

SECRETS OF SUCCESSFUL COACHING

by Susan Stolen

How can we coach our especially talented speech students so that they achieve their potential? How can we get them to do well in state finals or in national competition?

Like many coaches who have been around for a while, I have had some success in preparing students as public speakers. I have had many state and national competitors but no National champions yet. I have watched in awe at state and national speech finals as students from Minnesota schools have performed flawlessly. What do their coaches know that I don't know?

The most consistently successful students seem to have some elements in common. They all have a "presence" in the room or on the stage that cannot be ignored. They all convey a pleasing personality and sparkle. If they are having any dark thoughts, these are not visible. In a highly subjective activity, they are able to please the majority of judges the majority of times.

Since I long ago got over my major shyness, I decided to ask some coaches of highly successful students how they did it. I asked them to comment on several areas: **Charisma or Presence, Motivation, Preparation,** and **Expectations.** In this article, I'll share their secrets.

Charisma

So how do successful coaches help students to attain the kind of **charisma or presence** that cannot be ignored? Carol Purington of Marshall helps students learn how to move in the rooms they will compete in by modeling how to walk to the front of the room, how to pause long enough, how to stand, etc. She discusses with them what to do at the end of the speech, as well to hold that moment and what to do if the

student makes a flub. She encourages a strict dress code among her team members.

Pam Cady of Apple Valley feels that charisma can't be taught. "Unfortunately, for the most part this is an innate quality that ultimately can't be manufactured. Either the student has it or not and the coach recognizes it the first time the student speaks. For those who aren't blessed with this, conviction and experience gives presence, but charisma can't be duplicated."

Joni Anker of Eagan agrees that charisma is "tough to coach" but she feels it is helpful to give "students ample opportunity to perform in order to develop confidence. She also stresses the importance of grooming and dress as it projects an image. Many of her students also develop a sense of presence by modeling other strong performers."

Gretchen Heath of Robbinsdale Armstrong says, "Lucky are those who have it! But you can teach poise and style by careful modeling and reinforcement."

Linda Heinze, formerly of Forest Lake and now of Mounds Park Academy, agrees that charisma is very important. Appearance contributes to confidence which helps project credibility and communication with your audience."

Appearance is certainly not the only component of a successful speaker but it is important. Whether we like it or not, over 90% of communication by some estimates is nonverbal and that includes appearance.

Motivation

What secrets of motivation do these coaches possess? Carol Purington is a strong believer in finding the toughest competition the student can handle. She often sends her beginners to one meet and her more experienced

students to a meet that has a final round. If they don't make the final, they watch it to find out why they didn't. She has her top students record other competitor's selections and rank them. Later they compare their rankings with those of the judge and strive to understand what judges look for in a good performance.

She also likes to get parents involved in their students' commitment to speech and hosts a Parents' Night. Carol appreciates the motivational power of NFL membership and its point and award system and has a recognition banquet each year.

Deb Bendix of Forest Lake agrees that tough competition is a good motivator and adds that the coach's expectation for each student is extremely important. She points out that the coach must truly believe that the student is capable of reaching the next level. The coach's belief will help the student to believe in himself or herself. She likes the N + 1 theory: assess where the student is now and expect one level beyond.

Peter Thurgood of Anoka adds that it helps to motivate students during tough competitions by reminding them of the time and effort they have put in to get there. Review old critique sheets to see where the student has come from.

Gretchen Heath feels that some of the motivation must come from the team as well. Students must support each other.

Joni Anker feels that "generally students that do well at State and Nationals are quite self-motivated by various factors. Some students are motivated by the relationship with a particular coach because they have worked together closely and the student wants to do well for the coach. Many students are motivated by peers--they

want to be recognized by fellow team members as successful. Some students are motivated by the competitive atmosphere--the stiffer the competition, the better....Finally, many students are motivated by their pieces or speeches. We hope that the students on our team are internally motivated to communicate the message of their piece whether it is an oratory or dramatic piece. As coaches we try to build motivation by building the importance of state and national competition, helping students set realistic goals, building their confidence through praise, and helping students see that their selections have important messages to communicate to the audience."

Expectation

Along with motivation is the important concept of **expectation**. Peter Thurgood finds it is necessary to reevaluate expectations of individual students as you get to know them better. Gretchen Heath stresses that she will take students wherever they are and build individual expectations of them.

Carol Purington has different expectations for her top competitors, of course. She is much more careful with their selections and topics. She expects all of her students to commit to at least four invitational competitions.

Linda Heinze expects her top students to do the best they can both at practices and competitions. They must also have a commitment to the activity and set reasonable personal goals. Her job is to help them meet their goals.

Pam Cady says, "A good exercise that is worth investing time into at the beginning of the season involves goal clarification. What does the student want to accomplish over the course of the year? What does he or she hope to get from the experience? Are they realistic, achievable goals? Work through the goals together, share your

thoughts, so that it is one that you can work towards together. In the end, they need to know that you believe in those goals, that you believe in their ability to attain those goals, and that those goals are worthy of attaining."

Preparation

To help achieve consistency, Linda Heinze has speakers give a complete speech before the first round to eliminate "jitters." She also believes in "regular and consistent writing/analysis sessions as well as practice speaking sessions." She provides individual tapes for "at home" practices.

Gretchen Heath is another believer in regular practices where student and coach are "working to keep spontaneity even with consistency. I believe one should keep looking for ways to 'keep it alive' even as you have to do in a long stage run." Gretchen also believes we would not follow the "do as I do" imitative method of coaching, but rather "try to elicit an individual style through analysis, trial and error, repetition, and various strategies often used by actors."

A technique Carol Purington uses to help achieve consistency of performance is to keep a notebook of comments received from the coach and from critique sheets. Be sure a student selects a challenging enough subject or selection so that concentration can be maintained through continual practice sessions.

Joni Anker believes there are no short cuts to "hours and hours of practice!..... We try to take the selection segment by segment, line by line in some cases, and talk about how to interpret and which interpretive choices would be best for the text, character, etc... For national competition we add new material to keep it fresh, kick up the intensity a bit, and we have often added physical stuff and bits that we may not use in Min-

nesota."

Pam Cady suggests that coaches "enable the students to experience speech on a level deeper than just plain old competition. Let them kick back, enjoy each other, and share their talents and abilities. A beginning of the year 'lock-in,' if you have the energy, can be quite meaningful; especially later in the year when 'in house' battles are bound to happen. Without that initial bonding experience, these conflicts can be messier than what they need to be. The most important technique, however, is finding some way of organizing and maintaining a workable practice schedule with students. Ideally the schedule should be consistent, with enough room to allow flexible practice times for students who want to put extra time into their pieces." To help achieve consistency, Pam recommends a no excuses attitude. "Particularly in interpretation events, students have the tendency to explain away their bad rounds by saying, 'Well, I just didn't feel it this time.' Feasibly, if the audience had to wait for its performers to feel something, we would all be numb by now.

"A vigilant eye towards the standards of excellence, the importance of the message, the perfection of the techniques, and consciously making decisions/choices about the performance that are worth sticking to enhances consistency."

"The word 'expect' needs to also be addressed. Students should never be in a position where they 'expect' to win. They should be in the position where they can 'expect' an opportunity to perform, to show their stuff, to attain excellence. The old cliché should ring true: Excellence is the goal. Winning is the bonus."

(Susan Stolen coaches at Duluth-East (MN) HS. This article is reprinted from the Speech Association of Minnesota Journal, Volume XIII, 1986. Author permission given.)