

EXPECTATIONS IN A ROUND

by J. Scott Baker

Back in August of 2005, I was in my own world organizing papers for the first day of class, when Nicholas Cugini came into my room. Nick pulled himself out of his electric scooter and sat in a desk by the door in my room. The bell rang, and I began my first day routine of determining which students could hang with my caustic humor and demanding speech schedules. As always, the first 20 minutes of day one was a discussion of the NFL alphabet soup: LD, CX, HI, DUO, and Extemporaneous Speaking. Throughout that conversation, I could see this huge smile from one student by the door. Every joke I made, he got. Every political comment referenced, he understood. Every issue addressed, he seemed to grasp. It was obvious, from the look on his face, that our school had a future state champion in the back of my room. Later in the period, moving around the room, I almost tripped over Nick's scooter. It was at that moment when I realized coaching Nick, who had been diagnosed with Cerebral Palsy at about six months of age, would be an unforgettable journey to rediscovering this activity through his eyes. In fact, understanding and choreographing his speech and debate experiences has been a significant learning adventure for both of us.

Nick immediately shined in competitive speaking. After many trials and attempts to follow customary speaking styles, and finally abandoning the universally acknowledged public speaking shuffle, I needed to let Nick know what others thought. Sitting

outside Westfield High School one cold, Saturday morning before a semi-finals round of Domestic Extemporaneous Speaking, I pulled Nick outside and explained the perceptions people would have. There were two types of judges for him -- the type that would like him

Nicholas Cugini is a senior at Cypress Ridge High School in Texas. As a NFL Top Point Leader, he ranks 29th of the top 100.

because they were impressed that someone with Cerebral Palsy would try to give a public speech and the type that would question whether or not they would rank him "higher" due to his difference. In either case, he did not have the luxury of making a mistake like other speakers. Those that were thrilled that a student with Cerebral Palsy was speaking would notice every small mistake and harp on it - afraid that he would not finish. The other judges would harp on every mistake as a reason not to favor the boy in the scooter. Simply put, "Nick, you can't make mistakes; you must be perfect." That Saturday in January, Nick qualified for the Texas Forensic Association state speech tournament in Domestic Extemporaneous Speaking.

After speaking with him about the type of judges he would

encounter, I often question, "Why?" Why do we, as judges, walk into a room with preconceived ideas of what a student should/should not do in a round? For example, why would a judge write on a ballot, "Do not wear white after Labor Day?" Or, why write, "At least your acting isn't as bad as your hairdo?" It is funny, in retrospect, but not the right thing to write for a student who exposes his or her own raw emotions during a presentation. For Nick, ballots tell him to "Use more hand gestures" (with which he is limited), "Turn yourself in the scooter during transitions," or even, as one coach joked, "Honk your horn for transitions." I think he would find himself facing protests for using "props" if he honked the horn. Again, the suggestions are humorous, but they are not the academic answers we had hoped to find.

On the other hand, as academia, we could stress the need to follow prescribed practices in all NFL events, as long as we remind our students, and ourselves, that we must always think outside the box.

As a young coach, I thought I knew what was right and what was wrong in terms of expectations within a round. Many young coaches are wrong in that assumption, for they only think "inside the box." We must remember that there are many different ways of approaching the same event. Only after seeing competition through Nick's eyes, did I finally completely understand those differences. Ask yourself a question: What preconceived ideas do you place on students before they even enter the round? Does

an extemporaneous or oratorical speech have to include three main areas of analysis? What type of sources are the best for a speech? Is author's intent truly an issue in a 10-minute cutting? What is and isn't funny in an HI? Is LD becoming the new CX? Do you care about CX responses? Do you walk in with predetermined opinions on the resolution? Do you like certain types of literature more than others? What is your first impression when you are handed a ballot? Taking a moment to ask these questions is a small task, especially when the result is a better ability to fairly judge students.

We all try to be as open-minded as we can, but how many times have you heard a coach say in a judge room, "I hate this event because...." or "I had to vote that way because I think the resolution means...."? How many of us actually go into a round with an open mind? How many of us are tabula rasa in speaking or interpretation rounds?

Last fall, I watched Nick give an original oratory in my Debate I class. Since Nick had competed for two years, the novices could learn a thing or two about oratory watching him speak for the first time. When Nick finished, he looked to me for a critique: I asked the class, "What is Nick's physical impairment?" Nick sat in his electric scooter quietly waiting for the joke. The students were stunned. How could I ask such an inappropriate question? How could anyone not know, looking at Nick, that he had CP? Finally, one of the debaters said, "He has CP." "No!" I explained, "Nick is missing his funny bone. His speech was void of any humor." A freshman girl, Michelle, sat in the back of the room and asked, "really?" She was so focused on her own preconceived ideas of what a speech should look

like that she didn't get the joke. She thought "missing your funny bone" was the reason Nick was in the scooter. It was now my job to teach her the fundamentals, while keeping an open mind to individual differences.

Before meeting Nick, I walked into rounds thinking I knew exactly what a judge should see. Now, after seeing competition through Nick's perspective, it is clear that all competitors are unique in some way. Once a sponsor from a local school was astonished that I would let someone with Nick's needs compete on my team. Shocked that

a teacher would question whether or not a student with Cerebral Palsy should compete, I never questioned, "Should?" I only questioned, "How?" To that teacher I say, "I hope one day you meet a student who changes your life like Nick has changed mine; I have learned more from Nick Cugini, than I will ever teach him as an educator."

(**Scott Baker** has been the speech and debate coach at Cy-Ridge High School outside Houston, Texas since the school opened in 2002. He serves as the 2008-2009 Space City NFL District Chair.)

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