

# "AN EXTEMPELOR'S NIGHTMARE COMES TRUE: A VERY NON-FICTIONAL STORY"

by Ellen Trapp

I went into the State Tournament not expecting much, aside from a lot of Taco Bell food and many games of pool, but I came out with one of the most traumatic experiences of my life.

The full story began earlier at the La Cueva Speech and Debate Tournament, traditionally the largest tournament in New Mexico. I had been feeling some burnout in policy debate, so I decided to try my hand at extemporaneous speaking. Armed with only one lesson from our team's extemp god, Henry Huang, and two magazines as files, I managed to break to finals in my very first attempt at extemp. I had quite possibly found my true calling.

Although I began extemp with a good record, I in no way thought that I would have a chance of doing well at the State Tournament with so little experience. The first day of State I survived my two extemp rounds with what I would consider about average speeches. That night I was surprised to learn (through confidential inside sources) that I had received a first and second place in my first two rounds. This changed everything. Now I would have to care about my speeches and try to do well since I had a chance to make finals.

The next day, I managed to suppress my nervousness for the following two (only two) rounds, ending up with another first and second place. When the postings went up for Domestic Extemp, I found that not only had Gabe Scannapico, a second time National Qualifier and eventually State Champion, made finals, as expected, but both Jason Jarvinen, our freshman debating phenomenon, and I had also. Los Alamos made up almost half of all the contestants in Domestic Extemp finals.

When you are nervous, extemp prep is the closest you can come to hell without committing all of the seven deadly sins and proceeding to jump off an overpass in front of an approaching train. To make matters worse we were forced to wait, and wait, and wait for extemp prep to begin. Henry's hide-your-head-in-your-arms-and-refuse-to-speak-to-anyone position combined with Jason's frequent trips to the bathroom did nothing to alleviate my anxiety. Finally after 40 minutes of waiting, Scott Elder, a tournament official, walked in...only to tell us

that they had forgotten to send someone to start extemp prep and now they would have to postpone extemp finals another 20 minutes. Then he proceeded to tell a joke that probably would have been amusing under normal conditions. Torture. They were purposely torturing us.

After many seconds slowly ticked by, extemp prep finally began. I prayed to [deity of your choice] that I would draw a topic that I had some clue about. I did! "Will defense cuts threaten our national **economy**?" I swear I will remember this question until the day I die. This was a great question, one for which I would absolutely no problem preparing a speech. So, I spent the next 30 minutes creating a nice little speech about our defense budget's effect on our economy. My prayers had been heard and answered. I had carefully constructed a knowledgeable-sounding speech fit for a final round. Life was good. Very good.

My preparation time ended, and I calmly walked to the room where finals were held. I calmly waited as the judges finished filling out their ballots for the previous speaker. When asked, I calmly informed the judges of my topic: "Will defense cuts threaten our national **security**!"

"Could you repeat that?"

"Certainly," I said, "Will defense cuts threaten our national **security**?"

The judges then signaled that they were ready for me to begin, so, I began.

Halfway through my introduction it hit me. Paralysis overtook my mind with the realization of my horrid mistake. What had I done?! How could I have changed the most vital word of my topic, "**economy**," to "**security**!"? I started to wonder about my own mental security. Did I mention that I was calm before? That adjective no longer in any way represented my state of mind.

If telling the judges the wrong topic was my first mistake, the second one quickly followed. Instead of just changing the topic back to the real one and giving my prepared speech, I somehow decided that I must now proceed to give a speech that fit my new make-believe topic. One is probably wondering: "What could have I possibly been thinking?!" That is a good question which deserves a good answer...which I don't have.

When I completed the introduction

and started the outline I knew I was in trouble. I quickly made up a new first point that fit my new topic, then for my second point I accidentally reverted back to my old economy speech. A third point just didn't come to me at that moment. So, I began to speak on point one. Now, let's not forget that I had just made up point one and had no previous thoughts on the subject. I had only been talking for about three and a half minutes at most when my second (and consequently my last) point came to a close. I spurted out a conclusion and then attempted to run quickly from the room. I was then dragged back to center stage with the reminder that in final extemp rounds the speaker gets to be cross-examined. Oh, great. Does anyone feel pain? Believe me, at this point I was in excruciating mental and emotional pain. I did, however, manage to sound almost competent in cross-examination. I even got the joy of listening to a Taos extemp incorporate a summary of my speech into her question. When I was finally released from the finals room the realization that I had just screwed up **State Finals** was quite distinct in my mind. My hasty solution to forget what I had just done was an attempt to throw myself off a real overpass into an approaching train.

Henry probably never thought that as president of our debate team he would have little more to do than run our home tournament and give the occasional pep talk. Who would have guessed that stopping deranged extempers from taking drastic actions after screwing up **State Finals** should have been included in the job description?

While sitting on the overpass and waiting for a train, I got to hear Henry tell me stories of similar terrible experiences he had encountered. They didn't even come close to comparing with my atrocious blunder, but it succeeded in making me feel a little less inclined to commit drastic actions.

Reading the ballots from that round afterwards, I find my favorite comment to definitely be, "You seem a little down." Now I will attempt to shove this horribly scarring experience out of my memory.

Wait, what was I writing about...?

*(Ellen Trapp graduated from Los Alamos (NM) HS)*