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Back to the Beginning – Rethinking the AFA-NIET Qualification System

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On July 31, 2008, Professor Dan West (Director of Forensics at Ohio University) presented a paper at the 4th National Developmental Conference on Individual Events, in which he called our attention to the “Culture of Qualifying”. West (2008) explained that this obsession with qualifying for the AFA-NIET results in three problems: pulling events from the circuit after qualifying, “hunting” for legs in order to qualify for the NIET, and a decrease in the quality of regular season tournaments. He further contended that the AFA-NIET qualification system needs to be replaced – not modified, but replaced – by a method that better serves the activity.

Naturally, this culture of qualifying is linked to numerous aspects of our activity – to say it’s the sole by-product of the at-large qualification system would be to exaggerate the influence of the at-large qualification method. But the leg system is undoubtedly a detriment to the forensics activity. While the leg system has been a topic of debate for years, we have yet to see any substantial progress in re-evaluating how our students qualify for the national tournament. After countless discussions, debates, and arguments, any talk of replacing the leg system has died in committees, and it’s time that more progressive action took place. To that end, this paper proceeds with a history of the AFA-NIET qualification methods and their modifications, an overview of the impacts the leg system has on forensics, and a ballot analysis that provides alternative methods for qualifying for the NIET.

The Leg System – A History

Before getting into the numerous alterations the leg system has undergone, it is essential to explore the history of the AFA-NIET. In the Summer 2000 edition of *Argumentation and Advocacy*, Guy Yates and Larry Schnoor reported a history of the AFA-NIET which highlights important aspects of the tournament that are influential in understanding the problem with the leg system. In 1976, AFA president James Weaver appointed the National Individual Events Tournament Committee to gather information that would be used to create a national individual events tournament sponsored by the AFA. After developing and distributing a survey, the Committee found that the membership of the AFA had a high interest in a national tournament, with a rigorous qualification procedure that would distinguish the AFA from the NFA national tournament and that was consistent with the principles of qualification that the AFA-NDT upheld (Yates & Schnoor, 2000).

The Committee then decided to develop two methods of qualification: the first method required a competitor to place in the top ten percent in an event at a regional qualification tournament. The second method – also referred to as the alternate qualifying system – required a student to place first, second, or third in an event at three tournaments throughout the academic year. At the first AFA-NIET in

1976, 77% of the entries were qualified using the regional tournaments, while only 23% qualified using the alternate system. It was also at this tournament that the Committee defined the alternate qualification system more precisely; a tournament had to have 15 schools in attendance, and a “sliding scale” was used to determine the “legs” that would count for qualification. First place would be a qualifier if there were 10-15 students entered in an event, second place would count if the event had 16-19 students, and third place would count if the event had more than 20 entries. Further, the student had to achieve a cumulative ranking of 9 in a minimum of 3 tournaments. Since then, the alternate system has been modified on numerous occasions. Here is a breakdown of the changes:

1979 – Number of schools required changed from 15 to 12

1981 – 1st through 6th would be qualifiers; sliding scale as follows:

- 10-14 entries: 1st place earns qualification leg
- 15-19 entries: 2nd place earns qualification leg
- 20-24 entries: 3rd place earns qualification leg
- 25-29 entries: 4th place earns qualification leg
- 30-34 entries: 5th place earns qualification leg
- 35+ entries: 6th place earns qualification leg

1982 – Number of schools required changed from 12 to 10

1991 – 1st through 6th are qualifiers, but no more than 50% of entries can earn legs (12 entries were needed for all 6 places to count)

1992 – Cumulative ranking lowered from 9 to 8

1995 – Number of schools required changed from 10 to 9

2004 – Current system, with cumulative ranking of 8:

- 1st place: 2-4 entries
- 2nd place: 5-8 entries
- 3rd place: 9-12 entries
- 4th place: 13-16 entries
- 5th place: 17-20 entries
- 6th place: 21+ entries

**The above information comes from a report by Larry Schnoor presented to the AFA-NIET Committee at the NCA convention in 2004.*

The evolution of the leg system is interesting in and of itself, but the changes in the dynamics of the national tournament are equally as intriguing. While 77% of the entries at the first NIET were qualified through the regional tournaments, by 2009 this number had dropped to 18%. At-large qualifications, which comprised only 23% of entries at the first NIET, increased to 82% in 2009. In that 33 year time

span, we have seen a complete shift in the predominant method of qualifying, and this shift is not for the best.

The Harms of the At-Large System

Despite innocent intentions, the leg system is impacting numerous aspects of our activity, and most of those impacts are not good. The National Forensic Journal distributed a special issue on wellness in forensics in the spring of 2004, and the journal is full of articles beseeching us as coaches to re-evaluate our own wellbeing in this activity. I think it's obvious to everyone that traveling to tournaments takes a toll on our bodies, and I won't try to argue that the leg system is solely responsible for our unhealthy life choices. But the competitive culture that has resulted from the at-large qualification system does indeed play a significant role in our health and the health of our students. We've seen a dramatic increase in swing tournaments: only three swing tournaments existed during the 1986-1987 season, but this increased to 34 during the 1997-1998 season (Dickmeyer & Schnoor, 1997). Today, most competitors view the 2-day tournament as the exception to the rule, when in reality the swing weekend used to hold that position. And while the benefits and drawbacks of a swing tournament can be debated until the sun burns out, the reality is that swings provide a demanding schedule and minimal down time in exchange for the chance to earn two legs in a single weekend. Furthermore, Clark Olson (2004) draws attention to the severe dropout rate in forensic coaches, explaining that many directors and coaches leave the activity after experiencing high levels of stress and fatigue – essentially, we are burning out our forensic educators.

Next, the leg system inadvertently places more emphasis on competition than education. Anyone who has been involved in this activity will tell you that forensics is both; I happen to be of the “education through competition” mindset. The two are not mutually exclusive entities, but the negative connotation our community has given to the term “showcasing” signifies the imbalance. It has become a common practice to have students pull their events from the circuit once they have earned their three legs, only to take those events out again at tournaments that are designated as “showcase” tournaments. But when a competitor qualifies an event after just three tournaments – which could equate to just two weekends, given the pervasiveness of swing tournaments – they lose out on the continued growth and education that comes in the form of ballots. And we are making this sacrifice so that others can earn the legs they need. Similarly, when we hear stories of students competing with qualified events we often express nothing short of intolerance and hostility (West, 1997). You can argue that the choice rests with the student or the director as to whether they should continue to take out qualified events, but when the rest of the community frowns upon the practice so much, the “choice” seems fairly obvious. The leg system has drastically changed the way we view our competitions, and this change is not leading us in the right direction.

Finally, the leg system has evolved into a direct violation of the intentions of the AFA-NIET. Recall that members of the

AFA expressed interest in a national individual events tournament that upheld a rigorous qualification procedure. This led to the NIET's distinguished, elite reputation as the tournament of champions – a true testament to the skill and abilities of the country's most talented speakers. But the drastic flux in at-large qualifications has proven that anyone with adequate resources can qualify for the national tournament. A 1997 survey found that directors from the top 20 schools at the NIET send their students to around 23 tournaments per year (Dickmeyer & Schnoor, 1997). Considering that the leg system only requires three qualifying legs, and these programs travel enough to earn a potential 23 legs per event, it's no wonder the number of at-large entries at the NIET has shot through the roof. Instead of maintaining the kind of rigorous qualification the founding AFA body anticipated, the leg system has made it possible for just about anyone to make it to the national tournament. If you travel enough, and travel to the right tournaments, you can earn your three legs to compete.

Circuit Says! – A Ballot Analysis

The leg system is obviously broken, and I think we've used up our box of band-aids. It's time to replace the leg system with one that more adequately upholds the ideals we're looking for. In 2009, I wrote a persuasion speech and competed with it at the District 4 qualifying tournament, the AFA-NIET, and the NFA national tournament. In the speech, I asked judges for input as to whether or not they agreed, and what they thought would work as a replacement. An analysis of these ballots provided a few suggestions which should serve as a springboard for further consideration.

First, it was interesting to me that the 19 judges who critiqued the speech were split about what to do. Of the 19, 5 judges said they were indeed in favor of replacing the leg system, 2 wanted it to stay the same, and the remaining 12 didn't comment either way. The suggestions offered, however, were very diverse. First, it was proposed that any tournament that grants legs must be a three-round tournament. This would undoubtedly discourage swing tournaments, seeing as a three preliminary round tournament would be impossible to schedule in a single day. Another judge suggested that we stop encouraging our students to pull their qualified events from the circuit, and instead continue to compete with them. A third suggestion was that every school be allowed to send a certain number of entries to the NIET regardless of qualification. Still another judge proposed something similar to the high school forensics' Tournament of Champions, where certain regular season tournaments would function as bid tournaments. A student would have to earn a certain number of “bids”, which would differ based on strength, size, and geographic diversity of the tournament, in order to qualify for the NIET.

While all of these suggestions gained from the ballots have merit, combining two ideas is what I propose the AFA-NIET adopt: utilizing multiple regional qualifying tournaments, and an amended percentage rule. Obviously, if the leg system were removed from the qualification procedure,

a double-Districts system simply wouldn't work under the current structure. The top 10% rule would have to be modified in order to accommodate the significantly larger District tournaments, and ensure that each district be able to send more than 12 competitors per event every year. Another twist could be to use the District and State tournament as the AFA qualifiers, or use the District tournament and create a different regional qualifier. In any case, multiple qualifying tournaments are the best way to solve the leg system crisis.

This plan isn't as easy as it sounds, however. The immediate reaction I get when I bring up the double-districts idea is the argument that the current district divisions are uneven when it comes to size and number of programs. My response to this is simple, but not easy – we need to re-district the country. By re-districting, we can ensure that the district tournaments are more even, and allow the same opportunities to their students. For example, under the current district lines, the qualifying tournaments for Districts 4 and 5 would be drastically different from those of other districts. By re-dividing the country, we can circumvent this problem and establish a system that works.

Conclusion

The AFA is responsible for much of the standardization we've seen in our activity, and while unintentional, the qualification system for the NIET has drastically reshaped forensics for the entire community. The negative impacts of the leg system have caused us to move backwards in our attempt to create a rigorous, educational, and competitive tournament, and an alternative is necessary if we are to continue to move forward. Replacing the leg system will not bring about an end to the weekend tournament, it will not ruin our students' experience, and it most definitely will not destroy forensics. It's time we take the leap that we've needed to take for years and remedy a problem that, while intimidating, is a step in the right direction. On July 31, 2008, Professor Dan West (Director of Forensics at Ohio

University) presented a paper at the 4th National Developmental Conference on Individual Events, in which he called our attention to the "Culture of Qualifying". West (2008) explained that this obsession with qualifying for the AFA-NIET results in three problems: pulling events from the circuit after qualifying, "hunting" for legs in order to qualify for the NIET, and a decrease in the quality of regular season tournaments. He further contended that the AFA-NIET qualification system needs to be replaced – not modified, but replaced – by a method that better serves the activity.

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