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*(Kenneth Bisbee founded the Speech Team at Ridgefield (WA) H.S.) NFL is proud he is an NFL Coach!*

OF A FIRST-YEAR COACH

by Kenneth M. Bisbee

In retrospect, it seemed a modest inquiry. With our eldest, Vanessa, preparing to enter Ridgefield High School, my wife, Nancy, and I attended an orientation for parents during the spring of her eighth-grade year. As people were dispersing, I collared the vice-principal/activities director and queried, "What would it take to get a speech team at the high school?" Simple enough, was the response. Find a coach (had one in mind), get a group of students interested or committed (doable), and raise all your own funds for the first two years. (GULP!)

Our pastor, Ken Henry, had egged me on... "Vanessa would be good at speech" -- as a former Oregon state champion in Humorous Interp who also debated, he was a natural to coach the team. Alas, his schedule wouldn't permit the time commitment needed. My wife, who was on the Yamhill-Carlton (OR) H.S. speech team in the 70's, would be a good second choice. But with four other kids at home and Saturdays filled up with teaching at the local community college -- no dice. Third in line was me -- one undergraduate class in oral interp at Washington State University more than twenty years ago was my claim to competency. The pay was, literally, non-existent (my choice), so the queue for the position was not lengthy.

The school board needed to okay the

activity for a speech team to exist. Directly in front of me on the agenda was the golf coach. The golf team members were on their second year, and yes, even sports need to be self-sufficient for that period of time. The golf team hadn't raised all the necessary funds, and the fanny-grilling that ensued was not a pretty spectacle. My goal was to get in, get approval, and get out. The school board wanted to know that there was more student commitment than just signing up on a sheet of paper in the office, so we held an organizational meeting at the community center. Students' questions were slightly unnerving: "When do we start debate?" "Will this help if I want to be on television?" "Do colleges consider speech team important when you apply?" They signed up for the events they were interested in, and of course some signed up for every event. The school board okayed us at the July meeting and we were off.

There was one tiny problem with me coaching the speech team. I am an elementary school teacher whose school day ends one hour after the high school's. And there are no speech classes at the high school. And we could practice only one night a week after school. Make that one BIG problem.

Our first practice in mid-October turned up a small but diverse group. Two girls who insisted on policy debate but re-

fused to speak in front of the group -- no, an impromptu was not something they would like to try. One extemp who wouldn't practice her speeches aloud -- "I'm saying them in my head." A young lady who insisted on doing "The Highwayman" -- her favorite poem -- regardless of where or how it fit in (oral interp it turned out), and three young women to try duo interp. Yes, we were missing the male element on the team, and we decided we'd settle for one to start with. A local coach had a freshman boy attending RHS. One quick call later, we had us a little balance.

Ken Henry came to help most Tuesdays. If it was guilt-induced help, I didn't care since he was obviously more knowledgeable than I. Guiding students to find their own pieces was tough. For a small school, our library is reasonably well-stocked but not with what we needed. Ken dusted off an old duo interp he had used, and one of the teams recut it. Another two-some ended up with something light: the attempted rape and death threats of Extremities.

The next practices were - enlightening. "More emotion - make me believe it!" "Become the character!" "Diction, I can't understand you!" With less than two weeks until our first tournament, I was the one who couldn't sleep at night. The kids were calm and completely oblivious to what I was sure

was awfully competent coaching.

The first tournament was local, just six miles away. My wife's Italian heritage kicked in -- did we have enough food? She made popcorn balls for the entire team, with plenty for seconds and sharing. We met at the high school, I reminded them of my list of expected behaviors, and off we sped in a blue van with the orange letters "Ridgefield-Home of the Spudders." David Letterman has listed our high school mascot as one of the ten worst in the nation, but when you consider that the other choice was the "Prunes" (they were going for local agricultural products on the final ballot), a potato becomes a splendid mascot. The sounds as we approached the tournament site were the knocking knees and the chattering teeth of the six charter members of the speech team. "Can't we go home?" "We'll tell people that we went" were pleas that fell on deaf ears. A plaintive voice from the back of the van piped up, "Will there at least be some cute guys there?" If you remember the *Mary Tyler Moore Show* finale where they are all huddled together and move as one organism -- that was us as we entered. I'd cased the school the night before in order to give the team the appearance that I knew what was happening. We checked in, found a table for our stuff, anticipated the first rounds, and put our anti-perspirants to the ultimate test.

Our first postings were up. I made sure they were ensconced in the appropriate rooms and headed off to judge. A fledgling team, they sat in on each other's rounds and watched other events they might like to try. They survived the first round. It wasn't so bad. After the second round, they were enjoying themselves and loosening up. When the third round was finished, they discovered there was another tournament the next weekend just one hundred miles away -- could we go? The OI with "The Highwayman" took first. We just knew we were on a roll.

We wrangled an invitation to our second tournament, and since the school vans were already spoken for, I drove mine. We added a new member with a commentary, and three of the dualers decided to try impromptu. (Our extemper never returned, and the twosome determined to do CX debate never made a tournament). The duo doing Extremities made hidden finals and encountered their favorite judge of the season. He laughed during their introduction and through much of their piece (perhaps the intro should have been darker), and is still

mentioned in reverent tones. (He was so awesome"). Impromptu was a surprise. One of the girls took first in all three rounds, including hidden finals. Two speakers earned their NFL memberships at this tournament. (The memberships and advanced degrees were a huge motivating factor for this team. After each tournament they would total their new points, figure out their current NFL status and ask, "Mr. Bisbee, did we get you your membership yet?") On the way home while they were munching popcorn balls, now a tradition, they demanded ballots. I explained that I couldn't turn the overhead light on while driving and didn't want to stop. That was okay; they'd brought flashlights along.

One lesson I learned early in the season was to ask tournament directors for a break on the fees since we had to raise every penny. To a person, responses were that they were glad we now had a team and proceeded to waive some of the cost. The support from the seasoned pros in the Washington forensics ranks was unwavering.

Driving them to every tournament, I got to know my team even better. Maybe someday we'll need buses. I'm afraid it will take away from the group unity. The incidents that this team shares as part of its collective memory are varied. Kathryn (who hates to wear shoes) accidentally setting off the fire extinguisher inside the van with her feet as we were driving down Interstate-5 at 1:00 a.m....; Ben getting blamed for eating all the popcorn balls, even at a tournament he didn't attend; Vanessa doing an impromptu on the given topic "humility," accidentally delivering one on "humiliation," yet still placing; Becca (whose HI includes what has become the team's mantra, "It's a look") having her name misspelled three different ways in the local newspaper; Megan reading the NFL manual for fun during tournament down time and setting our goal -- get a charter; Dove changing a duo into an HI in twenty minutes because her partner backed out at the last instant; Sheryl and the other girls crooning "Speech Guy" to Ben, her duo partner, at the McMinnville tournament's talent show; Sydney taking a victory lap with her OI trophy at a family gathering where many of her star-athlete, male cousins were gathered; meeting at the junction at four in the morning; the telephone book delivery fundraiser where the total raised was less than the deductible on my car insurance (the dent acquired during the fundraiser is still there).

The season progressed with great

surprises and disappointments that were taken in stride. Whenever any speaker scored hardware, and it was always someone different, the standing gag was that we'd need two vans at the next tournament: one for the team and one for (insert the Spudder's name) ego.

The NFL qualifier in Auburn was our Olympics. The glory came from just taking part. The results were about what I expected - two downs and out. During this contest it became clear, from this coach's point of view, that the season was a success. I'd heard experienced speakers try to diminish other competitors or their work. My kids came back from rounds excited. "You have got to come hear the HIs (or duos). They're really terrific!" I was never more proud of my team than at that moment.

The Ridgefield Boosters Club was generous with us. Another coach said their boosters wouldn't give them a dime. Two of the team members made a presentation, gave examples of their speeches, and asked the boosters for funding. The girls were confident, poised, and well-spoken. Their abilities so impressed several of the businessmen attending that they received job offers. The boosters thought what we'd asked for wasn't enough and offered us more. (Of course we took it!)

The presentation for the school board garnered rave reviews for the speaking ability of the team when they strutted their stuff at one of the meetings. Team members doing an impromptu for the local ITC provided some outside funding. The Ridgefield Lions Club funded and prepared a pancake breakfast where the team served. They let us keep every cent. People attending got value for their money - pancakes, sausages, and speeches.

Norm, Leslie, and Brad, other coaches in Clark County, were incredibly supportive. They coached me, allowed complete access to their knowledge and experience, and helped with positive strokes whenever it was obviously needed.

Our first season is history. The school letters, NFL letters and NFL pins are proudly displayed on lettermen's jackets. Seven of the eight team members say they'll be back next year (one was a senior). They have moved on to other activities or sports but are looking for interp selections for next year. Would I do it again? Without a second thought, yes!