

## THE OTHER NFL

by Craig Klugman, Editor

I judged a speech meet last weekend. For those of you who have done that, you know where I'm headed:

Judging isn't easy, but it's fun. If you haven't done it, try it. If you despair of the future of our young people, you will return relieved. If you worry that teachers aren't so dedicated or caring as they were when we were young, you will find your worries are ill-founded.

The meet was at DeKalb High School. Some 300 students from 17 high schools and 50 judges took part. About a dozen other persons showed up -- not because they were judges or teachers, but simply because they were interested. That ratio, of spectators to players, is almost exactly the reverse of most high school basketball games.

As the day wore on, I judged prose interpretation, radio broadcasts, a discussion about nuclear proliferation and, what I found most interesting for reasons I'll explain later, impromptu.

The students take meets seriously, and it shows. Before they do battle with words, they hear a pep talk from their coach. Some teams have sweatshirts to wear at the awards ceremony. Teams stand up and cheer for colleagues who win.

Most of all, you can tell they take this seriously just by looking at them sitting in the classroom or standing outside the room pacing, wearing their best clothes, concentrating on what they have to do, staring at their notes, their speech or straight ahead.

"It was the first speech meet this year where I haven't seen a kid get sick," said Jeff Malcolm, the DeKalb teacher who ran the meet. "And we were relieved, because we had only one janitor

for the entire building."

Malcolm, 31, teaches U.S. history and is DeKalb's speech coach. He takes note of how bright and talented the students are, which should come as a surprise only if you're utterly convinced that all young people are in a headfirst lunge to perdition and are taking the rest of us with them.

"We're part of the National Forensic League, or NFL, and whenever we say that, people immediately think of the National Football League," Malcolm said. "Consistently, there are kids going to nationals from this (northeast Indiana) area. Ten years from now, they're the kids whose names will be in the paper as business leaders and so on."

That is evident. The students spoke with poise, didn't sprinkle their conversations with "likes" and "you knows," used rhetorical devices and displayed enthusiasm for solutions to seemingly intractable problems, like nuclear proliferation.

And they shared some of their elders' views. As I said, impromptu was most interesting to me personally. In this event, the student comes into the room, the judge says what the topic is, and the student has 30 seconds before giving a speech of up to five minutes. The judges don't know what the topic is until the first student comes in.

The topic this time: "Is the media fair?"

As far as I can tell, none of the students knew I worked for a newspaper. And every one of them said the answer was, to one degree or another, no. They're bright young people, and I'll take that to heart.

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