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Book Chapter: Introduction to Individual Events

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO INDIVIDUAL EVENTS

Kevin Jones

WELCOME! If you are reading this book, that means you are either thinking about getting involved in forensics or are already committed to the activity and want to learn more about it. In either case – CONGRATULATIONS! You are about to embark upon an adventure that can literally change your life. You will join a long list of thousands of people who have been touched by this activity and had their lives changed.

Defining Intercollegiate Forensics

Intercollegiate forensics is comprised of two different areas – Debate and Individual Events (IEs). While some squads participate in just one area, many squads participate in both. This book is designed to introduce you specifically to the world of Individual Events. Individual Events can be divided into three areas – Public Address events, Limited Preparation events, and the Oral Interpretation events. Public Address and Limited Preparation events are sometimes referred to as “Platform” events because they require the competitor to prepare and present a speech as if they were speaking from a platform in a formal speaking environment. Public Address events include Persuasive Speaking, Informative or Expository Speaking, Communication or Rhetorical Analysis, and After Dinner Speaking or Speech to Entertain. The Limited Preparation events include Impromptu Speaking and Extemporaneous Speaking. The Oral Interpretation events include Prose, Poetry, Drama, Programmed Oral Interpretation, and Duo. Each of these events is explained in greater detail in this book along with a sample speech for you to use as a guideline for preparing your own speech or performance.

Famous Forensics Celebrities

By choosing to participate in intercollegiate forensics, you are joining a large family of thousands of individuals whose lives have been changed by forensics. While not every participant in this activity has gone on to notoriety, several have and are worth noting. Actor James Earl Jones (credits his training in speech with helping overcome stage fright and stuttering), recording star Bruce Springsteen, film legend James Dean, actor John Laroquette (Night Court), Jane Pauley (Dateline NBC news anchor), actor Shelley Long (star of Cheers) – (Pauley and Long were high school Extemp rivals in Indiana), comedian Arsenio Hall, actor Brent Mintz (“Data” on Star Trek), actor Kelsey Grammer (star of Cheers and Frasier), comedians Jim Belushi and his late brother John Belushi, Comedian Adam Sandler, talk show host Oprah Winfrey, News anchor Tom Brokaw, movie critic Roger Ebert, actor CC Pounder (E.R. and Working), actor Nancy Cartwright (voice of Bart Simpson), actor Terry Nedry (Stand up comic and star of the comedy movie Young Doctors in Love), actor Steve Buscemi (Fargo, Reservoir Dogs, Armageddon), actor William Macy (Fargo, E.R.), actress Joyce DeWitt (Three’s Company), and Michael Stipe, song writer and lead singer of the group R.E.M., is rumored to have written the hit “It’s The End Of The World As We Know It” after watching a friend compete in a debate round about nuclear proliferation!

Former forensics competitors who have found success in law, business, the political arena, or have become world leaders are United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan, South African President Nelson Mandela, former British Prime Ministers Margaret Thatcher and John Major, former Presidents Lyndon Baines Johnson and Richard M. Nixon, George McGovern, Edmund Muskie, former Attorney General Janet Reno, former Congresswoman Barbara Jordan, William Jennings Bryant, former Pennsylvania Governor Tom Ridge, Supreme Court Justice Antonio Scalia, Lee Iacocca (inventor of the Ford Mustang and CEO Chrysler Corporation),¹ Dr. Henry Heimlich (inventor of the Heimlich Maneuver), and attorney Marcia Clark (lead prosecutor on the O.J. Simpson case).

While we cannot promise that you will join this list of notable individuals as a result of your involvement in individual events, you are entering into an activity that can provide you with the same resources, training, and experience that these very influential people were exposed to. By making an honest, serious, and concerted effort to give your best, you can prepare yourself for unlimited opportunities in your future.

Tournament Competition—Or what we do on our Weekends

Forensics should always be fun and educational, but it is a competitive event. Many students are not prepared to compete against other students from other schools. If you are not a competitive person and you do not like competitive environments; you may not enjoy a tournament very much. However, it is possible to be too competitive and miss out on much of what forensics has to offer. If you find yourself defining who you are by how well you do at tournaments, then you have lost balance and perspective. Remember: you can never measure your forensics career by one tournament, one round, or even one ballot. Learning is a process, not a final performance. What you learn from forensics takes place over a period of time. You will have many highs and lows in your forensics career. You can win a tournament one weekend and not even advance to elimination rounds the next weekend.

Several years ago a young woman won first place in her event at one of the national tournaments. One week later she participated at another national tournament and did not advance to elimination rounds. What happened? Did she suddenly get bad in one week? No, not at all. Her story illustrates the fact that forensics is a subjective activity. What one judge considers a championship speech, another judge will criticize for any number of reasons.

The story above also illustrates another valuable point you must remember if you are going to compete in forensics: If you are looking for an activity that you expect to be consistently fair or just – then forensics is not the place for you. Forensics can be fair. It can also be very unfair. Students often feel that they get penalized by a judge or dropped unfairly. At times, those complaints are not without merit. For example, there are no written rules regarding minimum time limits on events, only maximum time limits. In the public address events the maximum time limit is ten minutes. To some judges that means the speaker must be as close to the ten minutes as possible. A student may have a

wonderful persuasive speech that is only 8:45. In two rounds, the judges did not care and ranked her first. In the third round, the judge dropped her to 4th place and said he did so because at 8:45 the speech was too short. The 4th place kept the speaker from advancing to the final round. Did the speaker break a rule and deserve to be penalized? No. Did she get penalized for an unwritten rule? Yes. Was that fair decision the student? Probably not. However, even if the score was unfair to the student, it does not invalidate the learning experience. By setting specific personal goals based on performing to the best of one's ability, any student can have a successful tournament and a tremendous growing experience regardless of whether or not the judge was fair.

That is why you cannot define your own self worth based on forensics awards assemblies. You need to learn how to let forensics develop who you are. You need to set goals for each tournament, each semester, and each year. None of the celebrities listed above achieved their success just because they won a tournament (in fact many competed but not all were big trophy winners). It was what they learned from being a part of the forensics process that helped them become who they are/were. Remember: with a healthy balance between competition and learning, you can find yourself having the time of your life. In fact, many coaches have walked into the activity by accident, fallen in love with it, and have gone on to coaching so they could pass on to others some of what they believe forensics has to offer.

Another wonderful benefit of participating in forensics is that you can develop some wonderful friendships with other competitors that can last a lifetime. Many schools have gatherings or parties together, practice with each other, and support each other especially at the state and national level. Former competitors have gone on to coach against each other, present convention papers together, or even write books together. And the number of relationships and marriages that have grown out of forensics could never be counted (we make no promises but you never know!!!).

Workload Expectations

A common question students ask when looking into forensics is "how much time will forensics take?" There is no set answer. Some students invest one hour a week; other students invest ten hours a week. It depends upon your availability, your schedule, your expectations, and what you want to learn from the activity. Those students who invest a great deal of time each week may be on a large forensics scholarship and they view forensics as their job. Other students try to work forensics in between classes, homework, and a job. Like anything you do, you will take from forensics what you put into it. Even if you only invest an hour a week in forensics, if you make it a quality hour, an hour that is planned and one that you invest 110% of yourself in, you will reap the rewards of that effort. However, do not be surprised when competitors who have invested more time are more successful at tournaments. The key word is "invest." You

need to view forensics as an investment in your college experience, your career preparation, and your life. Many of the celebrities listed above readily credit their involvement in forensics as providing them with some of the tools they needed for doing what they do.

In his autobiography, Lee Iacocca stated

The most important thing I learned in school was how to communicate . . . [the Teacher] started us on extemporaneous speaking. I was good at it, and as a result I joined the [speech] team. That's where I developed my speaking skills and learned how to think on my feet. At first I was scared to death. I had butterflies in my stomach – and to this day I still get a little nervous before giving a speech. But the experience of being on the [speech] team was crucial. You can have brilliant ideas, but if you can't get them across, your brains won't get you anywhere. ²

NBC Dateline anchor Jane Pauley explained

At the age of fourteen I tried out to be a high school cheerleader and got cut. I felt my life was over. I ended up joining the speech team instead, and within a year, I became really good. I can't imagine a better preparation for what I do today.

Neither Iacocca nor Pauley mention winning as being their most important memory from their forensics careers. What they recall are the foundational tools and skills they learned from forensics as helping to shape their lives. They view their experience in forensics in terms of the investment they made in the activity and the returns they received from their investment. If you view forensics as a chore, a burden, or something you have to do, you will probably not have a very positive experience. But if you view the time you spend in forensics, whether it is an hour a week or ten hours a week, as an investment in your future you may be more inclined to make the most of your investment.

Like all students, you will have to make some hard decisions about how to manage your time. You may have to say no to a party, a dorm social, or to joining another club or campus organization. You may have to carry less course credits, take summer school, or not work as many hours at your job. Whatever choices you make, if you make them by determining what you want your investment to be in forensics, that choice will not come back to you void.

Developing a Personal Philosophy of Forensics

Whatever level of commitment you make, it is always helpful to develop a philosophical base to drive your involvement in forensics. Many coaches have clear visions and philosophies that guide their coaching and their programs and often share those goals with their squads. In my twenty years of coaching forensics I developed a three-part philosophy that guided my program and that I tried to pass on to every student. I firmly believe this philosophy is not only applicable to forensics, but that each student

can carry the philosophy with them throughout their life. To this day, I still hear from students who competed years ago who tell me they still use the philosophy to guide them in their businesses or careers. To have a successful forensics career, I believe each student needs to learn how to Focus, Control, and Communicate. I share this philosophy here to help provide a guideline to work from should you need one.

Focus

Successful forensics students need to learn how to focus – focus their priorities, their efforts, their presentations, their decisions, even their choices. Once you set realistic goals for investing in your forensics career, you need to focus on those goals. You need to strip off all of the distractions that prevent you from making the investment you need to reach those goals. What activities, clubs, organizations, possibly even relationships are preventing you from achieving your goals? Are you a poor time manager? Are you unable to find a way to manage your classes, workload, job, and forensics? Then focus on getting help. Most campuses have academic assistance or career assistance centers that specialize on teaching things like time management skills. Are you held back by an overwhelming fear of failure? Maybe you need to get some help on how to focus your talents. Every college campus has counseling centers where professionals can help you face your fears and focus on your investment. There is no shame in asking for help!

Focus on the event or events that you can learn the most from. I have often had students tell me they want to do a particular event because they see it as the hardest event to do. They want to do it so they can really be challenged and grow from their investment. Do not look for short cuts. If you are very successful in platform events – that is great. Just do not get in a rut and be afraid to try other events. Investments often involve risk and no risk often means no gain. Focus on learning as much from the activity as you can. Set a goal and keep your eyes focused on that goal. Do not allow yourself to be distracted.

When you are competing you need to learn how to focus on the tournament and the job at hand. I have always told my students that the tournament begins when we physically arrive in the city where the tournament is being held. The tournament is not just the ten minutes you are speaking in a room. You need to be mentally focused on the tournament from the time it begins until after the awards ceremony. That means you have to learn how to mentally shut out the world some times. You have to forget about the test you flunked on Thursday, the paper you have due Monday morning, the horrible fight you had with your significant other this week, your roommate from hell, or your money problems. Focus on the tournament, the job you have in front of you. When you make a financial investment in the stock market you watch that investment, you study the market daily, you focus on how your stock is doing to see when you need to make necessary changes and adjustments. The same principle is true with your forensics investment. You need to focus on that investment and make sure you are getting as much from your investment as you can. You need to focus on the tournament and keep your head “in the game.”

Who knows how many times Lee Iacocca, Jane Pauley, or any of the other celebrities noted earlier have had to speak on TV, address a board of directors, or perform to a large audience when their personal life is in disarray or they are terribly distracted by something else in their life. I am willing to bet that they have often drawn upon their forensics experience as a way to focus on the task at hand and shut out the rest of the world and do what they had to do to be who they are. I once had a student who had a fiancé break up with her on a Wednesday evening and she was devastated. On Friday we went to our A.F.A. District competition and I encouraged her not to attend and to stay home and take care of her personal affairs. She insisted on going and won her event and qualified to attend the national tournament. She went on to finish in Fourth Place at the American Forensics Association National Individual Events Tournament. She was very glad she did not skip the district tournament! Her pain was very real and she was not in denial. She was merely focused on her long-term goals and was not going to allow the breakup to prevent her from achieving something she had been working years to accomplish. She made herself focus on her investment. I have often had to walk into a classroom and teach after a fight with my wife, while going through a terrible divorce, or when my father was very ill and dying. I did not become cold and hardhearted to the issues in my life. They were all still very real to me. But I was able to set them aside and focus on what I was being held accountable for at that moment in my life – giving my students as much for their tuition dollar as I could.

Another aspect of learning to focus involves presenting your material. With experience and practice you can learn to shut out distractions that take place in a round of competition such as opening and closing doors, coughing audience members, rude competitors and even an occasional sleeping judge. It is how you handle the distraction that the judge will notice. If anything, judges tend to be sympathetic and very understanding in those situations and it can even work in your favor. So, when your code number is called and it is your turn to speak you need to shut out the rest of the world and focus on your investment and on learning as much from that moment as you can. I recently attended an outdoor wedding of a former team member. In the middle of her vows, a helicopter flew overhead nearby, a baby was screaming, and the wind had picked up terribly. But she held up beautifully and said her vows without missing a beat. Afterward she told me that when all of the distractions were taking place, she just kept saying to herself “focus, focus, focus!” She thanked me saying that she learned how to focus from being on the speech team. Learning to focus is more than just a cliché—it is a life skill.

Control

In addition to learning how to focus, it is very helpful to learn how to control: control a room, control your speech, control the environment, and control yourself. When you enter a competition room, you should enter like a person who is in control of the round. That means entering with confidence and poise, not arrogance and brashness. Avoid slinking into the room almost apologetically as if you are ashamed to be there. Enter with the attitude that you are there to make an investment in your life. You have a purpose for being there. When you stand to speak, you should stand with the intent of

taking control of the room. Everyone will be looking at you, you are speaking, you have some great things to communicate, and you are in control! When you have finished your presentation you should walk back to your seat still in control. As you watch and listen to the other competitors, you should be in control of how you listen (Chapter 17 will provide details on how to be a good audience member). As you leave the room, exit in control. Be confident. Be sure of yourself. Even if you think the other competitors are better than you are, you need to remember that you are leaving in control of your investment, your goals. You are not responsible for the goals, investments, or presentations of anyone else in the round. You are in control of you and only you.

Learning to be in control also means learning to understand what is within your reach to control and what is not. I often preach to my team “Control what you can control; forget about what you cannot control.” There are so many things about forensics that are out of your control and it is a waste of energy to try. You cannot control how other competitors will react to your presentation. You cannot control the judge, the ballot, or your score in the round. You cannot control distractions such as opening doors or noisy ventilation systems. You cannot control the room you will speak in—each room is assigned randomly. You cannot control the lights, the windows, the ticking clock, or even the fire alarms or tornado sirens that have been known to go off in the middle of competition. You cannot control your visual aids falling down (you can practice and work to prevent it but it can still happen!). You cannot control about a million other things that can happen at a tournament so do not expend your resources worrying about how to control them!

Instead, work to focus on what you can control to achieve your investment goals. You can control whether or not you are prepared. You can control how many practice rounds you made time for before the tournament. You can control saying kind words to other competitors. You can control being polite and courteous to fellow competitors and judges. You can control how much research you put into your speech. You can control whether or not you are focused. You can control the goals you have set for the tournament (Chapter 17 will go into greater detail on how to do this). You can control your confidence. You can control your sleep and diet patterns before and during a tournament. You can control so many things – focus on those and let go of all those things you cannot control which can consume too much of your energy!

Communicate

One final philosophy I try to instill in my team members is that the ultimate goal of this activity is to learn how to be better communicators. Communicating is not just memorizing a speech. If anything that is the opposite of communicating. I always tell my students “Never just give a memorized speech – communicate ideas!” Think beyond the text or the script. Think beyond the obvious characters or solution to your persuasion. Think about the bigger picture. Believe that you are communicating ideas that are important, relevant and the audience needs to hear what you have to say. Believe that you are not just competing in that room on that day in that tournament. Remember to

stay focused on your long-term investments. You are there communicating ideas that are all a part of your learning process.

When you communicate ideas, you tend to speak more from your heart. You communicate passion and audiences respond to passion. Think of a speaker you admire or consider an excellent communicator. It could be a fellow competitor, a pastor, a rabbi, a priest, a politician, a teacher, a famous person such as Martin Luther King or John F. Kennedy, or just a friend. Now think of what it is that makes that person so effective to you. Chances are, somewhere on our list is the passion or emotion that this person conveys when they speak. That emotion or passion comes from the heart, from believing that they are communicating ideas that matter rather than thinking that they are just giving a speech. If you approach a tournament with the mindset that you are just going to give a speech, you are preparing to fail.

When getting focused for a tournament, run this statement through your head over and over “Communicate ideas! Communicate ideas!” This will help you control situations such as forgetting your material. While you cannot control whether or not you will blank out in the middle of a speech, and it happens to the best all the time, you can control how you respond. If your purpose at the tournament is to deliver a memorized speech or read a memorized interp script, if you blank, you will have a horrible experience. But if you are focused and in control of communicating ideas, if you blank all you have to do is say to yourself “what ideas am I trying to communicate here?” If you cannot remember the exact text, you can remember and communicate the basic ideas.

Working to communicate ideas is about developing a mindset that you can cultivate and grow during your forensics career. Once you leave forensics, you can carry that mindset with you into job interviews, sales meetings, graduate school, board meetings, or wherever life takes you. Developing this skill becomes a part of your investment, part of why you are involved in forensics in the first place.

How to use this book

This book is designed to provide you with some of the basic fundamentals for preparing and competing in individual events. Different regions or areas in the United States often have different “preferences” for how each event should be presented. There are several national organizations that provide minimal “formal” definitions that allow competitors to prepare and present their material in many different ways. However, different judges in different parts of the country may “prefer” to see speeches presented in a different or modified version of what we are presenting in this book. As a result, you should always check with your coach for the regional preferences in your area when preparing your presentation. Do not rely solely upon this book. This book will provide you with excellent guidelines but since there are so many different preferences around the country, we cannot include all of them in one book. Use this book as a starting point but always check with your coach before preparing your material.

Once you have determined your goals and what level of investment you want to make in forensics, you will need to begin preparing for competition. The following chapters are designed to help get you started in that direction. Each chapter will explore an event in detail and provide you a sample speech or interp to use as a guideline in preparing your own material. Please do not take any shortcuts and just skim the sample speeches. Really learn what the event is all about. Become a student of the activity. Study each part of the speech and understand why you are communicating what you are communicating at this point in your presentation. Do not skimp on your investment! Find the time to learn as much as you can and get as much for your investment as you possibly can. Good luck and have fun!

¹ Lee Iacocca, Iacocca: An Autobiography. (New York: Bantam Books, 1984) 16.

² Iacocca 16.