other culture: it has norms, rules and rituals. It has expected behaviors and offers rewards to those who meet those expectations and punishments to those who don't. When this "culture of qualifying" replaces or supersedes other missions or goals of forensics competition, the following three problems result.

When we expect qualified events to be pulled from competition, we begin to view competition with a qualified event as unacceptable. The student competing with the qualified event is, in effect, breaking one of our cultural norms. And if we choose to perpetuate the culture of qualifying it becomes our responsibility to right this wrong and to show them the way. This can happen in any number of ways. We may make a comment on the ballot like, "I thought this was qualified." Or a student might talk to other students about so-and-so from school X who is competing with their qualified Prose. We might wonder with others about their coach's reasons for letting the student compete with a qualified event, or we may actually let the fact that they are competing with a qualified event effect how we rank the round. Regardless of how it happens, if we are expecting them to pull that slot when it has qualified, we have laid the groundwork for an intolerant culture that will not accept behaviors that are outside of the norm.

This intolerance may then spread to similar situations. If our forensic culture is focused on earning qualifying legs for nationals, then it seems fitting that schools that don't attend the AFA-NIET, and therefore aren't going to use those legs, don't deserve them. I have witnessed this first hand. Recently I was working in the tab room at a tournament and we were trying to make a decision as to how many contestants to advance to a final round. There was a clear break of five contestants who had earned a cumulative score of five or less. To bring a sixth competitor into the final, we would have to go to points to figure out which of those students with a rank of seven would advance. The person doing the calculations then made the following statement: "Oh wait. They're from a junior

college--they don't go to AFA's. They don't need the leg. Let's just go with five in the final round." I was dumbfounded. It took me a few moments to gather my wits and voice my concern about this attitude. Ultimately, six students were advanced to the final round, but this comment still scares me. The belief that qualified slots should be pulled fosters the attitude that earning AFA-NIET qualification is the ultimate reason for competing and perpetuates intolerance of non-AFA programs.

2. The Problem of "Looking for Legs"

Looking at the AFA Tournament Calendar, it is apparent that "swing" tournaments have become quite popular throughout the country. In speaking to coaches from Texas who were around when the "swings" were first introduced, it is clear that they were invented to cope with the great distances some schools needed to travel in order to attend tournaments. Since many schools had to travel between eight and fourteen hours to get to their closest contest, it only made sense to have two tournaments once you got there, thus giving students the opportunity to compete twice without having to travel every weekend. While this may have been the case in the past, I contend that this justification is no longer true. I will argue that most schools attend swing tournaments for the sole purpose of earning qualifying legs. In Texas, during Fall semester, it is possible for me to attend fourteen tournaments in eight weeks, all without driving more than four hours from Houston. While you might think that this is due, in part, to location, most schools in attendance at these tournaments have had similarly short drives. With so many tournaments available, students and coaches no longer see tournaments as an opportunity to perform at their best, but as places to earn the legs necessary for qualification. When this happens, tournaments are no longer laboratories for students to practice their craft and perfect their performances. Instead, they become academic games, reducing the qualification process to little more than hoop-jumping for our students where they must struggle to piece together the right combination of legs through strategy and patience.

This hoop-jumping further takes our focus away from the pursuit of excellence by encouraging our students to set their goals on specific legs, and not on the overall quality of their performance. I know that I am not alone in perpetuating this problem. This past Spring, a student of mine was having some difficulty qualifying his persuasive speech for nationals. All he needed was a third place leg to qualify and I remember saying to

him, "Just go out there and get the three, and then we'll work on it." It was only later that I realized the implications of that statement. What was I trying to accomplish by telling my student to aim for third place? Did I want him to think I viewed him as incapable of actually winning a tournament? Did I want him to feel that he wasn't worth my time because he hadn't qualified yet? Because I was trapped in the quest for legs, I lost sight of why he was competing in the first place. He was trying to perfect his craft and to learn how to give increasingly better and better performances. And our quest for legs was getting in the way.

3. The Lack of Competition Problem

Last year I had a very talented student on my team who qualified three events for the AFA-NIET before the end of September. Being the good coach that I thought I was, I advised the student to pull those events from most competitions, so that other students on our team and from other schools could earn their legs for nationals. At nationals I noticed that something was missing from that student's performance, that she didn't have the same spark of intensity I had seen before, that she didn't shine.

I had thought that pulling this student's events from competition would ultimately help her and the other students on my team, but the reality was that I actually hurt everyone. By pulling her qualified slots from competition, I robbed her of the opportunity to perfect her craft and to work toward a performance that would propel her audience into the sublime. I have often heard and made the argument that this can be done just as well in practice as it can be at a tournament. But my experience has proven me wrong.

This problem is even more apparent when we draw an analogy between intercollegiate forensics and track and field. In order to qualify for nationals in track, a competitor must run his/her event underneath the qualifying time set by the NCAA at any one of the qualifying tournaments throughout the year. Just because a student achieves this at the first tournament does not mean that the coach pulls him/her from competition for the rest of the season, or that other coaches expects that student not to compete. On the contrary, that student will continue to practice that event not only at home, but in competition, perfecting his/her skill, hoping to run faster each time, preparing him/her to run on any type of track against different competitors and under a variety of conditions.

This is where the "culture of qualifying" once again cheats our students. By expecting competitors to stop competing once they have qualified for nationals, we are sending the message that qualifying is the goal, while perfecting their performance has little place in regular season tournaments. In essence, we are saying to them, "once you have qualified, there is nothing more I can teach you and nothing more you can learn from your fellow competitors." And this, as we know, could not be farther from the truth. I have been in forensics for nineteen years, which is more than half of my life, and I am still learning from the performances I watch at each tournament I attend. Why then is it so hard for us to send our qualified students back into competition? Do we really think that they have nothing to learn? Or have we become so wrapped up in sending as many slots to nationals as possible that we want those competitors "out of the way"?

The attitude of getting qualified students out of the way only carries the lack of competition problem to another level. For years I have told my students to watch final rounds to figure out how to do an event, or more importantly, to figure out why they are not there. But the effect of the culture of qualifying on the quality of performance became clear to me this Spring when I realized that most of what I was seeing in final rounds, and most of what my students were doing, was just not good. The students who gave quality performances were already out of the way.

The question, "Would you want your Dean to see this?" has been asked of CEDA debate for years, pointing to the fact that if viewed, most administrators would most likely eliminate funding for their debate programs because of the unintelligibility of the performances. If we are not careful, the same thing could happen to individual events. This spring, I had a student who had not qualified for nationals even after our district tournament. So, the week after districts we attended a local Nationals Warm Up Swing, in reality nothing more than two "last-chance-for-legs" tournaments. My student ended up being top speaker at both tournaments and qualified two events for the AFA-NIET. But at what cost? He was embarrassed to be top speaker at the last-chance tournament. He was not proud of his performances and he knew they were not of the caliber of other students on his own team who had qualified earlier in the year. He realized that he had qualified for nationals because he was the best of what was left. And I had to ask myself, what kind of message was that sending him? Why would any one

of us want our students to walk away from a performance of which they could not be proud? I had taught him how to qualify for nationals, but I had not taught him how to perform.

Solutions

The solutions to these problems have nothing to do with the qualifying system for the AFA-NIET or any other national tournament. It is far more difficult than that. If we continue to perpetuate the culture of qualifying, I fear that we will ultimately doom individual events competition to nothing more than an exercise in mediocrity. If we truly believe that the goal of competition is to help our students perfect the craft of performance, we have to change our attitudes about qualifying for the AFA-NIET. We have to allow ourselves to forget about legs at tournaments. We have to quit asking each other, "how many slots do you have for nationals?" We must stop announcing how many AFA qualifying legs there were in each event at awards. And, most importantly, we must change our attitudes about competing with qualified slots. By no means am I advocating that a student compete with all their events at every tournament throughout the year. What we must do is consider factors besides qualification when deciding what events a student should compete in each week. If my students who have qualified still have something to learn from you as a judge, or from your students' performances, then I owe them the opportunity to go back into competition. We, as judges, owe it to our students to listen to their performances objectively and to help them to polish their skills and perfect their craft. And competitors owe it to themselves to seek ways they can learn from each others' performances, qualified or not.

All of this fails, however, if we allow one comment like, "Why are they competing in Impromptu? I thought they were qualified," to go unchallenged. We must demand tolerance for competitive choices from ourselves and from our students. It is only when we shift the focus at tournaments away from qualifying and toward excellence in performance, that we can truly move our discipline forward and be proud of the work that we do.