

JUDGES AND COACHES: THE INVISIBLE FENCE

by Rusty McCrady

My path to becoming a coach was probably not typical. As a fourth year English teacher back in 1975 I was invited to judge at county forensics tournaments. The experience was so enjoyable that I kept at it...for the next fourteen years. Gradually I gained experience judging not only all of the various forensics events, but policy and then Lincoln-Douglas debates as well. In the 1980's I had the opportunity to judge at the district and national levels.

It was not until 1989 that I received my first coaching position--forensics at my neighborhood high school (not the one where I taught). Since then have become both forensics and debate coach at my own high school.

The point of all this is that of my twenty-one years of experience with forensics and debate, fourteen of them were as a judge. Thus I have been able to view the judging process from both sides of the invisible fence between coaches and judges. Both co-exist in the tournament lounge, but sometimes the tension between them can be palpable.

I've enjoyed both jobs enough to have given up countless Saturdays over much of three decades, often for little monetary compensation. I've come to appreciate their differences as well as their common interests, and most important, I've come to learn some of what they can and should expect from each other. In that light, I'd like to make the following observations and recommendations about the entire process of how judges, are found, recruited, and used; and also about how judges and coaches can best relate to each other.

Finding the best judges is a process that has fascinated me. At times it has also perplexed me. As Su-

preme Court Justice Potter Stewart once said about pornography. "I can't define it, but I know it when I see it." I know it's a bit of a stretch, but in a positive way, something like this can be said about choosing the person you want to judge in a tournament. You might not be able to describe the ideal judge in detail, but you probably know one when you meet one.

Does this sequence sound familiar? Coach gets twelve students ready for the tournament. Coach suddenly realizes, "I need three judges, but have only one experienced one lined up." Coach tells the twelve prospective entrants: "You come up with parents, or at least warm adult bodies, to judge, or I cannot take you to the tournament."

Sure enough, come the day of the tournament, the one *bona fide* judge and two neophytes, one grandfatherly retired businessman and one good-hearted parent, show up to judge. The coach has myriad pre-tournament details to attend to, and at 8:45am the two new judges are sent into rounds in a state of utter cluelessness. When some of their ballots later draw complaints from other coaches, the coach who hired them pleads ignorance or inability to address the situation.

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"Hey, I was lucky to be able to get *anybody!*" is how he punctuates his lame defense.

The above scenario is quite often all too real, and it need not be. It all came about when the coach threw the

responsibility of judge recruitment upon his team. Quite simply, this is NOT their job. Indeed, there is a better way. First, let us ask ourselves what essential qualities we want our judges to possess. For all judges, we want them to be good listeners. For judges of interpretive events, we want aesthetic sensitivity. For debate judges, we want analytical ability. Regardless of the event, we want people who are somewhat humane or at least diplomatic.

I believe I can say without exaggerating that any coach has in his circle of acquaintances at least twenty people who fit most of the above criteria. Granted, most of them will not be free to judge on any given weekend, but two or three of them will. It's up to the coach to find these few willing and able persons, and sign them up.

Hiring qualified judges is a difficult and necessary part of a forensics program, but it's only a start. In order to run successful tournaments year after year, we must be able to keep good judges. We must make them feel needed and appreciated. Three elements are crucial here: pay, training and hospitality.

I used the term "hiring" in the previous paragraph for good reason. Too often, it is deemed an acceptable practice to have judges work for free as a "favor" to the coach or to the school. While I concede that we cannot pay good judges what they are worth, we need to pay them something. They are, after all, professionals. The only way to have high expectations of judges and keep them coming back year after year is to pay them some sort of an honorarium (in the neighborhood of \$10 per round, minimum). If we fail to do so, we are inviting inconsistent judging quality. How do you give needed constructive criticism to a judge who is doing you a favor? Our students deserve the best pos-

As to the matter of hospitality, coaches: put yourself in the judge's shoes for a moment. You get up very early on a Saturday morning, drive twenty miles to a strange high school, getting lost on the way. You walk into a "lounge" and are handed a stack of ballots and told to report IMMEDIATELY to Room C153. ("It's down that hall, down two flights, turn right past boys' PE and the boiler room, three doors on your right, and get there right now because they're ready to start. By the way, you'll be on your own for lunch, but the team is selling hot dogs and potato chips in the cafeteria as a fund-raiser.")

Not a particularly auspicious beginning to a hard day of judging.

Let's hold as a guiding rule that a happy judge is a good judge. Do we really want disgruntled individuals sitting there evaluating our vulnerable, nervous teenagers? In order to avoid such a situation, we need to provide clear written directions to the tournament site with the arrival time for the judges clearly stated. When the judges get there, they need to be greeted by a reasonable semblance of a continental breakfast (coffee, tea, juice, bagels, pastries, etc.). A lunch spread of make-your-own sandwiches and soft drinks or punch should also be served. Your league can provide all of this for a few hundred dollars a year--money well spent to create a proper atmosphere for our overworked and under paid judging corps. Finally, a word of thanks, via note or just verbally, goes a long way. (If the judge's work that day has been hopelessly inadequate, thank him/her anyway but don't rehire him/her unless you feel that the problems are remediable.)

As a coach, I'm often thankful that I spent all those years as a judge prior to having my own team. I know something of what it's like on the other side of that invisible fence, and more than ever I appreciate it when my

students encounter and learn from a good judge.

We coaches can expect professional conduct, specific, constructive written comments, and accurate ranking or win-loss decisions from our judges. To get these results, we need to get the best judges we can, and treat them with the respect they deserve.

(Rusty McCrady coaches and judges at Walter Johnson (MD) HS.)