

WHAT'S IN A WORD?

by
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"I didn't join til senior year because I thought it had to do with investigating crime scenes."

"Isn't it like 'Future Detectives of America'?"

"I thought it had to do with looking at dead bodies!"

The above responses really aren't exaggerations. They're just some of the comments I hear when

ing "forensic" as an adjective meaning "of or used in a court of law or in public debate" and as a noun meaning "a spoken or written exercise in argumentation." Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (Ninth Edition) basically recapitulates these two definitions in its first two entries for the adjective, but adds a third--"specializing in or relating to forensic medicine"--which helps explain some of the confusion students have with the word ("forensic medicine" is then defined as "a science that deals with the application of medical facts to legal problems.")

High school coaches in many parts of the country will need to continue to go the extra mile in publicizing and explaining the activities we sponsor....Forensics

The Oxford English Dictionary gives us more on the derivation of the word. It originally had to do with "courts of law; suitable or analogous to pleadings in court." In the mid 1800's it became linked with the word "medicine, linking the term "medicine" to law and jurisprudence. In the 1830s in the United States, it came to mean "a college exercise, consisting of a speech or (at Harvard) written thesis maintaining one side or other of a given question." The OED further tells us that the word forensic has its origin in the word "forum," a term from Roman antiquity for "the public place or market

students tell me their initial thoughts when we do our annual recruitment for new members for the school forensics team. Before going further, I must explain that in our Maryland County, the responsibilities of a forensic coach and debate coach are completely separate, as are the teams, leagues, and meeting times. While the term "debate team" is easily, universally, and even somewhat accurately recognized, the word "forensics" is a different story.

The problem came to mind once again a few months ago (May, 2002) when the tragic story of Chandra Levy, the world famous missing intern, became front page news once again. If you did a key word search using "forensic" in any news website or current topics data base, you'd turn up many articles about the investigation into her death and its continuing mystery, but very few about the NFL, its local affiliates, the national tournament, etc. To the average person on the street, "forensic" and "speech" are two words that just do not go together.

What do dictionaries have to say about all this? Surprisingly, one of the most recent ones, and an often quoted authority on standard as well as colloquial American usage, The Scott Foresman, Advanced Dictionary, provides a definition which clearly supports the NFL's use of the word, defin-

place of a city" which in ancient Rome was "the place of assembly for judicial and other public business."

Clearly, all of the above definitions as well as the derivation of the word from "forum," link the word to the concept of public debate and/or persuasive oratory. The problem that becomes apparent is that, as all coaches are well aware, forensics as practiced at the national, district and local levels includes far more than debate or even persuasive speaking. In many tournaments and contests, the majority of events involve oral interpretation of literature such as drama, humorous pieces, prose, poetry, and even children's stories. The emphasis in these events is much more on skilled delivery and deep personal understanding and evocation of the tone and voice of literature to enhance its aesthetic value--an art that is radically different from the logical analysis, questioning and rebuttal used in debate and oratory.

Our duty as coaches and spokespersons for the NFL is to clarify this situation. However, the confusion we coaches face is apparently being compounded in some high schools, which according to the CBS News report aired in late May, 2002, are now offering brand new courses and clubs in "forensics." But as you may have guessed, these are in fact medical investigation clubs, and have become instantly popular with students where
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