

## Perspectives of a Forensic Coach's First Year

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"You want me to do what?" I stammered as I faced our new college president. During his undergraduate days at Baylor University, he had been a stand-out in extemporaneous speaking. When Dr. William Dorrill arrived at Longwood College, one of his top priorities was starting a forensic team.

"Congratulations, Nancy. You are the new forensic coach." That is precisely how I landed the job. Serving as chairman of the Department of Speech and Theatre and as a freshman seminar leader, I was already loaded with responsibilities. But into an already busy schedule starting a forensic team was added.

Geographically, Longwood College is located in the center of the state of Virginia. Only George Mason, American University and Howard University had competitive programs and were situated three hours away from us.

In 1983, Grace Walsh wrote an article in the *Journal of the Wisconsin Communication Association* entitled "Reflections on Forensics." Based on her forty-eight years of coaching experience, Walsh offered fifteen criteria for a successful program:

1. The teacher must be well prepared.
2. The school system should be supportive of the program.
3. The community should see positive proof of the worth of the program.
4. The press should publicize the program.
5. Parents should be informed about school activities.

6. College squads should fight for the annual budget.
7. Some kind of club organization is highly recommended.
8. All events on the schedule should challenge students to perform with those of comparable expertise (beginners, intermediate and advanced).
9. Other faculty members should constantly be informed about new events.
10. Freshmen counselors can set up questionnaires to screen the list of incoming students who have previous experience.
11. The emergence of organized area leagues should occur.
12. Colleges and universities should sponsor clinics, festivals, tournaments and summer programs.
13. Invite community experts in areas related to the debate proposition to come in as guest lecturers.
14. Keep your alumni active in the program.
15. The final feeling of the student should be his conviction that this experience has been worth the effort.<sup>1</sup>

When we assessed Longwood College's potential to start a forensic program, we had eight of the fifteen points in place.

We had a supportive college and community, a budget out of the president's office, an informed faculty, a summer program for high school coaches, an invitational debate and forensic tournament for high schools, a competent public relations office, the conviction that it was a worthwhile program, and an established forensic/debate reputation on the state level with the Virginia High School League.

In sorting through the other seven criteria, special emphasis was placed on the eleventh standard: starting an organized area league. Deciding that we needed

<sup>1</sup>Walsh, Grace. "Reflections on Forensics," *Journal of the Wisconsin Communication Association*, paper presented at the Eastern Communication Association (Providence, RI: May 2-5, 1985), pp. 45-47.

some experience that was not as competitive, structured or intense as our northern Virginia colleagues, we contacted four colleges within an hour of Farmville. In a preliminary meeting, we started the Central Virginia Forensic League. With suggestions and encouragement from Bruce Manchester and Sheryl Friedly of George Mason, we adopted the rules established by the American Forensic Association. We opted for three, one-day tournaments with three rounds and a final round in seven individual events. We persuaded our individual schools to finance one tournament. To break the ice, Longwood hosted the first tournament in December 1988 with more than 40 students from three colleges. Lynchburg College handled the second tournament in January, with Randolph-Macon Women's College hosting the last tournament in March. The fourth college, Hampden-Sydney, dropped out of the league.

When the district tournament of the American Forensic Association was scheduled at George Mason in the same March, our college was the only one with enough courage to enter the competition. At the end of the first round, we knew that we were outclassed, outpracticed, and amateurs in the professional arena. But Bruce Manchester and Sheryl Friedly were sensitive to our inexperience and encouraged and reassured us. When the meet was over, we had three students who made the finals and qualified for a national tournament. Needless to say, our president was ecstatic. Hence, Longwood College was initiated into the intercollegiate forensic arena. When the faculty/coaches of Lynchburg College and Randolph-Macon Women's College accepted other employment, their programs folded. Thus, we were the only survivors of the Central Virginia Speech League.

When school opened for the 1989-90 year, President Dorrill provided a small budget out of his office for our entrance into five tournaments. In addition, he promised extra money if any of our students qualified for national competition.

Reflecting over this past year, I want to address several frustrating issues. The thesis for this paper will address three areas: 1) the faculty/coach problems, 2) the student problems, and 3) the logistical problems.

In Grace Walsh's criteria, her first emphasis was on the presentation of the teacher. My lack of training was evident. Most of the coaches of college teams have actively participated in forensics as undergraduates. When searching for a university or college that offered a summer workshop for college coaches, none were available. In fact, my institution was willing to send me for additional training, but most of the programs were designed for high school students and coaches.

Time became the next problem. Finding enough hours in the week to teach, to prepare for classes, to grade papers, to carry out administrative jobs, to attend meetings, and to coach students became a frustration.

Thomas Meulemans presented a paper on May 1, 1988 at the Eastern Communication Association meeting in Atlantic City, New Jersey. He stated that "Forensic programs generally take too much time and energy from other work, and an inordinate amount of our relaxation and recharge time. We recruit, raise money, plan the itineraries, host tournaments, manage budgets, fight the rest of the staff and administrators to keep what little perks we have, and try to keep our debaters from pulling each other's hair out. We mark exams and essays in the back of hotel bars and figure out grades on all-night buses, mailing them back to school from cities passed through on a Greyhound bus en route to national finals."<sup>2</sup>

When Robert Littlefield of North Dakota State University surveyed over one hundred college coaches as to their concerns, three general subject areas emerged: time, content and commitment. The respondents identified the time problem as

<sup>2</sup>Meulemas, Thomas. "Precautions in Applying Forensic Experience to Classroom Practices," paper presented at the Eastern Communication Association (Atlantic City, NJ: April 30-May 3, 1988), p. 2.

needing more time to coach, more time to recruit, more time for practice, and finding a common time for team meetings.<sup>3</sup>

From my perspective, the lack of training for my coaching and the demands on my time were barriers that needed to be addressed if I were to continue in this capacity as a coach.

The second type of problem was student-oriented. Since Longwood College is a small, liberal arts school, our student population is usually involved in two or three extracurricular activities. Most of our competitors in interpretation events were theatre majors. Since working on mainstage plays was a requirement in their majors, these students were not available during technical and production weeks. Rivalry for time by other activities became a real problem for our team.

Student motivation was another key factor. When starting a program, little success is realized in the beginning. The competition was so keen that new students often felt overwhelmed. For some, it served as a motivator in them to improve. However, in other cases, it caused students to get discouraged.

In Robert Littlefield's survey, college coaches commented on the commitment area that motivation of students was ranked first with not enough support from other faculty and administrators as second. Other areas were budget, too little credit, limited repeatability, rivalry with other campus activities, and too much work.<sup>4</sup>

Demands on their time and motivation were the two most serious factors concerning our students.

Lastly, the area of logistical problems caused many headaches. Making the necessary arrangements for each trip was time consuming. Reservations for

<sup>3</sup>Littlefield, Robert. "The Forensic Participation Course: What is it Really For?" paper presented at the Speech Communication Association (Chicago, IL: Nov. 1-4, 1985), p. 5.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

transportation and motels, following the college procedure for absences from class, filing the necessary forms for authorization for a trip, arguing with the athletic coaches over the use of a van, having to arrive back at a precise time in order that another group could use the van for a trip -- all put this coach under stress and pressure.

Maintaining the financial records entailed red tape. The state policy for reimbursement was quite specific, and, often in certain situations, money had to be pulled out of the pockets of the students and coaches. On several occasions, the coach was not reimbursed for items spent on a forensic trip.

In order to establish credibility for the team, academic credit was given to participants. The record-keeping from practice time to competition became a problem. Establishing evaluative criteria for performance was time consuming. It had to be altered and changed several times during the semester with more realistic expectations being set for students.

A four-part evaluation system designed by Carolyn Keefe at Rhode Island University was tried. Her grading system had six important components: making it an integral part of the speech curriculum, informing the learner about the criteria on which the grade would be based, evaluating the intellectual and social development, getting feedback, and using an organized method of record keeping.<sup>5</sup> I tried to implement this plan, but failed. My team was not experienced enough to handle this type of evaluation.

Robert Littlefield stated that if a participation course was going to be called a class and award students academic credit, then coaches had an obligation to follow certain guidelines. The participation course should have objectives, use a syllabus, provide for preparation and practice sessions, encourage tournament competition,

<sup>5</sup>Keefe, Carolyn. "A System for Evaluating Tournament Competition for Academic Credit," paper presented at the Eastern Communication Association (Providence, RI: May 2-5, 1988), pp. 3-6.

and have an appropriate format for evaluating a student's performance.<sup>6</sup> My syllabus was inadequate and unworkable.

The students in this program suffered from the logistical problems. Perhaps my expectations were not stated well; my evaluation system was overwhelming; my scheduling was tight due to my inexperience. The mistakes in this area were my fault.

But in spite of the faculty/coach problems, the student problems, and the logistical problems, we all survived. With a summer vacation to allow energies to be rekindled and time to reflect on how to run a smoother program, perhaps by Fall our forensic team will be on its way to becoming an integral part of Longwood College.

In the conclusion of her paper, Grace Walsh offered several warnings against current forensic practices that can damage a solid program.

1. Coach "burnout." Many professors are leaving the activity because the demands are not conducive to normal living. Tournaments beginning on Friday and running through Sunday make arriving home in the early morning on Monday a harrowing experience. One coach commented that, when his little son started to cry when what he thought was a stranger was really his father at the breakfast table, the father decided to get a full-time teaching appointment. Family friction often results from excessive absenteeism of a spouse. Is it any wonder that coaching today does not seem to be as attractive as it used to be?<sup>7</sup>

In further support of this issue, Thomas Meulemans stated that after some years of coaching, our bodies and minds say "enough."

<sup>6</sup>Littlefield, pp. 7-8.

<sup>7</sup>Walsh, p. 47.

Forensic coaches who teach need superhuman powers to continue as both for long. We may still wreck our physical, intellectual and spiritual health along the way. And we find it next to impossible to find the additional time and energy we need to master the research, study and retooling which other educators take for granted.<sup>8</sup> As a fifty-five year old coach, I found myself exhausted on Mondays after a weekend tournament. When the demand occurred for two or three weekends a month, I had a difficult time coping. With the complete responsibility for driving, chaperoning and judging on my shoulders, I was not able to relax and enjoy the learning experience. Perhaps coaches should be young, unmarried and adjunct faculty with superhuman capabilities.

2. The atmosphere of camaraderie was fast disappearing. Instead of relaxed enjoyment, and even a game of bridge now and then among coaches who were friends, the coach's time is spent trying to brief their team on how to beat the next day's "squirrel case" or a bigger problem yet – what names of judges should be scratched from the "approved" list tomorrow.<sup>9</sup>

If a concerted effort could be made by established teams to welcome new schools into the competitive arena, this sense of acceptance would establish a better relationship. Several times my team felt like the "new kids on the block" or the "outsiders."

When we attended the national competition at the University of Alabama, one of the highlights was the friendly atmosphere that

<sup>8</sup>Meulemans, pp. 3-4.

<sup>9</sup>Walsh, p. 47.

existed among schools. The seating at the banquet according to district encouraged talk and socialization. When rival competitors from our district made the cut, a great deal of enthusiasm was generated by their peers. Cheering for these students, attending their elimination rounds, and seeing them gain national recognition was a bonding experience.

With the 1990-91 school session beginning in four days, several goals have been set concerning Longwood's forensic team.

### 1. Recruitment

In Kevin Twohy's paper, "Developing the Recruiting/Public Potential of the Forensic Program," he summarized several elements that would enhance a forensic program. First, a pamphlet should be designed; second, college students should be judging at high school tournaments; third, newspaper coverage of forensic events; fourth, a two-week workshop in the summer; and fifth, publication of student's success should appear in the home-town newspaper.<sup>10</sup>

During this summer we have worked on and achieved each of the above elements. Several of the items were already being done by our college, but we had not seized the opportunity to use them as recruitment ventures.

### 2. Regularly scheduled group practices.

Since the time for individualized practice is so limited, we will utilize group efforts with experienced competitors working with newcomers. Peer coaching has been a valuable learning experience, according to Carolyn Keefe's research.<sup>11</sup> In addition, bonding between team members will occur.

<sup>10</sup>Twohy, Kevin. "Developing the Recruiting/Public Relations Potential of the Forensic Program," paper presented at the Speech Communication Association (New Orleans, LA: Nov. 3-6, 1988), pp. 5-8.

### 3. Smaller number of students on the team.

We will institutionalize tryouts for the forensic team in the Fall. Since we were new in the business, we tried to work with any student who was interested. This diluted time and energy from those students who wanted to become more competitive. With the tryout system, we can become more selective.

### 4. Better use of financial resources.

With a state-wide budget cut felt on all college campuses, we must have a better handle on spending money. Pooling transportation expenses with other colleges, selecting tournaments that are closer to us geographically, using fewer competitors who must perform in more events will make our money work with better results.

It has indeed been a learning experience. Without the help of many of the experts in the field, such as you, our program would not have survived at all. We are indebted for your cooperation, your advice, your reassurance, and your sense of humor. Our only hope is that we can continue and become more competitive.

As a new coach, may I challenge the American Forensic Association, the National Forensic Association, and the National Developmental Conference on Individual Events to:

1. Provide training for new coaches. Universities and colleges with successful programs might offer summer workshops or weekend courses with concrete suggestions on coaching tactics.
2. Offer demonstration workshops for new teams. Successful forensic teams might come to the campus for a series of programs, showing the event, talking about preparation, and explaining the

<sup>11</sup>Keefe, p. 5.

judging procedures. In the spring we hosted three students from Harvard University who spent two days on our campus. They demonstrated types of speeches for our communication classes, performed an oral interpretation program, and visited student organizations. Their presence on our campus was stimulating to our students. We are hopeful to continue this exchange with other colleges and universities in the future.

2. Focus on socializing among the schools. Making friendships, sharing the value of competition, and being friendly with competitors would enhance our association with one another. At tournaments and conferences, a real effort could be made to have some informal "get togethers" for coaches and students.

The questions that I asked this year were "Why should I be involved in this program? Why should I continue to support forensics? Why am I working so hard?"

Kent Colbert and Thompeon Biggers, in a chapter entitled "Why Should We Support Debate?" stated that the literature suggests that debate/forensics provides benefits in at least three areas. First, forensic competition improves the students' communication skills. Second, forensics provides a unique educational experience because of the way it promotes depth of study, complex analysis and focused critical thinking. Third, forensics offers excellent pre-professional preparation.<sup>12</sup>

President John F. Kennedy summed it up well when he said,

I think debating in high school and college is most valuable training, whether for politics, the law, business, or for service on community committees such as the PTA and League of Women Voters. . . . The

<sup>12</sup>Thomas, David and Jack Hart. *Advanced Debate* (Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Co., 1987), p. 2.

give and take of debating, the testing of ideas, is essential to democracy. I wish we had a good deal more debating in our institutions than we do now.<sup>13</sup>

Longwood College accepted the challenge to begin an intercollegiate forensic team. We have survived the first year; we have a starting point; we have focus; and we are on our way to becoming a seasoned competitor.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 8.