CROSS EXAMINATION IN EXTEMP
by James M. Copeland

Twice each year -- and only twice -- does CX enter the world of extemp: the final round of the NFL district tournament and the final round of the NFL national tournament.

Occasionally, as with Rufus T. Wright in the 1967 NFL national final, the questioner stuns an answerer with a brilliant dilemma. Once in a while, as with Adam Schwartz in the 1984 NFL national final, the answerer skewers the questioner with a great retort. More often though both questioners and answerers in final rounds prove what trial attorney Emory Bruckner opined at the turn of the century: "More Cross Examinations are suicidal than homicidal"!

Rules of Cross Examination

In NFL extemp the rules governing the cross examination period are simple:

10. Finals. For the final contest, each speaker shall be assigned a position in the speaking order. Drawing shall take place at twelve minute intervals. Thirty minutes after speaker number first has drawn, speaker last shall enter the contest room. Speaker first shall give a speech and speaker last shall take notes and/or listen. At the conclusion of speaker first's speech, speaker last shall pose a question of not more than one minute in length. Speaker first will have two minutes to answer. Speaker last shall return to the prep room and speaker first shall stay to listen to and question speaker second. Speaker second will question speaker third, etc. Where less than 5 students are in the final round, there will be gaps of time between some contestants so that all have equal preparation time. Questioners may make notes during the speaker's speech but not use them in questioning.
(NFL District Tournament Manual, Section 10: 10)

Goal in CX

An extemper who makes the final round must decide what his/her goal is in the CX period. If s/he had a good solid speech in the final round and good speeches earlier, and probably will win, a conservative approach -- brief sensible question, solidly evidenced answer -- will probably suffice. But if s/he is quite unsure of winning then perhaps a "home run" is needed in CX: an unanswerable dilemma question and a brilliant "turn" (retort) as an answer!

Common Errors in Questioning

Two kinds of contestants enter the extemp contest -- debaters and non debaters -- and each makes distinct errors in questioning.

Debaters' questions are always too long and too complicated, full of clauses and phrases, qualifiers and modifiers. A clever answerer may ridicule the question (Is that a question or a sermon?; How many questions is that?, etc.), reinterpret the question to his/her advantage (the question probably confused the judge enough to accept the answerer's reinterpretation) or to answer the question only selectively ("since I don't have time to answer everything you ask, I will answer [my choice of] what is critical).

Non-debaters usually ask the wrong kinds of questions: open ended puff balls which allow the answerer to filibuster (Why ...? and Can you explain ...?); and meaningless minor quibbles ("Wasn't the date of the report you quoted really 1994, not 1996?...").

Construction of Questions

Unlike debate, where a contestant has three minutes to build a series of questions into an inextricable dilemma, extemp offers the questioner only one bite at the apple. According to NFL rules the questioner has one minute to pose one question. There are no follow up questions to expose superficial, misleading or untruthful answers. Hence the question, if it is to have impact on the judges, must preempt evasive answers and force the answerer to take a position of weakness. Easier said than done!

Questions come in a number of forms: direct, leading and suggestive, according to British barrister John H. Munkman. A direct question simply asks for information (Is violent crime rising in the U.S.?, Why did Asian stock markets fall?, Can Gore be elected President?) Such questions have little use in extemp CX, as they make the questioner look uninformed and the answerer erudite.

A suggestive question implies an answer (Even after Tiananmen Square, you assert we should trust the Chinese government to recognize human rights?)

A leading question presents facts in evidence and then demands a yes or no answer. (The economy has little inflation, productivity is rising, the dollar is strong, do you still envision the recession your speech predicted?)

Both suggestive and leading questions are good for extemp CX. The former selects a major example contrary to the answerer's speech and asks how s/he could hold such a view in light of the powerful contrary example. The later marshals many known facts and presents the answerer with the dilemma of either admitting the facts (and contradicting his/her speech) or denying known facts and looking foolish!

Common Errors in Answering

Most answerers are truly on their own. At least some books, legal texts, and articles have been written about asking questions. Virtually none coach the answerer. Common faults in extemp final round answers include verbosity (many words hiding a simple point), diversion (canned stories or quotes instead of specific content), irrelevance (straying from the point of the question), and quibbling (centering on a minor point rather than the heart of the question).

Construction of Answers

The most effective answer is what debaters call a "turn" or logicians call a retort. In the one minute available the answerer responds to the question by 1) presenting new evidence that leads to a contrary conclusion ("Yes, the economy appears strong, but because of massive currency deflation in Asia and billions in bad bank loans in Asia and South America, these areas will 'export' a recession to America as cheap imports rise and American exports fall!") 2) reinterpreting evidence that leads to a contrary conclusion ("Since China lost 'face' and prestige due to the Tiananmen

attack, and since the Chinese leader 'admitted error' to American audiences in his recent trip, China will improve her human rights record.") or 3) Slipping between the horns of a dilemma with a third alternative ("You predict a Republican presidential loss by asserting the GOP will nominate an unelectable far right winger or a GOP centerist who can't hold the right wing faithful in the general election, but haven't you failed to consider social conservatives with mainstream appeal, like Elizabeth Dole?").

The Best

The two best CX performances at NFL nationals in extemp, alluded to earlier, are reproduced below. In 1967 an extemper from New York chose the topic "Is NATO obsolete". He began his speech with the riddle of the Sphinx: What animal walks on all fours when young, two legs when mature, and three legs (two legs and a staff) when old. The answer for the Sphinx was "man". For the New York extemper it was "Europe", who needed NATO in the rebirth after WWII but now, rebuilt and powerful, Europe no longer needed NATO's aid. Rufus Wright from Louisiana posed this question: "Once NATO is gone and Europe reaches old age, as did the man in your introduction, what nation or organization will serve as the cane to which Europe looks for support?" The New York contestant was stunned to have his analogy shattered.

In 1984 the brilliant Bill Thompson of Texas was seeking his second extemp national championship in three years (the other year he tied for first but dropped to second after a tie break). He posed an unwisely phrased question to Adam Schwartz of Wisconsin: "Adam, before I retire from extemp and become a normal person again, I want to ask you one question ..." Schwartz deftly retorted "Well Bill, nobody more than I would like you to become a normal person again..." and received widespread laughter and a huge ovation from the crowd!

Dilemma and retort are the keys to cross-examination success -- especially in CX extemp!

(James Copeland was the 1957 Michigan State Champion in Extemp. He coached NFL National Champions in Boys' Extemp in 1966, 1972, and 1977. His book Cross Examination in Debate is published by the National Textbook Company. Copeland has been NFL Secretary since 1987.)