

EXTEMP

COMMENTARY

WHAT IS COMMENTARY?

by Brother Rene Sterner, FSC

One of the more frequently asked questions as hundreds of qualifiers for the NFL national finals encounter orange entry blanks each April is, "What is extemp commentary?" Extemp commentary is currently a supplemental event at the NFL national tournament, one among several which NFL offers each year at nationals. Extemp commentary became an event at nationals as a result of a study committee report several years ago. The original task of the study committee was to come up with a "suggested" event of a rhetorical nature to replace the loss of a rhetorical event resulting from the combining of boys and girls extemp into one event. The committee report endorsed extemp commentary as the replacement event. The suggestion for the event originally came from one of the high school chapters in Texas. Because it was something totally new to the national scene the committee report was not endorsed by the members of the National Executive Council and extemp was simply divided into U.S. and foreign extemp. In spite of the willingness of a majority of the council and coaches to accept the event it continues to be the largest supplemental event at the national tournament and seems to present little difficulty to those speakers enterprising enough to give it their effort.

To answer the question, "What is commentary?" is fairly simple. It is a combination of both extemporaneous and persuasive speaking. It can be both informative and advocative. It requires a knowledge of current events as well as some history. Interestingly, it can frequently require the speaker to have a knowledge of local and regional issues. Anyone who watches the nightly news knows that periodically David Brinkley, John Chancellor and others offer a "commentary" on some particular event or issue. Frequently, TV and radio station managers offer "commentary" on some trend or community problem. Editorial writers offer similar "commentaries" of a journalistic nature. The OP-ED page of the *New York Times* is an excellent example.

As the event was originally proposed a list of topic areas for the event would have been announced annually and would have been used throughout the year (or could have been changed every two or three months). Currently such a list is offered

only for the national tournament. This year's list is on page 3.

A list of specific topics (12 to 15) is prepared for each topic area. Each speaker draws three topics and selects one. Twenty minutes of preparation time is given. The speech is delivered seated at a desk or table much as any commentary might be delivered in a radio or TV station. Those who label the event as "sit down" extemp probably have not grasped the finer points of the event. There is far more than just an extemp speech given while seated. The particular challenge which the event poses is that topics are almost never framed in the form of a question. Hence the speaker must not only know something about the topic but also has the challenge of selecting an approach and defining the parameters. For example, under "Americana" the speaker might find topics like "The U.S. Constitution", "Martin Luther King Day", "Gettysburg", "The Gold Rush", "Baseball", "Bill of Rights", etc. The topic selection allows a wide latitude of approach -- praise criticism, balance. The event demands a solid combination of knowledge and speaking skills. Perhaps one of the most unique features of the event and one which was paramount in the committee's original decision is the potential for real life approximation. Future leaders will be asked to comment on issues, personalities, trends, events, concerns of contemporary importance. The real challenge to the speaker requires framing the parameters since usually the topic itself does not offer the limiting or positioning of "should" or "will". Because all topic areas are not always limited to current events the scope of preparation can be more demanding than that of the traditional extemp contest. However, as any well prepared commentator offering reflection on the "4th of July" knows the secret of good commentary is the ability to make history live today. Understanding the connections and relevancy is sound preparation of youth for informed and persuasive leadership.

(Brother Rene Sterner FSC is secondary school administrator on the NFL Executive Council. He chaired the Committee which invented Commentary. Brother coached the 1980 National Champion debate team.)

**SUPPLEMENTAL
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