



National Forensic Journal

The Journal of the
National Forensic Association

Volume 22, Issue 1
Spring 2004

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Special Issue: Wellness in Forensics
Guest Editor: Cynthia Carver, Concordia College

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**Nutritious, Plentiful, Easily Accessible, and (Especially) Free: A
Modest Experiment in Wellness**

Mary Trejo, The University of Texas at El Paso

Observed at a Southern tournament on a chilly autumn day: Several students in full competition dress are huddled under a stand of pecan trees in the center of campus, stooping to gather and eat pecans fallen on the ground. When asked why, they explain that there is no food available within walking distance, and their coach has made no arrangements to have snacks brought in to them. In short, they are hungry.

While few forensic tournaments are as devoid of opportunities for nourishment as the actual situation described above, the link between nutrition and achievement, in spite of the current interest in wellness, is still given insufficient consideration. The following scene is replayed at almost every tournament. In the first hours, the competitors' spirits are high, their resolve to achieve, strong. Carefully dressed, painstakingly accessorized, their faces glow with health, and their eyes shine with energy and hope. They are the best and the brightest, and nothing seems impossible to them. After as little as 48 hours, the setting is unchanged, but the players are altered. Those who are the most experienced demonstrate the hallmarks of survivors, presenting themselves as impeccably as before, having learned how to care for themselves in order to surmount the rigors of many competition weekends. These savvy persons often become our winners, empowering their infinitely practiced performances with reservoirs of carefully tended energy. They are in the minority. Most have undergone an alteration, which, despite their considerable determination and courage, is, quite simply, physical. No matter how much heart they have, their strength has been depleted not only by the enormous expenditures required by performances, but by inadequate replenishment through sleep and nutrition.

To be young, as most intercollegiate competitors are, is to believe oneself invincible, yet we as forensics coaches see this bright, creative segment of our college population brought down again and again by inattention to the most mundane yet profound truth, that it is necessary to nurture the body in order to have the full service of the mind. Our tournament culture has evolved as an unhealthy culture, generations of competitors and coaches having bought into the myth that champions are made of all night practice sessions, strong coffee, and sheer determination, that hardships like going hungry and being deprived of sleep are part of the winning experience. The forensic community's current discussion of wellness is an indication of the growing awareness of this problem.

Controlling the area of sleep deprivation is not an option available to tournament directors, beyond choosing to adhere to sensible tournament schedule guidelines, as exemplified by the 1997 AFA-NIET recommendations. However, a tournament director's hospitality effort can control nutrition to a large degree during tournament hours, contributing to physical and emotional well-being and thereby enhancing not only performance quality but the shared tournament expe-

rience for all. Also, the concept of a mutual and equitable experience can be extended to avoidance of the custom of supplying judges and students with differing calibers of refreshment. I suggest that the healthier option is to offer the same foodstuffs to all tournament participants, reasoning that the active appetites of our competitors should not be a justification for restraint in hospitality. In order to avoid lengthening the tournament day by scheduling set meal times, which could negatively impact wellness by robbing participants of sleep, I believe that the ideal solution is a lounge, nutritiously if not elegantly stocked, that remains open to everyone not only for breakfast but throughout the competition hours. Of course, this all takes money.

When I was elected Chair of AFA-NIET District IX in 1998, I reasoned that I was in a position to implement some of my observations about nutritional wellness into the setting of the yearly district qualifying tournament. My objective was to impact wellness by offering free food, enough to make a difference in the totality of the tournament experience for District IX competitors. No full-blown open wellness lounge had ever been tried at this tournament, although in some previous years continental breakfast items had been served.

The first order of business was to find sufficient resources to attempt the experiment, since District coffers are not deep. I reasoned that the traditional Saturday night coaches' party was not only costly, since it customarily featured hors d'oeuvres and alcohol, but expendable. This late-night event utilized both resources and time in a two-day tournament weekend schedule that included a Sunday luncheon for coaches and judges and a District coaches' meeting. I consulted with each member of the District IX Committee to see if any disagreed with eliminating the coaches' party and using the hosting resources on a wellness lounge. Two members objected until assured that the expenditures would not tap District resources; other committee responses ranged from accommodation to enthusiasm. In recent years, the District IX qualifying tournament has become a hotel tournament, coordinated by the District Chair, with the school volunteering to serve as the "host" school shouldering a large portion of the hospitality expenses. In March 1998 the host school was Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, Arizona, which utilized a faculty donation to fund a District IX Wellness Lounge throughout competition hours both Saturday and Sunday. Full accessibility to healthy food at all hours was my primary request, and our host complied with graciousness and generosity.

Foods offered free both days to all tournament participants included both caffeine and non-caffeine drinks, juice, and canned sodas; fruit, primarily apples, oranges, and grapes; assorted cookies, a variety of snack chips, and a prodigious quantity of granola bars. In addition, on Sunday submarine-type cold meat and vegetable sandwiches were brought into the wellness lounge in such ample proportions that leftovers could still be seen after the Awards Assembly. The fare was nutritious but not lavish; what distinguished its presentation was the fact that it remained available throughout tournament hours and, when depleted by heavy demand, was replenished. Competitor reactions solicited informally ranged from

simple expressions of gratitude to reporting a heightened feeling of well-being. If success is measured in terms of crowds of eager, hungry people vying to eat between every round, the 1998 District IX wellness food experiment was a success.

Reflection has provided insight into opportunities for improvement at future tournaments. First, a fiscally responsible way to encourage the funding of a more substantial selection of edibles should be found. Second, student responses identified the room used for the wellness room as inadequate. A larger, more open space must be found, as the overwhelming consumer response resulted in an uncomfortable crush which displeased all and limited opportunities to interact. Third, the location and open availability of the wellness lounge to all participants needs to be advertised more effectively, for even though the response to the lounge was enthusiastic, some complained they did not learn of it in time to participate fully. All reactions shared a common theme: we want more! Dealing with these opportunities for improvement creatively and constructively should produce positive results for District IX's next modest experiment in wellness.

Note: My department Chair, Dr. Witherspoon, has reviewed these materials, and has suggested I attach an informational comment, since some years have passed since the submission of this article.

Since 1998, the change I initiated in wellness practices at the District IX tournament has been permanent, having now become part of district tradition. No participant in the yearly district tournament now has cause to go hungry, whether due to coach inattention, lack of funds, or lack of transportation/easy access to food. Nourishing and plentiful food has been made readily available each year. I am proud of this modest contribution to the wellness of participants, and especially to students, in my district.

Respectfully,
Mary Trejo