

Politics in Student Congress Taking a Stand for Competitive Ethics



by Adam J. Jacobi

A wise man once remarked that competition can inspire the worst conduct in some people, and that in Student Congress, it can corrupt the objective of the event to simulate the problem-solving process through a democratic framework. That man is none other than Mr. Harold C. Keller, “Mr. Congress” himself, who dedicated his career to enhancing the stature of this event, through service as a coach, as a member of the NFL Board of Directors, and as director of the Sen. John C. Stennis National Congress.

It took the mind of a civil engineer, Henry Martyn Robert, to devise *Robert’s Rules of Order*, the parliamentary framework used as basis for legislative discussion. Mr. Keller himself engineered the NFL’s *Base System*, a tabulation method of balancing quantity of participation with the quality of input to legislative discussion. Together, Mr. Robert’s and Mr. Keller’s contributions allow students to collaboratively communicate, addressing problems in our country, and earn recognition for the value of their efforts.

I have had the pleasure of introducing several elected officials, attorneys and other influential people to Student Congress. After observing a legislative session,

they are inspired to see the intense argumentation, vision for the future, and professionalism these young people have. They are amazed that a teenager can bring a higher degree of leadership to the legislative process than many of our adult elected officials. The joke, “if the opposite of pro is con, then isn’t the opposite of progress Congress” is a sad commentary on how political and financial forces often get in the way of achieving legislative goals in Washington, D.C. Student Congress remains a beacon for the romantic notion of how democracy belongs to everyday people, as Jimmy Stewart’s character reminds us in the film *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*.

Yet, more and more, negative forces driven by the greed for competitive success are encroaching on this unique event. I present a challenge to students, judges and coaches to take a stand for ethics, before those negative forces drive away newer participants, who become disillusioned and disgusted by petty tactics and game-playing.

Student Congress often starts with administering an oath of office. This process, which reminds an elected official of their obligations, could be trivialized as a matter of routine pomp and circumstance. Students

who enter this event should have a sense of those obligations foremost in their minds. Consider another oath students should be expected to uphold in competition, the NFL Oath: “As a member of the National Forensic League, I pledge to uphold the highest standards of integrity, humility, respect, leadership and service in the pursuit of excellence.”

Let’s apply the five principles of the NFL Code of Honor to elected officials. They are “public servants,” because they conceivably serve a larger purpose than their own interests, and they are leaders through charting a course of action for our country. The most successful politicians show respect toward one another, because debate can’t happen without listening, and they are humble enough to avoid being consumed with their power. Their actions speak louder than words, because they have done what’s right through their personal integrity.

Yet, these values are sometimes absent from competition. The darkest hour I have observed in this activity came this past summer at the National Tournament, where a majority of students in the final session of the Senate elected a presiding officer who did not even wish to be considered for that office.

This was apparently done to remove this student from the floor, denying his ability to give speeches, because the trend holds that it's rare for a student who presides to win the tournament. The most discouraging aspect of this action was that it denied another student whose passion genuinely was to preside, from having that opportunity. What's more, the laughing that followed the presiding officer election results was not senatorial by any standard.

Be the Change

I often get asked for advice from coaches whose students are frustrated with voting blocs and manipulative presiding officers. To that, I offer a few suggestions:

1). Mahatma Gandhi once said, "Be the change you wish to see in the world." Students should take a stand and not become embroiled in questionable political plots. Such actions sacrifice integrity, and often the ringleaders of these schemes make empty promises, because their intentions are not noble to begin with. To employ a companion quotation: "What a wicked web we weave when at first we practice to deceive."

2). Coaches should make sure they supply a judge who is versed enough in parliamentary procedure to know when negative manipulation is happening, to ask questions of more knowledgeable people, and willing to intervene when necessary to moderate students' questionable behaviors. Take, for instance, when a student moves to lay legislation on the table immediately after a motion for the previous question has failed, and the presiding officer fails to rule this out of order. That is an improper use of the motion to lay on the table,

and should not be tolerated. While Congress is student-driven, judicious adult intervention is necessary to uphold a just playing field in the framework of competition. For coaches and judges less versed in parliamentary procedure, the NFL has some great resources available.

3). When a student is elected presiding officer, concerns over perceptions of favoritism often make recognizing speakers a difficult task. Subjectivity can enter into recognition even under the best of intentions for randomization. My suggestion to presiding officers has been to "inoculate" themselves from those worries by making sure the first several speakers they recognize are unlikely candidates: newer students, a student from a rival school, or a shorter student in the back who might otherwise be overlooked. It's inclusion, sensitivity and having a genuine interest in others. In short, effective presiding officers project the five pillars of the NFL honor code.

4). A student who is truly likeable can transcend voting blocs. Some basic tenets of interpersonal communication go a long way toward building respect. Be a good listener. Stick up for underdogs and include outcasts. Address issues in debate, not the debaters. Be aware of what's happening and who's involved. Be patient and be professional.

5). When all else fails, it's important for coaches to advocate for integrity in competition. While Congress is student-centered, it's also an interscholastic event, and just as coaches would be upset if a structure were skewed in any other forensic event, why should they not fight

for fairness if other schools are manipulating procedures? Some rule changes may be necessary to prevent manipulation. Whether coaches or students take up this charge, it might mean some sacrifice initially, due to the "resistance to change" mentality. To quote sports columnist Howard Cosell, "What's right isn't always popular. What's popular isn't always right." However, it's people like Mahatma Gandhi whose tenacity for change made the decisive difference in the long run.

Congress is indeed a democratic event, and to quote an inscription often found on government buildings, "*vox populi*," Latin for "voice of the people." We are a country founded on the premise of "*E Pluribus Unum*," "Out of many, one." Sometimes, it takes many drops of water to fill the bucket, for one person at a time to effect change, and for many people over time to be heard. Competition sparks motivation in students to perform at their best, but it can also tempt a greedy desire to win at all costs. The ethical student who takes the high road and advocates for fairness will ultimately gain the most success in life, because she or he will be remembered as – to quote Roman orator Quintilian – a "good person who spoke well."

If you have any comments, concerns, questions or ideas you'd like to pose in this column, please let me know! E-mail jacobi@nflonline.org.

