The Search for Qualified Judges: A Tournament Director's Views

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For the past seven years I have had a hand in hosting seven to nine tournaments every season. These have ranged from high school invitational to the Pi Kappa Delta National Tournament. Hiring judges has been a full-time activity for five months a year. The search for qualified judges is an important one for all tournament directors. In order to continue to provide judges for tournaments, there are three areas I have emphasized to help staff the many tournaments I have been a part of. These areas include recruitment/training, maintenance, and investing in a future judging pool. Other tournament directors can do the same. When it comes down to it, however, the activity as a whole must address these issues, all coaches and contestants have a responsibility to contribute to the judging pool.

Recruitment for judges should begin well in advance of the actual tournament. Each season I try to assess who is available as a potential judge. Departmental colleagues are a place to begin but are far from sufficient. If your university has graduate programs, consider recruiting interested judges from a variety of departments: English, Education, Business, Theatre, and Communication. Faculty at smaller colleges in similar disciplines can also be contacted. Do not forget about adjunct and part time faculty who might be available. Community members are also worth tapping. Contact local high school programs for hired judges who might be available for collegiate tournaments and make the connections necessary to offer your students to help judge high school tournaments. Advertising might also be helpful. By casting a wider net, you might find additional judging resources.

Once you have a pool in place, some training would be helpful. In the North Dakota high school system, there is a judge test to become certified. Your recruiting and quality of judges will be enhanced by offering judges guidance, before, during, and after tournaments. Collegiate tournaments rarely include judges meetings or guidelines unless there are experimental events or unique competitive circumstances. I have tried to provide training to graduate students prior to tournaments to familiarize them with basic judging responsibilities and procedures. Any training that can be performed prior to a tournament will save the staff time and potential embarrassment at the actual tournament. What makes a judge "qualified," however, is a matter of opinion.

I firmly believe in the notion of the lay judge. Someone who knows how to perform the basic responsibilities of a judge but who is not fully immersed in the...
forensic culture. Recent convention papers have discussed the "unwritten" rules of forensics. Many of us take these "rules" for granted and even use them in our coaching and judging paradigms. The existence of unwritten rules or norms by their nature should make them outside the responsibility of the hired or lay judge. They cannot be expected to know them or to rank and rate students on the basis of expectations that have not been articulated to the community as a whole. If such expectations are so important, then event descriptions or judging guidelines need to be published for the community to follow. I do not expect my judges to know about unified analysis or the proper angle to hold a scriptbook. The varieties of standards and preferences that are seen in lay judges make the activity more diverse, challenging, and interesting for competitors, judges, and coaches.

Once I have my pool of judges and I have tried to provide at least some degree of training, I move to preserve or maintain these judges over the span of the speech season. Because I have hired judges at least five months a year, I need to develop them not just for the tournament this weekend, but for future ones as well. There are some basic areas to consider: pay, working conditions, and even non-tangible rewards. Most judges are volunteers; they sacrifice some of their time and energy to this activity. They rarely need forensics as much as we need them.

In the past few years I have raised judge fees to an average of $10 per round. I usually provide guaranteed fees for judges willing to commit to a set number of rounds or days of judging, usually with bonuses for lengthier commitments. In addition to the financial support, I have also tried to offer other incentives. The wellness tradition that has been growing in the Midwest usually means providing food for judges and contestants. In the past, I have also offered daycare for the judges' children when necessary. Anything you can do to make judging more pleasant is important. Give judges sufficient time between rounds and time off. At the end of the tournament, payment should be convenient and prompt. Paying judges and thanking them before the final rounds gives you time concentrate on tabbing. The tournament should be a positive environment for judges. I have needed my judges to return frequently so the conditions they work under should be the best possible.

There are additional ways to reward judges that do not need to cost you much but are equally appreciated. Every year I have hosted an open house around Christmas to thank judges, faculty, and others for their support. It has become a tradition and it serves to show my appreciation for their efforts. Thank you letters, public recognition for service, making judges honorary team members, and other means of recognition help to cement your relationship with judges. The relationship you establish with judges should be a two way street and it should be possible for them to feel as though they are benefiting from their services along with you.

Finally, we need to grow more judges, increase the pool and help share the burden of judging as widely as possible. There is a lot of turnover in local judge pools. Every competitor should be taught to expect that they too should help promote judging in the future. Most of my students have judged at the high school level for tournaments I have managed. This experience helps to encourage future judging activity and expertise. Using seniors to judge novice events has been an
approach taken by some tournaments which also can help these future alums see the value and need for becoming a judge. Giving other coaches information about your alums with forensic experience in their area might help other programs.

Discussions of judging paradigms and critiques of judges found in journals like this one, and in convention papers and online lists need to respond to the educational and the competitive tensions that hired judges inherently create. We cannot have it both ways. I have been satisfied to use hired judges in local and regional invitational tournaments with limited expectations as to their competitive literacy. They do not need to be former competitors or coaches. They do need to conduct themselves professionally, respect students, attend rounds on time, and complete ballots with some reason for decision (RFD). In the limited time I have to train them and to monitor their behavior, these are reasonable assumptions. If a judge is failing to adhere to any of these basic expectations, I expect to hear from coaches or competitors and I would take action if necessary. The diversity of opinion and expertise is a reflection of the evaluations competitors are likely to receive outside of forensics. Life is not always fair and no one is entitled to "win."

The national tournaments have the option, in my opinion, to expect more from their judges. I do not believe that national contests serve as anything more than competitive venues, with the exception of the Pi Kappa Delta National Tournament. The PKD tournament lacks a qualification requirement and therefore does not limit participation to those most in need of development. The awards and tournament structure of the PKD tournament also helps to encourage experimentation and new participation by competitors. At the AFA, NFA, and ISO tournaments in particular, the field has been limited in varying degrees. Participants come together with explicit competitive expectations and the purpose of the tournament is competitively defined. Others may disagree with my assessment of these tournaments, but few coaches and competitors would welcome panels of lay judges in final rounds or experimentation in judging paradigms at the national tournament.

With these expectations in place, national tournaments can require or expect different judge qualifications. These requirements should be developed for all judges, including coaches, graduate assistants, and lay judges. Unlike some debate national tournaments, we do not require judges to pre-publish their judging paradigms. We do not allow strikes for judges in events either. If the national tournaments wish to limit their judging pool for competitive reasons, I believe they should. They have not been willing to do so because it would require significant restrictions on entry sizes, fees, or tournament schedules. Limitations that could add expense, time, or change the competitive standing of teams.

There are many ways to improve the quality of our judges; actions that would help renew our educational mission in forensics while allowing the competitive impulse that dominates forensics to remain. Judge training could be a required part of the national tournament schedule. It would require time, expense, and keep some from participating. We could also use national and regional conventions, qualifier tournaments, publications, workshops, and Web sites to train and develop the quality of judges available at all of our tournaments. Forensics could actually become more educational, training critics who might not only render verdicts that
satisfy the competitive complaints but that are also grounded in communication principles and practices that remain vital outside of the forensic tournament.