

**National Individual Events Tournament
Qualifying Legs:
An Idea Whose Time Has Passed**

Clark D. Olson
Director of Forensics
Arizona State University

The national individual events tournament hierarchy has a significant impact on practices at invitational tournaments. Regardless of which national affiliation one holds, participants are constantly being bombarded with questions of "7/12?" or "How many legs?" It is the contention of this essay to examine the role that the national hierarchy has had with regard to the at-large qualification method, examine an alternative, and provide implications for an alternative qualifying method.

History

The American Forensic Association-National Individual Events Tournament (AFA-NIET) came into existence when individual events were already quite well established. Figure 1 shows that the total number of individual events tournaments was fairly constant both prior to the creation of the tournament (236) and ten years into its existence (229). Hence, the tournament itself has not provided an impetus for a significant addition in the number of tournament opportunities. However, the existence of the AFA-NIET has caused the events offered at most tournaments to become much more uniform in line with the events

offered at the national tournament. Figure 1 shows the consistency with which all 10 regularly sanctioned AFA-NIET events are currently offered as compared to much greater irregularity prior to its existence. Indeed the fluctuation between the experimental events of Sales Speaking and Programmed Oral Interpretation indicate great variance in their offerings at invitational tournaments pending their existence at the AFA-NIET. Earlier event trends mirror the addition of events at the National Forensic Association Tournament initiated in 1970.

The current at-large qualification method was created primarily for two reasons. Initially, the AFA-NIET wanted a smaller, more exclusive tournament than the previously established National Forensic Association's Individual Events National Tournament, so the at-large/district qualification procedure was enacted. Secondly, since the sponsoring body, the American Forensic Association, also sponsored the National Debate Tournament, complete with an at-large/district qualification system already in place, it seemed logical to parallel that structure with one similar for individual events.

Throughout the thirteen year history of the tournament, the at-large system has been modified a number of times, placing limits on the total number of placings, and establishing a scale for the number of participants which constitutes a qualifying "leg." However, with these slight modifications, the qualifying systems remains largely the same as the one originated by the founders in 1978.

Disadvantages of Legs

Qualifying legs have outlived their usefulness for three primary reasons: they are continually circumvented, they cheapen the value of achievements at individual tournaments, and they are cumbersome to administer.

Initially, there are continual efforts made to circumvent the current leg policy. While in theory it should be quite easy to determine what does and does not

constitute a qualifying leg, there have been numerous attempts made to proliferate qualifying legs in an effort to secure more slots to the AFA-NIET. Specific policies have even been enacted to thwart such practices as unadvertised "last chance" tournaments where tournaments were thrown together following a district qualifier to "help" "deserving" competitors qualify for nationals, sometimes allowing student judges, and sometimes even announcing which students needed legs. Perhaps one of the most flagrant violations occurred when a lone contestant from a local beauty school was entered to round out the number of schools at 10, making the tournament a qualifying event. However that is only one attempt to circumvent the legs policy. Recent national committee decisions have surrounded problems with "hidden legs" and a single school hosting two tournaments on the same weekend. Just when one circumvention technique is disallowed, a creative forensicator will dream up another to stir up controversy over the integrity of the AFA-NIET qualifying system.

Secondly, the at-large leg system cheapens student achievements at individual tournaments. Since nearly all tournaments have qualifying legs, every competitive opportunity a student has is toward gaining legs to qualify for the national tournament. Each tournament, then, becomes a means to an end and is not appreciated for the intrinsic value for which it holds apart from the national tournament. No doubt every coach has had to console a student who placed fourth at an important tournament only to be disgusted that fourth was not a leg and one place higher would have earned the student a leg. Since not all students who participate in individual events will qualify or even hope to qualify for the AFA-NIET, it seems to devalue a fine performance at any tournament when a leg is not received. Certainly individual tournaments have far more value, both educationally and competitively than as merely a method for qualifying for a single national tournament.

Several practices at invitational tournaments point to the fact that success at individual tournaments is cheapened in the quest for at-large legs. When students who have already earned three qualifying legs are in a final round with students who have yet to qualify, it has been known that those students who have already qualified have performed less than their best to purposely allow unqualified students to earn legs. Clearly, there is little educational or competitive value to such a practice. Similarly, coaches may be coerced into entering unprepared students in an event just to fill out a leg requirement, and unprepared students may be coerced into performing to just obtain a score so the requisite number of contestants appear on a tabulation sheet. The reverse may also be true. Students who have already earned their three legs may be discouraged from further competitive opportunities to allow more students to earn legs, thus disallowing further educational benefit from participating in that event. In fact, students who do not voluntarily remove themselves from competition may be ridiculed by those who have yet to qualify. Qualifying for the AFA-NIET may not be a director's sole reason for entering a student in an invitational tournament. Furthermore, some tournament directors may collapse varsity and novice contestants into a single division, not for educational reasons, but to generate for legs for the AFA-NIET. Clearly, all such practices have questionable educational implications and are certainly suspect of competitive value.

Consistent with this problem is the over-emphasis that students may place exclusively on the AFA-NIET. If participation in that tournament becomes a student's sole goal, a less than successful performance at that single tournament or failure to qualify for the AFA-NIET can cause a student to believe he/she had an unsuccessful season, when his/her fine record at a number of invitational tournaments throughout the year may belie that claim. Competitive success should

not be determined by a single performance, and the preoccupation with qualifying for the AFA-NIET can breed that attitude.

The final, and undoubtedly most time consuming problem with the at-large qualifying system, is that it is cumbersome. Countless hours are spent by district chairs calculating the legs.

For the 1990 AFA-NIET 645 of the 987 entries were earned at-large. Given the existence of 245 individual events tournaments, keeping accurate records and verifying these 645 events, to say nothing of all the other earned legs which are never used for qualifying is an arduous burden, one often fraught with error. For the national tournament director, merely determining which students have qualified for the tournament is often a three week verification task. If all the time record keeping for the AFA-NIET was instead channelled into educational pursuits aimed at improving the pedagogical aspects of the activity, no doubt nearly all involved in the activity would conclude that the amount of time spent record keeping was extreme and could be more productively spent. Instead, what currently exists is a body of creative and talented educators spending their time doing basic clerical tasks, hardly duties befitting their training.

Not only are qualifying legs cumbersome for individual directors who must submit them and district chairs who must verify them, the whole notion of legs is one which plagues the NIET committee. Great quantities of valuable meeting time have been spent discussing the issues surrounding legs. In just the past two years, the committee has addressed the number of contestants which should count toward a qualifying leg, whether or not all divisions at a tournament should be legs, and removing the maximum number of 9 for NIET qualification. These philosophical concerns in addition to thwarting the circumvention techniques listed above to maintain the integrity of the tournament comprise a great amount of the NIET committee's meeting time. Again, there seem to be better ways to spend national

committee time. While one purpose of the committee is to oversee the national tournament, certainly a secondary objective is to promote the educational nature of the forensic activity. And when the bulk of time is spent quibbling over who has/has not, should/should not qualify for the national tournament, it again seems like a waste of valuable resources. When leaders congregate to share ideas, they should do more than referee qualification disputes.

No doubt there exist several other reasons why qualifying legs do not meet their intended purpose. From an historical perspective, the at-large system has been argued to be a major reason for the decline in NDT debate: it has fostered an elitist system, where a dedicated few must adopt travel patterns which may not be educationally sound, but which are necessary to fulfill NDT at-large qualification requirements. While individual events appears in no immediate danger of a significant decline in participation, a certain trend of elitism is emerging. One need not comment on the fact that but a single school has been the national champion for eleven consecutive years, and those schools in the top ten remain relatively constant as well. Perhaps the at-large qualification system should be examined to see if it, too, fosters a sense of elitism and if participation from some less successful schools is discouraged by the current at-large qualification method.

An Alternative to the At-Large Qualification Method

While several potential modifications of the AFA-NIET qualification procedure no doubt exist, I wish to present one which has been prominently discussed in several districts, but never actively proposed. The solution proposed here is to eliminate the at-large qualification procedure and move exclusively to district qualification. However, the procedure would be modified to include two district tournaments, one during the fall semester and one during the spring semester. The specifics of amending the AFA-NIET Charter By-Laws would be:

1. Eliminate By-law V (At-Large Qualification Process)
2. Amend By-law VI (District Qualifiers)
 - B. Change top 10% to top 15%, i.e:

21-26 competitors	4 slots
27-33 competitors	5 slots
34-40 competitors	6 slots
41-46 competitors	7 slots
47-53 competitors	8 slots
54-60 competitors	9 slots
61-67 competitors	10 slots
68-73 competitors	11 slots
74-80 competitors	12 slots.
 - E. Replace with "Fall District Qualifying tournaments shall be held between October 15 and December 15. Spring District Qualifying tournament shall be held after January 15 and no later than the third week-end in March.
 - F. Change each school may enter a maximum of five students in each of the events to maximum of ten students in each of the events.
 - G. Intentions. Add "Alternates from the Fall District Qualifying Tournament shall compete in the Spring District Qualifying Tournament unless they have already been advanced due to the nonparticipation of a Fall District Qualifier. If a Fall alternate should qualify at the Spring District Qualifier and be subsequently advanced from the Fall Tournament, the next alternate from the Spring District Qualifier shall be advanced.

These changes would also need to be reflected in each of the district constitutions and by-laws as well once adopted by the NIET committee.

Implications

Perhaps the first concern is what impact the elimination of the at-large system will have on the size of the AFA-NIET. By using the best available data from the AFA-NIET tournament director, given the approximate number of district qualifiers from each district, Figure 2 displays the actual number of tournament qualifiers 1988-1990 and then taking the top 15% instead of top 10% and doubling the figure who qualified from the district tournaments (to represent two district tournaments), the second figure for each year was arrived at, which approximates the number of qualifiers that would occur under the double district method. The larger the event, the smaller the discrepancy between the two systems. The largest discrepancies occur in the smallest events, After Dinner Speaking and Communication Analysis. To preserve the integrity of the extrapolation method, these data were left unaltered. However, given the relatively small size of entries at district tournaments in these events, it can be argued that the number of qualifiers under the double district method would not be significantly larger than the current number of qualifiers. Despite those artificial increases, the total number of qualifiers at the AFA-NIET under the double district method varies between 5-10% more than currently entered. Given the size constraints on the smaller events, most likely the size increase would be negligible.

While this system no doubt will need refinement and will probably be subject to some potential circumvention, the circumvention done at a few regulated tournaments is much easier to control than that done at invitational tournaments. The entire qualification procedure will then be under the purview of the district chairs and hence the AFA-NIET committee. Questionable tournament practices

can be regulated by the districts and procedures deemed "un-educational" can be eliminated.

Since the tournament exists not for the coaches, but for the students, it is important to determine what impact this alternative method may have on students. Given the addition of a fall district qualifier, this method will reward students who prepare their events and are successful early, similar to the goal of the current at-large system. In addition, it marks a clear time period for mid-year graduates to qualify at the national tournament.

Perhaps the biggest implication would be on individual invitational tournaments. One could argue that participation in individual tournaments would decline since there is no incentive to qualify for the national tournament. But the data in figure 1 seem to deny that, in that there has been no proliferation of tournaments since the advent of the AFA-NIET, in fact there has been a slight decrease in overall number of tournaments offering individual events. Invitational tournaments were strong prior to the AFA-NIET, there is no reason to believe that a lack of leg incentive will cause tournaments to dramatically decrease.

In fact, it could be argued that forensic participation may actually increase. For programs with small budgets, attending only the two district tournaments is essential for participation in the national tournament. Smaller programs do not need to attend a series of small, perhaps weak, tournaments in the quest for legs, but instead with the increased percentage of qualification slots at districts have an equal chance to qualify for the AFA-NIET. Travel patterns will perhaps not be predicated on who can get a leg where, but on who can get the best educational opportunity at which tournament. Decisions made based on education instead of national qualification can only improve the nature of the activity.

In addition, the elimination of legs restores the achievements of individuals at invitational tournaments. Instead of looking at the results of a tournament as a

means for national qualification, a student can take pride in performing well and being successful at each individual competition, instead of using it as a means to an end.

While some may argue that the double district method may place undue pressure on students to perform at a single tournament, it does allow students at least two chances to qualify in their events. Given the subjective nature of forensic activity, there are always some deserving students who do not qualify for the AFA-NIET, and that would no doubt continue. But with two opportunities to qualify and a larger number of qualifying slots, all deserving students should have a fair chance to qualify for the AFA-NIET.

Finally, the double district method vastly reduces the amount of paperwork necessary to determine qualifiers and will reduce the time commitment for those involved in administration. Instead of needing to examine the results from 245 tournaments, the tournament director needs the results from only 18 tournaments, a much more manageable number. While there could be some confusion in advancing alternates from one tournament to the other, certainly no more time should be spent on this task than is already spent notifying alternates of their pending participation. While the addition of a second district tournament does require the district chair to direct another tournament, most district chairs regularly direct several tournaments per year so that this is a familiar task. And given the increased educational benefit of a tournament over a volume of paperwork, the educational trade off seems worthwhile. For large geographic districts, a tournament could be held at both sides of the district, allowing all schools the chance to participate at least once at minimal expense. Or, a central location could be settled upon so cost approximations can be regularized.

In addition to lowering the amount of paperwork for the district chairs, it also frees up more meeting time for the AFA-NIET committee to explore methods of improving the forensic activity instead of worrying about qualification methods.

While the double district method may seem like a radical alternative to the current at-large qualification method, it does seem like a solution to many of the problems which plague the current system. While it is no panacea for all the problems faced by the AFA-NIET, it is a solution worthy of consideration. Only when it is experimented with, will the full implications of its adoption be known. But the substantial benefits it offers with minimal costs, both to participants and for the AFA-NIET organization as a whole, make it worth the risk.

Figure 1

EVENTS AT INDIVIDUAL EVENTS TOURNAMENTS

	73/ 74	74/ 75	75/ 76	76/ 77	77/ 78	78/ 79	86/ 87	87/ 88	88/ 89	89/ 90
INTERP	236	267	333	389	426	448				
Prose							199	213	206	231
Poetry							197	213	200	225
Drama							144	171	170	194
ORAT	171	173	205	204	225	220	210	226	213	234
IMP	87	99	118	122	140	145	204	214	210	227
EXT	137	138	169	171	195	189	195	211	200	221
ADS	71	83	100	118	146	148	200	217	204	225
INF	66	78	119	130	170	176	205	224	213	231
CA/RC	38	52	70	85	101	101	163	184	180	195
DUO	30	44	76	74	151	151	196	204	194	229
SALES	7	7	14	17	18	11	81	114	14	13
POI	106	107	115	100	84	74	21	33	118	160
TOTAL # OF IND. EVENTS TOURNAMENTS			236				215	229	219	
	245									

Data compiled from Intercollegiate Speech Tournament Results, from the designated years, edited by Jack H. Howe, Edward J. Harris, and Seth C. Hawkins.

Figure 2

**AFA-NIET QUALIFIERS
AT-LARGE VS. DOUBLE DISTRICT METHOD**

EVENT	1988		1989		1990	
	AL	00	AL	00	AL	00
IMPROMPTU	106	110	108	110	111	114
INFORMATIVE	91	94	94	94	88	90
PROSE	117	118	115	110	122	122
DUO	82	94	71	78	82	81
EXTEMP	77	78	84	82	85	90
PERSUASIVE	88	90	85	90	87	84
DRAMA	93	94	86	90	88	94
POETRY	103	118	95	110	113	100
ADS	67	78	62	78	74	90
CA	57	82	52	82	60	81
TOTALS	853	956	834	924	899	946

Data determined from information from Guy Yates, AFA-NIET Tournament Director presented to AFA-NIET Committee.