

This paper will support the thesis that more training of forensics coaches and judges, whether formal or informal, needs to take place in order to address many of the concerns of the forensic community in regard to inequities in coach/judge expertise and to philosophical inequities in the criteria for events by which coaches and judges fulfill their supervisory and evaluatory responsibilities in helping students become more effective communicators.

Implications of the Informal Training of Coaches and Judges

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Reflecting on the ten years this author has spent coaching and judging forensics in different capacities, the author soon realized that most of his knowledge and philosophy of coaching and judging has been achieved either through "trial and error" or through occasional "tips" along the way from colleagues. The author received very little instruction and training in developing coaching techniques and judging philosophies as a graduate student, even though he was coaching in an established forensics program.

Consequently, while preparing this paper, this writer pondered the idea that perhaps many of us who are now directors of forensic programs also had to learn these techniques the "hard way." That is not to say that there is no merit in prospective coaches learning many things through "first-hand" experience, etc. However, it occurs to this author, at least, that too much of the training many of us received was "informal," which, I believe, has created some of the same problems that we usually attribute to lay or hired judges at our tournaments. That perception leads this author, therefore, to delineate, in this paper, the thesis that

not only do forensic educators need to continue addressing the issue of hired judges and increasing their competency, but we also must consider the need to further educate our graduate assistant coaches and assistant directors of forensics in order to increase their competence as coaches/judges.

Most coaches, naturally, were forensics competitors and thus understood, for the most part, many of the events they began coaching. However, they probably also started coaching students in events in which they had never competed or for which they had little affinity. As a result, many of us had to "sink or swim" in learning the criteria for those events and then imparting that information to our students, while pretending to be competent enough to coach them in particular events. That same uncertainty, at least in this author's case, carried over into the judging of these events in competition.

While many of our students' complaints, whether justified or not, about judging have been directed toward hired judges, we as coaches should also be willing to admit possible cognitive and philosophical limitations in ourselves in regard to coaching/judging specific individual events. Some of you may remember the specific examples of judge arrogance and incompetence that were brought up at the NFA National Assembly meeting in April [1990] at Mankato State.

This concern, which supports the above-mentioned thesis of this paper and subsequent analysis, was also substantiated by Professor Norbert Mills, when he quoted Faules, Rieke and Rhodes from their book *Directing Forensic* (1976), who stated:

The validity of a judgment depends largely upon the ability of the judge to understand what is being judged. This means that the judge must have knowledge about the criteria that he/she uses to arrive at the decision.¹

¹Norbert H. Mills. "Judging Standards in Forensics: Toward a Uniform Code in the '80's." *National Forensic Journal*. (1) Spring 1983: 20.

David Dunlap reinforced that statement when he remarked at the Second National Conference on Forensics in 1984:

The greatest challenge facing individual events is not increasing the competence of its judges, but rather in increasing the competence of its critics.²

C.T. Hanson made an even stronger statement:

Perhaps more than any other criticism, the forensic community is especially vulnerable on the issue of judge competency. Quality has been sacrificed on numerous occasions in tournaments to accommodate a large quantity of events Creating a condition of competency in a critic necessitates as much, if not more, educational training than does creating a condition of competency in forensic competitor.³

Kathryn Elton (1989) wrote a thought-provoking article concerning the forensics program at the University of Minnesota, which is operated entirely by graduate students, and concerning the fact that, as she says, "The University of Minnesota is one of the many programs that offer absolutely no training on any aspect of forensics."⁴ She stated further that "it is more often than not a learn-by-doing, hands-on experience."⁵

With the added awareness of forensics researchers toward the continuing concerns about fairness in tournament judging and in bridging the gap in disparity between judges' decisions (ranks and ratings) in tournament competition, aided especially by the editorial staff of the *National Forensic Journal*,⁶ it is now time for

the forensic community to consider the concept of further educating its coaches/judges by developing ways in which we can give more formal as well as informal training to graduate assistants, assistant directors of forensics, faculty helpers, and lay (hired) judges. With that challenge in mind, the rest of this paper will seek to explore possible ways to accomplish this goal.

In partial response to Norbert Mills' call for a uniform code of judging standards and criteria for each event,⁷ the scholars who studied judging issues at the Second National Conference on Forensics in 1984 stated, as part of their recommendations under Resolutions 46 and 48, that tournament directors especially should make available to all critic/judges all of the information they will need concerning the events they will judge, through the use of seminars/workshops, lists of criteria for each event, etc.⁸ Since then, David Ross⁹ and Kevin Dean¹⁰ have extolled the virtues and numerous advantages that can be gained from conducting judging workshops before and/or during a tournament. Ross, in particular, cites at least three meaningful advantages to a judging seminar:¹¹

1. It ensures valuable critiques for students by identifying possible criteria upon which to base a decision.
2. A judging seminar can maximize fairness in competition.
3. It is an opportunity to arrive at standardized rules for events.

Calling for Clarification not Prescription." *Journal of the American Forensic Association*. 24 (4), Spring 1988: 251-257.

⁷Norbert H. Mills. *National Forensic Journal* 1(1), Spring 1983: 19-31.

⁸Murphy, p. 91.

⁹David Ross. "Improving Judging Skills through the Judge Workshop." *National Forensic Journal* 2(1), Spring 1984: 33-40.

¹⁰Dean, pp. 251-257.

¹¹Ross, pp. 37-38.

²John Murphy. "Order and Diversity: The Search for Judging Standards in Individual Events." In *American Forensics in Perspective*; papers from the Second National Conference on Forensics. Donn Parson, ed., 1984: 92.

³Murphy, p. 92 [emphasis mine].

⁴Kathryn Elton. "Second Among Equals: The Graduate Student Perspective." *National Forensic Journal*. 7 (1), Spring 1989: 56 (emphasis mine).

⁵Elton, p. 56.

⁶Norbert H. Mills. "Judging the After Dinner Speaking Competitor: Style and Content." *National Forensic Journal*. 2 (1), Spring 1984: 11-18; Edward J. Harris, Jr. "Rhetorical Criticism: Judges' Expectations and Contest Standards." *National Forensic Journal*. 5 (1), Spring 1987: 21-25; See also Kevin W. Dean. "Judge Training for Individual Events: Case Studies

Dean more specifically outlined the procedures and advantages gained from day-of-the-tournament workshops, especially the one developed when he was at Ball State University.¹²

When the University of Montevallo forensics team reinstated an invitational tournament in February of this year (after an eight-year hiatus), this writer implemented a judging workshop which was held on two consecutive weeks before the tournament. Several faculty members who had agreed to judge in the tournament attended the workshop, which consisted of an explanation of each event offered, instruction on how to fill out a ballot and summary sheet, explanations as to judge etiquette, and then actual judging of live student performances. The faculty members who attended were very appreciative of the effort we made to educate them to the nuances of forensics competition and judging in particular.

In preparation for this paper, this researcher sent an open-ended questionnaire to those faculty members after the tournament, seeking to gain input and insight from them as to the strengths and weaknesses of the workshop. Here is a sampling of their responses:¹³

1. I learned how to judge the events. This was my first experience as a judge, and I found the discussion and the 'live' example very helpful. It gave me some idea what to expect and greatly reduced my anxiety about judging.
2. You can strengthen this workshop by passing out handouts which list criteria for each specific event.
3. Get more participants (more discussion = more learning) to attend. Maybe you can pay workshop attendees the equivalent of one round of judging as an incentive to attend.

¹²Dean, pp. 253-254.

¹³Responses to questionnaire sent to Montevallo faculty judges, July 9, 1990.

This author found the workshop to be extremely beneficial both to the faculty/judges and to the students who participated in the workshop by giving them "live" examples to critique.

Event though we did not conduct a workshop during the tournament, this writer finds Ross' and Dean's suggestions for workshops at that time full of possibilities, not only for the hired judges, but especially for the coaches in attendance at any tournament. Ross reported that, while his seminars received mixed reviews due to the timing of the workshops, he felt that the advantages outweighed any timing disadvantages because, in his words, "a seminar can be an effective vehicle for identifying and prioritizing judging criteria, as well as helping coaches to be better critics by seeking the counsel of those most qualified in specific events."¹⁴

This author would also like to advocate that tournament directors consider the possibility of post-tournament judging workshops, not necessarily for coaches from different schools because of travel constraints, but particularly for the hired judges. This workshop, perhaps held a week or so after the tournament, would allow these judges to express their feelings about the judging experience overall and then give them a chance to assess their individual strengths/weaknesses in critiquing student performances and present suggestions as to how the workshops could be improved in the future. If we are to improve judge competency, as mentioned earlier, then this writer strongly feels that we need to provide guidance to those judges before, during and after a tournament. We read much in educational literature about the need to assess what we do in the classroom and professionally; that need is no less significant and important in dealing with the concerns we face in supervising and judging students in forensic activity. If we are

¹⁴Ross, p. 40.

willing to make the effort to continually assess ourselves, then it seems to be logical to assert the claim that we will also need to answer many of the concerns we have concerning judge agreement in ranking and rating student competitors, fairness in judging, becoming more competent coaches, judge indiscretions (in terms of unnecessary, disparaging comments on critique sheets), etc. Students will always complain about judges, but we can educate coaches/judges to the extent that they can cease to be, in Kevin Dean's words, "the scapegoat of poor tournament performance."¹⁵

The author would also like to advocate the following:

1. The forensic community should continue to consider and follow the guidelines set forth by Resolution 48, passed at the Second National Conference on Forensics.
2. Directors of forensics should meet with their assistants regularly to discuss coaching and judging philosophies and to ensure that their assistants are competent articulators of the rules and criteria for each event as they coach the students in their program.
3. Tournament directors should consider the benefits to be gained from conducting pre-tournament, day-of-the-tournament, and/or post-tournament workshops.
4. At universities where classes in Directing Forensics are offered, students should receive equal instruction in coaching/judging individual events as they often receive in coaching/judging debate.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There is much to be gained from an honest appraisal of this subject and of our methods of coaching and judging forensics competitors fairly and competently. This report has merely raised some questions and posed some challenges along with a few suggestions pertaining to the informal training that most coaches and judges receive. Informal training is not altogether a negative concept, but this is one important aspect of the forensic activity that continues to necessitate reforms and

¹⁵Dean, p. 251.

further research. This author would personally like to see more articles written on coaching techniques, ways in which coaches can be trained (both philosophically as well as administratively), and further discussions as to the merits and successes of judging seminars. I commend the editorial staff of the *National Forensic Journal* for providing the opportunities and the space for forensics researchers to explore every aspect of individual events, just as debate has been perused from almost every angle since the early part of the century in many of our respected journals. Future coaches and judges, even though they need the academic freedom to develop themselves philosophically and otherwise, do not need to be left to "sink or swim" when it comes to learning how to effectively train students in the art of communicating in competition and in real life. As Kevin Dean ably remarked:

While we must guard against the proliferation of restrictive practices, such as the articulation of detailed and formulaic judging criteria that bind and stifle the creativity we wish to cultivate in our students, we must concurrently strive to protect the student from the innocent ignorance of the inexperienced judge. Just as we work to elevate our students from novice to varsity, we must strive to elevate the judges who serve at our tournaments from the type who write, 'Good job . . . tough round -- 8/70' to those who provide students with critical comments and insights which aid the student in further shaping the event.¹⁶

¹⁶Dean, p. 254.