

## **Ain't No Cure for the Coaching Blues**

Ann Burnett

Allow me to begin by saying that my time spent at Nebraska as Director of forensics was rewarding, in large part due to all the wonderful students with whom I worked. It has taken several years for me to not gauge the school year by the tournaments held on particular weekends, and I still cannot resist thinking about good topic ideas for the upcoming season. I now can actually eat a doughnut and enjoy it. These days, there is little that brings me more delight than to hear from my former forensics students. I will always have a fondness in my heart for my years in forensics, but I was a victim of burnout, and I can safely say that I do not wish to return to the activity. Therefore, not only do I agree with Billings' assessment regarding coach burnout, I think he could have chosen to discuss it first, as I believe many of the other problems listed in his essay stem from the issue of coach burnout.

The root of coach burnout lies, in my opinion, with his seventh question regarding the rigor of research in forensics. Whereas the area is ripe for research that might have consequences beyond the borders of competition, the major problem that my contemporaries and I had was the lack of time or resources to conduct well-done research. As a result, much of what is written in forensics is done hastily and without much thought, simply due to time constraints. Furthermore, with pressures to publish in order to obtain tenure and with many schools not considering forensics publications as legitimate, coaches with assistant or associate professor status must maintain a research program in a non-forensics area.

The paucity and lack of legitimacy attached to research in forensics is one of the factors leading to coach burnout, particularly with regard to individuals who have doctorate degrees and who hope to continue in the professorate. Simply put, forensics is a dead end job. Thus, many coaches do not have much choice but to quit. As a result, Billings states, they are increasingly replaced with coaches who do not have advanced degrees. Coaches of this ilk may not have the same research expectations as assistant or associate professors, allowing them to devote their time to coaching. Unfortunately, the trend toward hiring more so-called "second generation coaches" only perpetuates burnout because, without research obligations, the focus can be on competition.

In recent years, coaches have increasingly felt the intense pressure of competition. Billings outlines these issues well. First, the length of the season is unwieldy for students and coaches alike. Yet, the forensics community is caught in a

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bind in which no one is able or willing to make any changes; few individuals would elect to travel in vans to various locations throughout the country, nearly every weekend for an entire school year. However, if students and coaches do not travel, they are unable to win trophies and qualify for national tournaments. Research requires time to write and to think; the current forensic marathon does not allow for such extravagance, thus enabling those who do not engage in research activities to maintain active travel schedules.

Second, Billings mentions the success formulas, a product of the emphasis on competition. These formulas stifle creativity and certainly do not provide new material for forensic research. Not only are these formulas troubling, they are time-consuming for the coach who must take excessive amounts of time to suggest obscure pieces for oral interpretation or obscure topics for public address. In addition, working through the formulaic, stifling "unwritten rules" takes time away from other academic duties.

Third, Lincoln-Douglas (LD) debate takes time. The advent of LD debate was good news to our squad. We did not have the money or scholarships to field NDT or CEDA teams, but we were able to take LD debaters to individual events tournaments. However, with debate comes an additional type of coaching which is time-intensive. As Billings points out, nowadays the coach must have some expertise in oral interpretation, public address, and debate—all of which take a great deal of time.

Such pressures ought to cause any coach, in the professorate or not, to burn-out. However, if an assistant/associate professor is still coaching, imagine the dual pressures of research and competition. Other pressures exist as well. In line with Billings' conclusion, I found the pressure to recruit in local high schools to be almost overwhelming. Billings also mentions the issues of using unpublished literature and citing sources from the Internet. One of the last meetings I had with my squad revolved around such issues; I clearly remember students firmly asserting, "we're losing our competitive edge because you [meaning me] won't allow us to [write our own oral interpretation pieces]." That day, I truly felt like a fish out of water, advocating a seemingly ethical position and not being supported for doing so. Lastly, Billings does not mention fundraising, but I found it to be an extremely stressful part of my job, never knowing if we would have enough money to get students to national tournaments. I grew tired of begging, writing letters, and hoping for last-minute donations.

Coach burnout affects and is affected by a number of issues that Billings lists and is certainly a serious problem in forensics today. Colleagues and I (Burnett, Brand & Meister, in press; Burnett, Brand & Meister, in press) have argued that competition has supplanted education in contemporary forensics. We call for national leadership to make changes, as change can only come from the national organizations. Sadly, as Billings points out, such change will be long in coming as long as leadership changes so often and as long as no one is ready to advocate for serious structural change. Forensics coaches are caught in a vicious circle in which the system, as it currently exists, will continue to burn out those individuals who wish to educate their students and administer a fine forensics program, and who

also wish to be valued faculty members in their departments as well as have a life outside the activity. Perhaps this special issue will be the catalyst for making some healthy changes.

#### References

Burnett, A., Brand, J., & Meister, M. (in press). Winning is everything: Education as myth in forensics. *National Forensic Journal*.

Burnett, A., Brand, J., & Meister, M. (in press). Forensic education? How the structure and discourse of forensics promotes competition. *Argumentation and Advocacy*.