

# ZEN AND THE ART OF FORENSICS

## PART 2

by  
**Bob Jones**

As I watched a friend who had left golf for a while take the game back up, I could see a need to apply some of the lessons the sports psychologists are teaching. As he got more and more frustrated with his golf game, mostly because he couldn't perform at the same level as when he had been playing nearly every day, I dug out my copy of Dr. Bob Rotella's *Golf Is Not a Game of Perfect* and a copy of Dr. Deborah Graham's *The Eight Traits of Champion Golfers*. When we talked about the lessons the sports psychologists had for both of us, it renewed my interest in applying some of those same lessons to my forensics coaching. Thus, I started on a new journey of discovery for gleanings to help my forensic students.

In my search I found four more principles to go along with the first seven:

1. A competitive speaker with great dreams can accomplish great things.
2. Potential depends upon the speaker's attitude and how well he or she thinks.
3. Attitude ultimately wins out over ability.
4. Positive attitude is very effective.
5. Prioritize your opponents.
6. Quality of practice is more important than quantity.
7. Trying harder is not always better.

[See "Zen and the Art of Forensics," *Rostrum*, April, 1997, pg. 21.]

Again, with thanks to Rotella and Graham, I adapted the lessons of sports psychology to our activity.

**PRINCIPLE EIGHT: The speaker must love the challenge when things don't go exactly right. The alternatives--anger, fear, whining, cheating--do no good.**

A golfing friend of mine has shown great improvement in his game without improving the physical side of his game. He

instead has made strides in his mental golf game. Not long ago most of us could beat Nick by letting the natural bad breaks of the game cause him to self destruct. A bad lie in the bunker, a bounce the wrong way, landing in someone else's divot, one missed shot and Nick was done in. In a match with Nick it was money in my pocket when one little thing would go wrong for him. Sadly for my pocketbook Nick read *Golf Is Not a Game of Perfect*. Once he realized what he was doing to himself and his game, it was not very difficult to improve to the point of winning the club championship.

**Speakers need to understand that every tournament is a new chance.....**

- a chance to win
- a chance to lose
- an opportunity to improve

On our speech teams we have all had speakers we would call "fair weather" competitors--they do just fine as long as everything is just fine. But let one small thing go wrong and they're done for that competition. These are the students who let a bad room, an interruption, a bad hair day interfere with their ability to perform at the top level. They respond to the bad break with anger as if the Speech Gods had conspired against them. Worse yet, they may respond by trying to create bad breaks for others -- they make faces (when they believe the judge can't see them), make distracting noises, or any other examples of discourtesy judges could recount.

We know other examples of these speakers who don't know how to respond to the bad luck golfers refer to as the "rub of the green." For instance, every coach has had students who come home with no trophy whining about the bad breaks or ill luck. "I could'uv...I should 'uv...I would'uv...except for... (list of all the natural events that have ever happened to any speaker in any competition)." And perhaps most infuriating, we've all had the speaker who gives voice

to the "stupid judge" syndrome. "I would have won except the STUPID JUDGE didn't listen to me...I would have won except the STUPID JUDGE was too old [it was probably me]."

All these speakers need to listen to the sports psychologists who tell us that to overcome the bad breaks we all get, we need to turn them into challenges. In other words, let the bad luck challenge us to turn adversity into advantage. We should all heed the advise of William Shakespeare in *As You Like It* [Act ii, sc. 1]: "Sweet are the uses of adversity, Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous, Wears yet a precious jewel in his head." Instead of students responding to bad luck with anger, fear, whining, or cheating, we would like to have them come back from rounds saying, "Listen to what happened to me and here's how I handled it." Use natural adversity to our advantage. Even if it doesn't help the score that round, it certainly can in the future.

**PRINCIPLE NINE: At the beginning of every competition, a forensics competitor must expect only two things of herself: to have fun, and to focus on doing the best job possible.**

There have been many cases of professional golfers who talk about how they got their game back together by deciding to have more fun. Even people who play a game for a living sometimes take the game too seriously. Though I might be tempted to take a golf match fairly seriously if I were playing for a million dollars (or even thirty dollars), it is still a game. And, as important as we believe speech competitions are, they are still just learning exercises. Too many students don't have fun at tournaments. They may enjoy the social experiences, but the competition is not fun for them. These speakers take the game too seriously -- whether pressure comes from parents, coaches, peers, or within -- and they suffer burnout. It may be the reason a sophomore places tenth in LD at Nationals and quits speech the next year. It may be the reason

one of my sophomores placed seventh in Prose at the Minneapolis Nationals and the next year told me, "It will be too much work for me to get better." I lost a great prospect because I had let the competition stop being fun for him. When I step up to the first tee -- or when the speakers head to the first round -- we should expect only two things: that we will try our best and that we will have fun.

**PRINCIPLE TEN: A competitor cannot let one round or one performance determine his thinking for the rest of the tournament. Since forensics competitors are human (despite what some debaters believe) and humans make mistakes, successful competitors know how to respond to mistakes and adversity.**

Every speech coach in every school can tell story after story about speakers who have a bad round and give up. They are the ones who say, "I've blown it already, so why bother to try." We console and cajole to spur them on. What these speakers need to realize is that the game isn't over after one round or because of one round. The great golfer Walter Hagen believed he would hit five bad shots in a round. So, after hitting a bad shot, he would just forget that one and concentrate harder on the next shot. A student of mine made it to the tenth round at Nationals in oratory with a speech entitled "Stuff Happens." The lesson he preached in that speech was that mistakes will happen, but what is important is how we deal with those mistakes. If we learn from mistakes or don't let the stuff that happens to us determine the rest of our thinking, we can prevail. Sam Donaldson from Canby had every reason to quit in extemp his junior year at the Eau Claire Nationals. I had shipped extemp files UPS a week ahead of the tournament to our Wisconsin hotel. Monday morning of the tournament they still hadn't arrived. Sam went to extemp prep with his flow pad and no resources. He knew how he scored that round and he could have given up on the rest of the rounds, but he didn't. When we got our files (in time for the second round), he worked harder on the rest of the rounds and made it to the tenth round. The example of Ted Scutti (Colorado) in his senior year should be an example to all. Ted was the favorite to win US Extemp, but he dropped out after six rounds. Almost two-thirds of the competitors at Nationals experience this, but not from the perspective of the expected winner. Ted could have easily

given up. No, Ted couldn't. Others could, but Ted didn't let his experience determine his thinking for the rest of the tournament. He responded by winning Extemp Commentary and earning the National Championship he'd expected -- only in a different event. We are all bound to make mistakes -- it's one of the qualities that makes us human. But it is also a human quality that we can choose how to respond to those mistakes. We can give up, call it a day, go home a loser, or we can learn and grow from the experience. The sports psychologists tell us over and over that the real winner, the real champion is the one who will learn and grow.

**PRINCIPLE ELEVEN: In forensics, the bad news for the current champion is that tomorrow is a new day, when the competition starts again from scratch. But that's the good news for everyone else.**

The most wonderful thing about golf, to me and many other players, is that each hole is a new beginning. Every time I tee the ball up I have a new chance to make the perfect shot. I can have a bad hole (or a whole bunch of them) and still look forward to the next hole. I can lose this weekend's match with my golfing partners, but next week I get another chance. That may not be great news for Tiger Woods who is expected to win every time he tees it up -- everyone gets a new shot at him every week. He's on top of the golfing world because he's better than everyone else. But if he wants to stay on top, he has to beat them all over again next week.

This pattern may also be one of the best aspects of our activity. When I was a college debater for Linfield College (a small liberal arts college in Oregon), two debates stick with me today out of the hundreds I debated. The first was when my partner and I debated against Rick Flam and his partner from Berkeley. Rick was called by some the best college debater ever (at least of 60s and 70s era). He beat us, but the judge (a highly respected college coach) said it was the best debate he'd ever seen and gave us all maximum points. What a day! To debate the best there was and come close to winning was great, but that we'd have other chances to try was greater. That same year we were debating against a Harvard team whose affirmative hadn't been beaten all year. That time we won. We'd taken the champions down.

Our speakers need to understand that

every tournament is a new chance -- a chance to win, a chance to lose, an opportunity to improve. When my junior speaker, Sam Donaldson, came home from the Eau Claire Nationals having placed fourth in LD, what he worried most about was losing. How would it affect him, a consistent winner, to lose? The next year every tournament he won meant more pressure. Finally, at one tournament he lost (placed second) and he found out it was okay. Someone else could be on top for a while. With the pressure off, he won the next week. He went on to finish sixth in LD and first in US Extemp at the Tulsa Nationals. Winner or non-winner, every tournament (or every golf match) is a new chance.

Adding these four principles to the other seven may give us eleven ideas that we can use to improve our competitive speaking and/or our coaching. I know that each day on the golf course, one or more of these principles comes into play in my game. I may not be able to use the lesson at that instant, but the lesson is there for me to learn. As my ball unfairly bounces into the bunker, I may not always think about how this gives me an opportunity to hone my sand play even though Principle Eight says I should. But I know I would be a better golfer if I would. Maybe this about forensics is that which I will miss the most in retirement -- the opportunities for learning the activity presents to us all -- competitor and coach alike.

*(Bob Jones retired as coach at Canby Union (OR) HS in 2000. He is chair of the NFL Extemp Topic Committee and co-chair of Extemp Prep at the National Tournament. Bob and his wife Ann coached US Extemp national champion Sam Donaldson in 1986.)*