

EXTEMPERS OF THE WORLD, UNITE! YOU HAVE NOTHING TO LOSE BUT YOUR TUBS!

by
James W. Rye, III

In 1952, the National Forensic League established two separate divisions within the realm of Extemporaneous Speaking. This division, whether based on gender or topic, continues as we march into the 21st Century. If we examine Extemp as it relates to history, topic areas, and logistics, the case for the elimination of this artificial division emerges as strong.

There will be a brief pause as individuals nationwide begin their weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth.

When extemporaneous speaking began as an event at NFL Nationals, there was only one division. This single division existed from 1931-1951. In 1952, the gender of a competitor determined in which division an individual could compete with the establishment of Boys and Girls Extemp. Perhaps it surfaces as not surprising that in the pre-ERA days of the 1950's this silly distinction started, but it is surprising, to me at least, that this separation continued well into the 1980's. After 30 years of two divisions of extemp, I'm certain that few people wanted to go back to one division, so a new distinction of Foreign and US (sometimes called Domestic) was established. Unfortunately, in today's world, the Foreign/US separation also emerges as silly.

At that first National Tournament held in Ripon, Wisconsin in 1931, a clear difference existed when it came to foreign or domestic policy issues. The world seemed enormous and with the exception of World War I (which really wasn't a worldwide war in the same sense as World War II) domestic policy in the US had little if no impact on foreign policy and vice-versa. However, in the 21st Century, with industrial and technological advances, the world has significantly shrunk, thus one rarely can find a US specific issue that does not have an impact on the Foreign world. When you analyze some of the broad topic areas - Economics, Environmental, Military, Civil/Human Rights, Politics - how can one adequately

discuss these issues from purely a US perspective - or how can one adequately discuss these issues from purely a US perspective - or how can one adequately discuss these issues from purely a non-US involvement/impact perspective. The answer is....you can't. The result has been a blurring of what is a US specific topic area or what is a Foreign specific topic area. Having judged many rounds of extemp at nationals over the years, including one of the final rounds this past year, the blurring becomes quite evident as the students attempt to tackle the topic and the judges ponder how the question or the speech fits neatly into a US or Foreign "Only" event.

Before anyone "bows up", I'm certain there are some topics that can be discussed that are US or Foreign specific, but, to use a "policy voter", what is the significance of the question. A discussion of the penguin population in Antarctica? OH GOODY! Unfortunately, to ensure a distinction, often times a not-so-significant topic pops up. Two problems emerge - the obvious for the student, which is "What do I say?" and the obvious for the judge, which is "What is s/he saying?" This lack of knowledge about the obscure topic on both the part of the student and the judge turns the event into more about "slick" instead of "substance."

Let me take a moment to say that this is not a reflection on the writers of the topics. Bob Jones of Oregon who writes most, if not all of the extemp topics, does an excellent job. This is a reflection on the current day and age in which we live.

Logistically, extemp at NFL Nationals is a nightmare for tournament officials and coaches alike. Tournament hosts must provide a facility that allows for 440 students and their tubs. Usually this means two massive rooms that may or may not be air conditioned. Having students in both US and Foreign from the same school becomes difficult as two sets of files must be kept current and brought to the tournament. Fortu-

nately, I have never qualified more than one extemper in the same year at nationals (dadgumit), but I know for many of my colleagues this is an issue. All of these particular issues are not a critique of the NFL or of any National Host, but rather these issues are an inconvenience, if not an evil, associated with two division of extemp. It is because of these logistical issues that few tournaments throughout the country have two divisions of extemp.

As a coach who has traveled to tournaments in 22 different states over the last ten years, I can safely say that few tournaments, other than NFL Districts and Nationals, separate extemp into two divisions. Many of the tournaments that do separate, tend to divide extemp not along Foreign and US lines, but on the basis of experience, as in novice and varsity divisions like the tournament hosted by Kamehameha School of Hawaii, or on the basis of age, as in 9th and 10th graders separated from 11th and 12th graders like the tournament hosted by Isidore Newman School of Louisiana. These divisions obviously could not exist at NFL Nationals for the same reason that we don't have these division in an event like LD where varsity/novice divisions are common at most tournaments. I can hear some individuals screaming "We Separate at Our Tournament Into Foreign and US!" Well, bully for you! The fact is that nationwide few tournaments do. Plus, I bet that the ones that do separate do it only because NFL does it. In addition, our collegiate colleagues do not have these distinctions at their national tournaments hosted by AFA and DSR-TKA.

So, if historically extemp began as one division **and if** the current separation came about as an impact of sexism in the 1950's **and if** a blurring of the topic areas exists **and if** we as a community prioritize substance over slickness **and if** it is a logistical nightmare **and if** our college friends don't do it **and if** the world will not stop spinning if we combine - then why do we continue to have

two divisions of extemporaneous speaking at the NFL District and National tournaments? EXTEMPERS OF THE WORLD, UNITE! YOU HAVE NOTHING TO LOSE BUT YOUR TUBS!

(James (Jay) W. Rye, III, is in his 10th year coaching at The Montgomery Academy (AL). James' involvement in forensics began in 1985 as a high school competitor at Mountain Brook (AL) HS. During his four years in college, James continued in forensic competition for the University of Alabama. Through James' dedication at The Montgomery Academy where he began teaching in 1991 had no forensic program at the time, has since qualified 25 students to nationals over the last 8 years. In addition his school has won five Overall Sweepstakes Awards at the State Tournament, 31 Individual State Championships, received the Leading Chapter Award in 1997, District Trophy in 1997, and has been in the 200 Club for the last four years.)