

COACHING AND WELLNESS

by

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New Prescriptions for an Old Problem

It began like any normal tournament day. The alarm clock buzzed at 4:30 AM and Coach rolled out of bed in order to be at school by 5:15 to meet the bus, which, as always, was late. Fortunately, all 22-team members showed up on time, but a judge was missing when Coach told the driver they had to leave for the 2-hour drive to the tournament. Once there, Coach had to explain the missing judge, which would now mean he and his other judges would have to “cover” those rounds with their rounds off. After wolfing down three jelly donuts, Coach headed across campus to his first round, only to discover that one of the teams was late and would be forfeiting. “Why didn’t they tell me that at the judging table?” Coach wondered as he sipped his now lukewarm coffee. Fortunately, it was one of his long time friends who was running the tournament, so his anger didn’t last long. In fact, the flustered tournament director met him at the donut table midway through the first round and asked if he’d be willing to help in the tabulation room, since one of the regular tab staff was feeling sick. Eager to miss those “extra rounds” Coach agreed, but somewhat reluctantly, since he knew the tournament director was not all that well organized and had a different philosophy about running tournaments. But it was a “close tournament,” one Coach couldn’t afford to have his squad miss. The morning was a success, with rounds being only an hour late as Coach picked up a cold slice of pizza from the nearly empty box after talking to 20 of his 22-team members and being sure that they had eaten. The tournament ended at

8:30, but the same two team members who’d been missing at lunch were nowhere to be found. When they did get to the bus at 9:30, Coach had already missed the dinner reservation at Perkins and decided to make a quick stop at McDonalds. Forty-five minutes later everyone was fed on the bus and headed home, and Coach gave similar instructions for the time schedule for tomorrow, the second day of the tournament. At least tomorrow the tournament would be over, even though awards wasn’t scheduled until 9:00 and was likely to start late. The papers he’d planned to grade during his rounds off were still in his brief case and lesson plans for Monday weren’t quite finished. How much more of this can I take, Coach thought as he looked into the mirror? It was 12:30 and he’d just gotten home. He remembered what he looked like at 25—only a few pounds overweight, but then by 35 he’d been 20 pounds heavier, and the late night dinners and lack of exercise had increased that surplus to 50 pounds—Coach had given up any notion of getting back this svelte figure. After all, once his wife had left him 7 years ago, there wasn’t much hope of meeting anyone new with his schedule. At 45, he had a good life: his students adored him; he’d won 3 state titles and considered himself a success. But he wondered, just the same as he finished his last cigarette of the day and tossed aside the empty pack. He’d always considered himself healthy, but a flash of doubt crossed his mind as he breathed heavily climbing the stairs to bed.

If you could identify with any aspect of this narrative (and most anyone in forensics probably can) then the issue of “wellness” is one that is particu-

larly pertinent, if not overdue, in a consideration of providing steps for successful coaching. The purpose of this essay is to detail aspects of forensics that may pose particular problems to the health of coaches and explicate the potential consequences of those behaviors. Finally, I will propose prospective solutions that can be undertaken to make coaching a more healthful activity in the long term.

There is little doubt that the role of forensics coach is a demanding one. The personal rewards are great in terms of satisfaction and personal esteem. However, the demands on coaching year after year can exact a great toll on the most important aspect of a coach’s life: his/her health.

What causes this lack of concern for health, both on the part of ourselves and the part of our students? Two reasons emerge: the necessity of routine, and the role of competition. Forensics coaches become creatures of habit. Tournament schedules become ingrained into one’s psyche—the same tournaments exist on the same weekends year after year, and it becomes our obligation to attend the majority of these tournaments as often school districts will not let students travel without the person in charge. Today, the forensics season lasts year round. Students are already planning which debate/individual events workshops to attend during the summer before the NFL tournament is ever completed. The debate topic is released in the spring, prior to a current season ever being completed, so one rarely has a moment not to consider the topic, much less worry about finding the latest topic for a winning oration or discovering new interpreta-

tion material. Tournament schedules become ingrained into an academic calendar and weekend after weekend become devoted to supporting tournaments that are necessary to accomplish the goals of success at a state or national level. The scenario described above, while seemingly inhuman, becomes routine, happening weekend after weekend, year after year. Soon, patterns of behavior that seem unhealthy become integrated into a schedule that is necessary to insure the measures of success we find rewarding.

This leads to the second reason why forensics continues to be unhealthy: competition. Like a drug, we become addicted to the thrill of winning. We know and reward the notion of striving to the best, and are cognizant of the fact that winning requires sacrifice. And too often, what we're willing to sacrifice is our health and subsequently, the health of our students. We believe that more is better, and so work to integrate as many competitive experiences as possible into the school year. In an era of tight budgets, we feel obligated to get the biggest bang for our buck and so are willing to compromise on a variety of health issues to get our fill of competition.

The thrill of competition carries with it a heavy toll—the stress of success and the striving to meet it. To relieve this stress, we often turn to known carcinogens, such as drugs, alcohol or tobacco, or use such “legal” means as satisfying our hunger with food—whatever is available. The adrenaline rush often means fifteen to eighteen hour days, with few breaks, other than to squeeze in a meal of fatty donuts, fast food, or well-meaning, but high in calorie prepared foods, prepared by mothers eager to do their share to promote the forensic activity. Sleep often becomes a luxury, as we struggle to minimize classes missed by traveling late at night or early in the morning to reach tournament destinations. The stress of supervising students, being in loco parentis to them, often can yield sleepless nights, periods of high stress, and the desire to just get away from it all—

—something easy to do given the ready availability of drugs, alcohol and tobacco.

The consequences of such behaviors, weekend after weekend, become immeasurable, both physically and psychologically. In his startling narrative Leland (1996) details the cumulative effect of poor nutrition, lack of sleep, exercise and stress: a near death sentence from a physician. Excessive travel, constant administrative demands, stress, lack of physical activity, abuse of alcohol, tobacco and drugs are all a harbinger for physical collapse. Is it any wonder that when we look around a typical tournament and see those who've been in the activity year after year, we see individuals who are overweight, prematurely aged, and just plain tired: walking risks for heart and lung disease to say nothing of a host of other physical risks?

If the physical consequences are not dire enough, researchers have found significant negative consequences to psychological health as well. Forensics can easily become an all-consuming activity, leaving little time to devote to a successful family life. Jones (1997) found a high incident of divorce among coaches involved in forensics, largely due to the enormous time demands and excessive travel required. Cronn-Mills (1999) found in the college ranks of the top ten programs nationally, that all directors were single. And Deaton, Glenn, Millsap Millsap (1997) found a negative impact on family life for those involved in debate. To be honest, forensics attracts like-minded individuals, so that peer groups of friends tend to consist of only those involved in the activity, leaving little time or energy available to devote to other persons or interests.

Even the way competitive forensics encourages one to think is in terms of a win/lose mentality. Carried over into personal relationships, it's easy to believe that every disagreement needs a winner and a loser, and as people skilled in argumentation, we often can cognitively result as the winner. But at what price? Often the interpersonal re-

lationships most important to us are not familiar with this win/lose mentality, where every issue is debatable and each discussion has a clear winner and loser. Maintaining successful long-term interpersonal relationships becomes difficult with this mindset, to say nothing of the excessive demands of daily teaching and then coaching on weekends. Such behaviors tend to become all consuming, and year after year adding up to a lifestyle that is unhealthy and down right dangerous (Burnett & Olson 1998).

And if this is the lifestyle we're willing to engage in for ourselves, imagine the message we're sending to our impressionable students, who revere us and work to emulate our behaviors. Could we truly be consigning an entire generation of forensics participants to the unhealthy lifestyle we have fallen into?

Fortunately, some forensic educators are beginning to confront the issues of wellness in forensics and even propose solutions to make and activity that has spiraled into one of unhealthiness, into one that better promotes wellness for all involved. While those involved in forensics are among the most highly educated, this new awareness of health risks may come as a surprise. What is no surprise is that for educated folk, our consciousness toward health issues is low. And that is where the issue of wellness in forensics must begin. Initially, its time to take a long look at the behaviors we've been engaging in for years and evaluate what might be dangerous trends. Dr. Donald Ardell (1979, 1982, 1994) has provided a model for wellness that includes nutritional awareness, physical fitness, stress awareness, environmental sensitivity, and a safe and supportive work environment. These dimensions of his wellness continuum seem an appropriate place to begin.

Nutritional awareness relates to the role of food in one's life and the effect it has on one's body. Could decades of fast food, Saturdays filled with donuts, high fat tournament food, and between round snacks, combined with late night dinners with little time for

proper digestion be improved? Of course, allowing more time at tournaments for meals, striving to provide a variety of choices for meals, serving healthy food, salads, sandwiches, etc. instead of fatty hot dogs or fast foods is a first step. Some tournaments even work to provide water, power bars, Gatorade, etc. between rounds to help participants keep up their energy. While tournament schedules may need to be revised to allow for a proper evening meal, the first level of consciousness for wellness can often be through nutrition.

Physical fitness is one dimension of wellness that frequently gets overlooked in an activity that rewards glib and impassioned speaking. However, just as athletic coaches encourage awareness for one's body, so can forensic coaches extend their concern beyond merely the mouth! At the very least, we should be aware of our own health. Such concepts as ideal weight, heart and stress rate, cholesterol levels, etc. should be of primary concern for wellness. In an era of eating disorders among teens, we can encourage our students to be aware of such concepts as well. But beyond awareness, must come a commitment to take physical fitness seriously. Developing exercise programs, even simple ones, encouraging walking habits, and integrating physical fitness as part of a coaching routine are all ways to improve this dimension of wellness.

There is no doubt that being a forensic educator is a stressful job, which often manifests itself in unhealthy habits such as use of tobacco or drugs or abuse of alcohol. Being cognizant of what stress relievers work for each of us is paramount. Perhaps it's exercise, meditation, and just doing better planning so one doesn't always feel in such a rush. Shortening tournament days can also allow more time for decompression after the thrill of competition.

Environmental sensitivity is perhaps the most difficult to control, but is key to an overall wellness mentality. Here, forensic travel patterns can be examined. As tournament schedules

become ingrained rituals, perhaps it's time to reexamine each tournament to see if it's absolutely necessary to attend. Scaling back the beginning of the season has actually been found to have competitive benefits by the time national tournaments roll around as students, and coaches are less exhausted (Olson, in press2). It's time to realize that not all tournaments are created equal, some tournaments run better than others, and not every school needs to, nor should be expected, to host a tournament. Perhaps the economic theory of supply and demand should more closely govern forensics tournaments. Those tournaments that are efficiently run, on time, impartial events that also integrate wellness into their schedule should be supported, while other tournaments that actively disregard wellness, though perhaps providing competitive advantages, need to be sacrificed in order to encourage the health and wellness of oneself and one's team.

Finally, a safe and supportive work environment is key to becoming a fully functioning and healthy human being. Eschewing bad habits and those who engage in them is one measure of improving one's work environments. Carefully planned travel, not taking extraordinary risks driving late at night, or on roads compromised by weather conditions is important as well. While these measures may result in some additional costs, the risks associated with negative consequences are far greater. Ultimately, one needs to be conscious of his/her entire environment, engaging in spiritual pursuits if one so desires, having adequate time to cultivate a positive family life and develop non forensic friends who provide a balance to the constant awareness of one's involvement in forensics are important steps toward maximizing one's overall health.

At the center of Ardell's model is the notion of self-responsibility, that it is up to each person to be cognizant and involved in the dimensions of wellness that impact him/her. As a concept, it's time for wellness to be prioritized for coaches. As such, it can be discussed and ideas can be developed

on a regional or state level. At the collegiate level, wellness initiatives have been passed by the American Forensic Association's National Individual Events Tournament and by several districts as well. Fortunately, advances have already been made in terms of integrating wellness into one's forensic career (Carver 1996; Hatfield, Hatfield & Caver 1989) and models created for healthy tournaments, (Olson, in press1).

But discussion alone will not achieve wellness. All the initiatives and ideas do no good if one does not start at the center with self-responsibility. Even moderate changes can be proof that we have not given up on our own health and can encourage our students and other forensic educators to follow suit and prioritize wellness. The time has come when wellness must become integral to the forensic activity. For too long, this wonderful activity has focused solely on the benefits of research, critical thinking, presentational skills, and self-confidence. It's time to add one more dimension to the benefits hailed from participation in forensics. To continue to ignore the issue of wellness only puts each of us, as well as our students, in greater jeopardy. Are we up to the task?

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