

## **Assessing Competition and Stress: The Perceived Effect of Tournament Atmosphere on Students and Coaches**

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A persistent and salient concern of forensic educators is the recruitment and retention of students and coaches to engage in competitive forensic events. However, while providing opportunities for students to demonstrate their communicative and interpretive skills, the tournament setting may not afford students (or their coaches, for that matter) a choice regarding the kinds of healthful behaviors they might normally seek to demonstrate. In a survey discussed later in this article, one respondent provided a poignant description of forensic competition: "Try waking up at 6 a.m., having gone to bed at 2 a.m., pour battery acid down your gullet and then try to stay awake watching Lawrence Welk—that's forensics." Although this remark may be a bit extreme, the forensic tournament environment may exact a physical and mental toll from participants.

Little research has been conducted regarding health issues in the forensic tournament environment. A study by Hatfield, Hatfield, and Carver (1989) on this subject, however, has proven to be insightful. They described wellness as an integration of social, physical, intellectual, career, emotional, and spiritual well-being, and revealed through a narrative review of selected tournaments, violations of wellness standards in the forensic tournament environment. The findings of their study, presented at the First Developmental Conference on Individual Events, resulted in the Tournament Management Practices Division of that conference proposing four recommendations:

1. To create a shared vision of what a tournament experience should include for healthy competition (i.e., well scheduled, well managed).
2. To enhance awareness of the stressful nature of forensic tournaments and provide guidance through information for stress reduction and management.
3. To provide information to the forensic community on the wellness approach to forensics by having all national organizations promote programs on that orientation.
4. To encourage tournament hosts to analyze and meet the need of the forensic community even if it places more demands on the host, (p.32)

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These proposals were designed to enhance the opportunities for forensic competitors to maintain healthful behaviors during tournaments.

Some findings outside the forensic community indicate that adherence to wellness principles aids in preventing burnout. Freudenberger and Richelson (1980) define burnout as, "... a state of fatigue or frustration brought about by devotion to a cause [or] way of life..." (p. 13). Veninga and Spradley (1981) offer a more specific discussion of the connection between stress and burnout. They identify five primary risk factors that contribute to burnout. These include: individual perception of stress, family [or what might be considered squad] pressures, environmental demands, work problems, and faulty stress safety valves (p. 28), all of which seem closely related to the forensic tournament environment.

Individual perception of stress concerns the interpretation of a given situation. Those who are easily frustrated or who have a pessimistic attitude are considered to be high stress perceivers. Those who tend to be flexible and optimistic are considered to be low stress perceivers. The pressures of competition and the frustrations of travel would tend to produce more stress in high perceivers than in low perceivers.

Family pressures or intrasquad stress contribute to anxiety in the forensic competitor. Rivalry, interpersonal relationships, and the tensions of spending significant amounts of time with the same group of people cannot help but produce tension.

Environmental demands concern the pressures produced by the physical and social environment. Such pressures in a forensic tournament environment might include limited time for food or sleep and a general disorientation due to an unfamiliar physical setting.

Stress related to work problems can affect students and coaches. The preparation schedule set by the coach can produce anxiety. Programs that are underfunded and understaffed can also produce stress among coaches.

Faulty stress safety valves concern the ability to release pressures that build up from anxiety. Some opportunities for the healthy release of pressure are associated with exercise, relaxation, or support from friends. Unhealthy release behaviors include drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes, or consuming other drugs.

This study explores the ways that forensic tournaments may limit the opportunities for coaches and competitors to maintain health-promoting behaviors, identifies constraints that may contribute to stress in students and coaches, and provides suggestions beyond those proposed by Hatfield et al. for successfully implementing wellness principles when planning and scheduling forensic tournaments. It is hoped

that such principles will result in a reform of those practices that do not contribute to a healthful environment for forensic contestants and their coaches.

### Survey Procedure and Results

#### Subjects

The data for this study were obtained from a survey conducted at the 1989 National Individual Events Tournament sponsored by the American Forensic Association. Four hundred surveys were distributed to coaches and students twenty minutes before the awards ceremony. The surveys were collected several minutes before the ceremony began. Two hundred ninety-four surveys were returned, for a response rate of 72.5%. Four surveys, completed by hired judges, were eliminated from the study. The identity of respondents was kept confidential; however, the respondents were asked to indicate their gender, years of experience, and whether they were a hired judge, contestant, or coach.

#### Closed-Ended Responses

The two closed-ended questions on the survey, pertinent to this study, were focused on two areas. First, respondents were asked whether their general health behaviors at forensic tournaments were different from their general health behaviors in other settings. Later, respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which contestants, tournament schedules, and coaches influenced them, in positive or negative ways, to change their general health behaviors.

As is indicated in Table 1, 76% of the 290 respondents indicated that their general health behaviors were different at forensic tournaments than in other settings.

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**Table 1**  
**Changes in Health Behaviors**

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Yes	220	(76%)
No	53	(18%)
Unsure	10	(4%)
No Response	7	(2%)

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When asked later in the survey about sources of influence on their healthful behaviors at forensic tournaments, those responding varied in their perceptions. The major source of influence identified by the majority of students and coaches was the tournament schedule. As can be seen in Table 2, 78% of the coaches and 83% of the students indicated that the tournament schedule was influential in affecting their general health behaviors.

	Coaches (n=67)	Students (n = 217)
Influential	52 (78%)	180 (83%)
Average Influence	5 (7%)	23 (11%)
Not Influential	4 (6%)	11 (5%)
No Response	6 (9%)	3 (1%)

Students and coaches differed to some extent in their assessment of how their general health behaviors were impacted by other contestants. As Table 3 indicates, only 19% of the coaches indicated that contestants were either influential or of average influence in changing their healthful behaviors. Conversely, 56% of the students indicated that other contestants played an influential role or contributed average influence in changing their general healthful behaviors at tournaments.

	Coaches (n=67)	Students (n=217)
Influential	7 (10%)	56 (26%)
Average Influence	12 (18%)	66 (30%)
Not Influential	38 (57%)	91 (42%)
No Response	10 (15%)	4 (2%)

Students identified coaches as one source of change regarding their general healthful behaviors. As shown in Table 4, 65% of the students claimed coaches were either influential or of average influence in changing their health behaviors.

Influence of Coaches on Students (n=217)	
Influential	79 (36%)
Average Influence	63 (29%)
Not Influential	71 (33%)
No Response	4 (2%)

Despite the fact that the majority of coaches and students believed their general healthful behaviors were altered by forensic competition,

few respondents indicated that health concerns caused them to attend fewer tournaments. In fact, when asked if a concern for their health caused them to limit their participation in tournaments, the majority of students and coaches said "no." As Table 5 indicates, only 10% of the coaches and 8% of the students responding to the survey said they attended fewer tournaments because of health concerns. The fact that the respondents were NIET qualifiers may have encouraged them to respond as they did. The NIET's qualification procedures encourage students to attend as many tournaments as possible to earn an at-large qualification.

	<b>Coaches (n = 67)</b>	<b>Students (n = 217)</b>
<b>Yes</b>	7 (10%)	17 (8%)
<b>No</b>	54 (81%)	186 (86%)
<b>Unsure</b>	2 (3%)	10 (4%)
<b>No Response</b>	4 (6%)	4 (2%)

**Open-Ended Responses**

One open-ended question on the survey read: "Please describe how the overall environment of a forensic tournament affects your ability to adhere to your general health behaviors." One hundred ninety-one individuals responded to this question for a single-question response rate of approximately 48%.

**Coding.** For the open-ended question, a preliminary review of the responses was conducted. Clusters of responses were determined by the authors based upon the subject areas addressed by the respondents. Appropriate titles were created and an operational definition was formulated for each cluster. Each of the authors then analyzed the responses and categorized them according to the definitions. Differences in judgments were discussed and resolved. If a given comment mentioned aspects of more than one category, the comment was coded into each appropriate category. For example, the comment, "The schedule makes me rush so I feel more stress," was coded in the categories of both "schedule" and "stress." If a single respondent offered two complaints about the same category, only the first complaint was recorded. Examples of how the coding system was applied are offered in the discussion segment.

**Schedule.** Any comment about the time available between rounds or the number of rounds scheduled in a given day.

**Nutrition.** Any comment about the quality or quantity of food consumed during a tournament.

**Stress.** Any mention of stress levels due to the circumstances surrounding forensic competition.

**Sleep.** Any specific reference to receiving specified hours of sleep.

**Exercise.** Any reference to having opportunities to exercise one's body in the manner desired.

**Illness.** Any description of a negative physical condition that either developed during the tournament or that was still evident during the week following the tournament.

**Drugs.** Any reference to increased consumption of alcohol or other drugs, cigarettes, or caffeine during a tournament

**Same/Improve.** Any mention of improved or maintained health behaviors promoted by the tournament environment.

The vast majority of those surveyed claimed they experienced difficulties maintaining their healthful habits during forensic tournaments. Ninety-one percent of the respondents offered at least one complaint. A total of 350 complaints was recorded for an average of 1.8 complaints per subject. Respondents are quoted verbatim, and [sic] is not used.

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Table 6  
**Summary of Complaints by Category**

	# of Complaints	% of N*
Time	87	46%
Food	85	45%
Sleep	57	30%
Stress	57	30%
Exercise	22	12%
Illness	14	7%
Drugs	10	5%
Same/Improve	18	9%
*N = 191		

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As is indicated in Table 6, schedule complaints were most common. Nearly all complaints concerning the schedule claimed that typical tournament schedules did not allow enough time for the pursuit of what respondents considered to be healthful behaviors. The descriptions of these behaviors were both general and specific. For example, one respondent wrote, "Just too hectic to do anything properly." Another respondent complained, "Activities should not run so late or begin so early, usually exhausted afterwards." The more specific comments described an inability to eat or sleep properly due to the sched-

ule. Three respondents mentioned that the pace of tournaments was too slow. One such person opined that tournament schedules produced stress due to "... a lot of waiting around."

The second most frequent complaint category was nutrition. Those respondents who claimed they ate less food during tournaments cited both the tournament schedule and a feeling of stress as reasons. For example, one respondent claimed, "Tension keeps me from eating." Another wrote, "The schedule usually doesn't allow much spare time to relax and eat." Other respondents focused their nutritional complaints on altered meal times. For example, one respondent wrote, "The time between lunch and dinner can be as much as eight hours." Another respondent described how s/he coped with the inability to eat during tournaments: "I usually starve in the daytime and stuff myself in the evening when we have time to eat." Conversely, two respondents indicated that the tournament environment caused them to consume more food than normal: "Lot of social aspect centers around food so I eat much more." "Competition produces stress which promotes over-eating and snacking." Finally, one respondent summarized the problem of food quality by writing, "Low cash = fast food."

Table 6 further indicates that complaints about sleep and stress were each recorded by 30% of the respondents. Most respondents who complained of increased stress at tournaments focused their comments on competition and lack of sleep or food. With regard to competition, one respondent wrote: "Rude judges and competitors irritate me and dehumanize the education of the event." Another respondent noted, "[I] feel tournaments are too competitive and unhealthy." Comments regarding the relationship between food or sleep and stress were quite specific. For example, "I don't get enough sleep and therefore, I tend to be more stressed than usual."

Most complaints addressing a lack of sleep were related to the schedule. For example, one respondent indicated, "As in any competition there is stress involved. However, I believe that if tournaments were scheduled a bit differently allowing the competitors more sleep, the stressful environment could certainly decrease and it would allow for a healthier tournament." Another cause for little sleep concerned socializing and practicing late into the evening. One respondent summarized these points by writing, "When with people I like, avoid sleeping; when competition is rough, stay up late and practice and smoke."

Table 6 indicates further that 12% of the respondents complained that they were unable to exercise adequately at forensic tournaments. Virtually all of the exercise complaints focused on the schedule. For example, a respondent noted, "I just don't get enough time to workout

or take care of myself." Another person wrote, "Can't run, feel like I could give myself ulcers (were I prone to that)."

Mention of illness accounted for seven percent of the complaints. Complaints of illness focused on problems both during and after the tournament. Two separate responses about health after the tournament read, "I run myself ragged and spend weeks after a tournament recovering." "Completely wrecks me for the next couple of days." Another respondent bluntly described her illness at tournaments: "The nerves in my stomach plus my ulcers acting up prevent proper health habits at forensics tournaments."

As is indicated in the drugs category of Table 6, only five percent of the respondents specifically mentioned that they consumed more tobacco, caffeine, or alcohol at forensic tournaments. Respondents cited fatigue and stress as reasons for ingesting more of these substances. One respondent wrote, "Stress level increases my habitual need for caffeine and cigarette[s]." Another respondent wrote, "Competition increases stress which promotes overeating, snacking, and daily [intake of] caffeine and alcohol."

Finally, Table 6 indicates that nine percent of the respondents felt that their health behaviors were not changed or improved at forensic tournaments. Those who indicated that their health behaviors were no different claimed that they maintained poor health behaviors at all times. One such respondent wrote, "My health behavior is horrid regardless of how/where I am." Another respondent wrote, "Since I never really make an effort in the first place, it doesn't affect me much."

### **Discussion**

This study provides further data supporting the findings of Hatfield et al. (1989). The forensic tournament environment poses serious constraints on what can be termed healthful behaviors. Moreover, these environmental problems seem aligned with what Veninga and Spradley (1981) described as stress leading to burnout. The demanding schedule and subsequent lack of sleep and proper eating habits represent environmental risk factors. The frequent mention of stress due to the intensity of competition suggests that many participants have a high perception of stress. Finally, complaints of an inability to exercise and a tendency to consume more alcohol and tobacco suggest that some forensic participants are employing inappropriate means for coping with stress. These factors suggest that forensic tournaments create an environment that may be conducive to burnout. How, then, can the forensic tournament environment be altered to promote more healthful behaviors?

A large majority of those surveyed felt the typical tournament schedule was related to changes in their normal health behaviors. Competitors and coaches complained that it provided inadequate opportunities to eat, sleep, and exercise. Some also blamed the schedule for their feelings of stress. One solution to the problem might be to extend the length of tournaments. If tournaments were longer, competitors could maintain their current levels of participation, and more time for sleeping and eating would be available. The obvious problem with such an alteration is that time spent at tournaments is itself a cause of concern. Students and coaches need to return to their respective colleges and universities as soon as possible in order to keep up with the demands of their classes.

A second option would be to encourage students to compete in fewer events. By offering only two groupings instead of three, tournaments could begin later, end earlier, and contain more breaks. Similar options might include reducing the number of panelists in each section, the time limits of some events, the number of rounds, or the number of cross-entries allowed for each student. While these seem to be logical suggestions, students often choose to perform in additional events rather than assuring that they will have adequate time for eating and relaxing. It is ironic that such eager commitment to the activity can and does contribute to increased levels of stress and unhealthful behaviors.

A third option is to reconsider how coaches interact with their students. Nearly two thirds of the student respondents indicated that their coaches influenced their health behaviors at tournaments. As coaches, we can and should give consideration to the health of our students. Encouraging students to take occasional breaks from competition could prove to be an investment in the students' future as competitors. Similarly, allowing students to travel with fewer events could reduce their level of frustration. Coaches themselves might also occasionally seek substitutes in an effort to provide a break from the long and demanding individual events season.

A fourth option involves innovative forms of competition. Interactive video is becoming a more realistic possibility for forensic competition each year (Littlefield & Pawlowski, 1991). Individual events tournaments through interactive video are currently taking place in North Dakota. Many campuses in other states are already connected with such video options. It is doubtful that interactive video will ever replace tournaments as we know them, but such an alternative could supplement the existing schedule. The result could be several tournaments each year where the students would not need to leave their respective campuses.

A fifth alternative is already showing promise in the forensic community. This alternative involves providing healthful snacks and meals for coaches and competitors during tournaments. Hatfield et al. (1989) called for tournament hosts to serve a healthful meal at some point between evening rounds and to improve the nutritional quality of the traditional Saturday morning breakfast. Such alternatives have been carried out at a variety of tournaments, including the 1989 National Individual Events Tournament sponsored by the American Forensic Association. These options require additional time and money from the host school; however, it remains a workable alternative to the status quo.

In summary, this study suggests that the current forensic tournament environment often promotes unhealthy practices. As our society becomes more health conscious, so too must the forensic community. Alternatives for improving the problematic conditions of forensic tournaments are available. The challenge is to incorporate these changes during this decade.

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