

Tales of a Small School Forensics Team

by Chris Mosmeyer

The intent of this article is to provide some encouragement and perhaps ideas for teachers trying to get forensics off the ground at their small school. Holy Trinity Catholic High School is a small school—95 students—in Central Texas, yet it has an active and successful forensics program.

I have a particular fondness for the biblical story of David and Goliath.

As a graduate of a small high school and a small university, and now, as a teacher and forensics coach at a small high school, the idea of holding one's own against apparently insurmountable odds is appealing. The story is not just a metaphor; it's a personal experience.

I think it is safe to say that I coach at one of the smallest schools in the National Forensic League. Currently, Holy Trinity Catholic High School in Temple, Texas, has a grand total of 95 students. We are a member of the LBJ District, which is, as our district chair Jimmy Smith from Princeton describes, a district of small schools in Texas. But, even in that district, we're tiny. As far as overall school enrollment goes, that is.

Despite always being the smallest school at tournaments, my team is routinely one of the largest. As of January 19, we have gone to seven tournaments, and my squad has reached 39 students, or 41 percent of the student body. We currently have 88 degrees, second in our district. Best of all, I only have two seniors on the squad, and most of my guys are sophomores and freshmen.

I mention this not just to brag (though being in Texas, it comes naturally), but to emphasize that forensics and membership in the National Forensic League are not just for big schools. Yet, I also know that many schools of all sizes, but particularly small ones, are intimidated and feel that they

cannot put together a competitive team. I want to share a few things that have worked for us at Holy Trinity.

Getting started... Use what you have.

Rather than starting a forensics program from ground zero, look around your school and see if there is a tangential organization. Do you have an active theater program? Does your school compete in academic contests that have speaking, debate, or interp events? Who teaches Speech I at your school?

For our school, the pre-existing team was the Academic Team. Holy Trinity competes in the Texas Association for Private and Parochial Schools Academic Competition, similar to the public school UIL competition in Texas.

Within that organization, there are six speaking events. Our forensics Team grew out of a desire to do better in the academic competition. In 2003, we formalized our after-school practices in the speech events in

Share students

Sharing students goes with the territory of any extra-curricular activity in a small school. I have athletes, band members, cheerleaders, actors, quiz bowlers, and all other kinds on my team. Knowing that, I do my best to work with other faculty members to ensure the success of all teams.

I know some of you are thinking, "Well, [insert name here] will never work with me." Every school has one! If that's the case, then you need to be the one to figure something out.

At Holy Trinity, for example, we try to do a lot of Saturday-only tournaments in the fall so as not to conflict with football. The fall tournament we host is scheduled on an open date or a weekend with an away football game.

Working together often means that one party has to be the one to step forward and sacrifice. I'm reminded of an incident about seven years ago. Our academic team district scheduled the district meet in conflict with the district music meet—the two meets being about 80 miles apart. When I asked why this happened, the academic district president said, "They [the music district] wouldn't move their meet."

I asked, "Why didn't we move ours?"

I also avoid the ultimatum, "If you don't go to this tournament, you're off the squad." In small schools, everyone is pulled in different directions. Realize that if you use

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preparation for the district meet and started to see some success. The next year, we went to our first invitational tournaments, and the team was born.

the ultimatum, you may not like the results. I have seen this happen in other clubs at Holy Trinity—ones that aren't around anymore.

Recognizing and publicizing success

Students—whether they admit it or not—have a genuine desire to be successful at something. Take every opportunity to tout successes.

The National Forensic League's point system and accumulation of degrees offer excellent methods of recognizing success. After every tournament, we announce and post our winners, and recognize the students who have earned degrees.

Once a student earns the NFL Degree of Merit, we frame the certificate and hang it on the wall in my classroom. The students now look upon "getting on the wall" as a significant accomplishment. Just recently, I was able to announce to the students that we have now gone farther along the wall than ever before. I currently have 29 certificates hanging—in a school of 95 students.

Another very visible sign of success in my room is the trophies. I ask the students to keep their trophies, ribbons, and medals in my room during the school year. At the end of the year, we take a team picture with all of the winnings, and then, they take them home.

Keeping the trophies and the certificates visible has a positive effect on the team in many ways.

First, it is a great recruiting tool. I have overheard many students say, "I want a trophy," and often, I have students come and ask about forensics right after a big tournament when a lot of trophies appear.

Second, the trophies and certificates are constant reminders of what we've done and what we want to continue to do.

Consider letter jackets, t-shirts, sweatshirts. The concept here is simple: Kids love clothes. Every year, we have a team t-shirt designed by the officers, and we have a standard sweatshirt that hasn't changed in a few years.

Also, students are able to earn letter jackets. Letter jackets should not be just for sports. As a matter of fact, at Holy Trinity, the first letters were awarded in forensics.

Before we were members of the National Forensic League, we created a point system by which students earned points for participation and success in speaking events. Once a student accumulated 175 points, he or she earned a letter jacket.

The jackets, t-shirts, and sweatshirts are a good way to publicize your team in the school and outside.

Record keeping

I am a real record fiend. I enjoy the numbers. I've also found that good record keeping is a great incentive to push students. We still maintain two point systems—NFL and Letter—which can be confusing, but it enables us to see how the current students are doing in comparison with their predecessors. We also keep track of individual awards, team awards, and sweepstakes points. For debate, we keep track of awards, win-loss, and winning percentage.

All of these records find their way into our forensics team record book, which is currently approaching 70 pages. The book contains a host of individual and team records for the squad, as well as a detailed account of each tournament we've participated in. The top 10 students are listed for each record; the top five team performances are listed for each team record. We also have freshman and novice records to encourage our "newbies."

Again, maintaining the record book and being able to tell students when they've broken a record is a great way to maintain interest in the team and to push the students to keep working. Just recently, I was able to announce to my students that they had broken their team record for most awards at one tournament—they earned 34, breaking the old record of 23. Such an announcement caused a loud ovation! And it was only possible because we had kept records from the past years.

Host something... anything!

It's hard work to host something, but it can also be very rewarding. Merely having your school as the host of a tournament will increase excitement within your team. It's as if we're having friends over!

Besides the financial benefit—and there should be one for your team—there are added benefits. Parents volunteer and learn more about the events their children are doing. Students and teachers unrelated or unfamiliar with forensics volunteer and find out more about this strange club. Again, I have more than once recruited a chaperone or competitor whose first experience was volunteering at one of our events.

Second, your team learns a lot about forensics. It's so simple in some ways, but when you're running the meet, there is a whole new perspective. Why did you break two and not three to semis? Why is that judge still here? How exactly did you determine who broke in debate? Once your students have been behind the scenes, they begin to

understand what's involved and are usually more forgiving for tournament gaffs. My experienced students rarely complain about a tournament running late. They know it's part of the game, and they know why!

Last, just go!

There are many reasons why you can't go to a tournament. There is always a game, a dance, a birthday, a test. Those other schools are so big and talented. We're already doing so much at our school!

Okay, but the glory of forensics—the thing I've always really liked—is that there's not a minimum limit on how many people are on a team, and you can play with the big boys on an even playing field.

Our first invitational tournament was at Bryan High School on October 17, 2003. There were more than 20 schools—almost all of which were public schools ten and twenty times our size. Two of my students were literally told by some of the other competitors, "Where do you go to school? You're not supposed to be here." And if it were one of a dozen other events or sports, they would have been right.

However, forensics can be a team of one or two students. And, those one or two can do wonders. Just this year, I took four students to a tournament. Two of them made the semifinals in Prose and Extemporaneous Speaking, and one took third in Lincoln Douglas Debate. No, it wasn't a big trophy day, but it was still a success. And it was a win we wouldn't have had if we had chosen to sit it out.

Several years ago, one of my students got his first trophy at a small tournament—sixth place out of six in Extemp. He told me, shamefacedly, "I got last." I told him, "No, you got sixth. This is what you got because you decided to get up at four in the morning on a Saturday and compete rather than catching up on bad Saturday morning television. You got sixth."

It's all about perspective. Start small if you must, but dream big!

About the Author

Chris Mosmeyer has been coaching forensics for eight years at Holy Trinity Catholic High School, TX. He is a quad ruby coach and was named Fine Arts Teacher of the Year for 3A schools by the Texas Association for Private and Parochial Schools in 2008.