

The AFA-NIET Initiatives on Wellness: Helping a Nation Make Better Choices

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The mid-1990s had seen extensive discussion in formal and informal settings on the topic of wellness. Most of us by that time had begun to feel the effects of a season that was twice as lengthy as most athletic (or any other) activities and with fewer resources to smooth the long road. There were stories of director burnout, where coaches would leave the activity to pursue the simple pleasures of a normal romantic relationship or family, a day or two off each month, a more profitable position in the academy, and three square meals each day, none of which included french fries or potato chips (Gill, 1990). Interestingly enough, when a coach would leave the activity, entire programs would begin to die, providing more support for the belief that most forensics programs are driven by the interest and sacrifice of the director (and the lure of success) rather than by the mission of the institution (Workman, 1997).

In an effort to understand the slow but distinct march of both debate and individual events toward extinction, the American Forensic Association National Individual Events Tournament Committee established a Sub-committee on Wellness chaired by Dr. Cynthia Carver. The sub-committee, composed of members from the NIET Committee, sought feedback from their districts and fashioned solutions to minimize wellness concerns. Several District Chairs, myself included, composed legislation for a national wellness policy for the AFA-NIET.

District IV's proposal, which eventually became transformed into the AFA-NIET Wellness Initiatives for Tournament Directors (approved April, 1997), was based on four basic assumptions:

- 1) Threats to personal wellness exist both at the tournament and program level. An approach to wellness must address the unhealthy attitudes and behaviors found in the daily activity of the individual program, yet such behaviors are often perpetuated by the structure of the tournament. It is the design of the local tournament that influences student preparation in multiple events, hours of travel (and the impact on safety), and opportunities for sufficient amounts of sleep and nutrition. In other words, the ways in which local tournaments are designed and scheduled affect the wellness of students for far more than the length of the two or three-day competitions. Focus, therefore, was placed on those who design and direct local, regional and national tournaments.

- 2) In essence, there is no legitimate way to define or legislate wellness. The Hardiness Studies of the University of Chicago found that stress and the detrimental effects of stress on physical and mental health varied dramatically from person, culture, and population. Some thrived in "high stress" environments while others wilted (Lindsey and Hills, 1992). Though there are schedules that would exhaust the "hardest" among us, determining the health risks associ-

ated with any tournament is a matter of individual coach perception, experience, and choice. It is ultimately the coach who must "shop around" for tournaments that offer an excellent competitive experience (Schnoor and Alexander, 1997), and the NIET guidelines were an attempt to add the dimension of wellness as a part of that choice-making. The coach, however, must determine what is healthy or unhealthy for that particular set of students on that particular weekend.

3) The NIET, with limited jurisdiction over individual tournaments and no control over the season schedule or the attitudes and behaviors of individual programs as they attend local tournaments, could only provide a set of guidelines that would serve as a national model for healthier competition. As seen in the second assumption, choices about what is or is not healthy for any group of students are difficult to operationalize, much less legislate. Needless to say, they are impossible to enforce. We fell strongly that the NIET had no authority to determine the length of the competitive season or the design of individual tournaments. Instead, as an association of member programs, the NIET could provide those members who direct local tournaments with approaches to healthier tournaments thereby encouraging healthier tournament designs. Our hope was that as tournaments became more "wellness-friendly," those tournaments that were unhealthy in design would lose support and attendance to those that provided good competition without impaired student and coach performance both at the tournament and back at home.

4) In order to impact wellness on a national level, the AFA-NIET would need to practice what it preached. The guidelines produced for tournament directors would be those that could also be put in place at the national tournament, making that tournament a healthier environment as well.

There is little doubt that these guidelines will, in time, evolve and change as new insights to the threats to individual and group wellness become better understood by those of us who are involved in the activity. Whether these initiatives can slow down the sad exodus of coaches and students to healthier extra- and co-curricular activities remains to be seen. For now, the initiatives serve as a small but manageable first step toward solving a national problem.

Notes

There are a number of excellent references to this research. The quickest route to learning more about the hardiness model and the initial study can be found at the Hardiness Institute's web page, located at <http://www.hardinessinstitute.com/model.htm>

References

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AFA-NIET WELLNESS INITIATIVES FOR TOURNAMENT DIRECTORS

(Approved by the AFA-NIET Committee, April, 1997)

1. Tournament directors should schedule tournaments and tournament formats in consideration of the regional activity surrounding the date of the tournament, working to create a regional schedule that fosters a variety of tournament formats which allow students and coaches time during weekends to spend at home or campus.

2. Tournament directors should schedule tournaments where no competition round begins before 8:00 a.m. or after 6:30 p.m., applied equally to all competitors (debaters, extemporaneous speakers, etc.). Adequate time should be created between rounds to allow short breaks between rounds and to avoid rushing for participants who are double-entered.

3. Tournament directors should create a schedule that allows meal breaks during normal eating hours on all days of competition, applied equally to all competitors.

4. Tournament directors should facilitate the availability of "healthy" food choices during the tournament, including breakfast, snacks, and other times when food is provided or area restaurants are recommended.

5. Tournament directors should hire ample amounts of hired judges in order to create a schedule where all coaches attending a tournament are provided with a minimum of one round off per day of competition.

6. Tournament directors should provide a lounge(s) that is available at all times of competition to allow students, coaches, and judges a comfortable atmosphere to relax or rest between rounds or during off rounds.

7. When evening activities are scheduled, tournament directors should promote activities that do not hinder wellness initiatives, being mindful of activity elements which might limit a full night's rest or might encourage unhealthy practices (consumption of alcohol, tobacco, etc.).

8. Tournament directors should offer options to the conventional pentathlon sweepstakes system, encouraging students to participate in fewer events by offering triathlon or general individual sweepstakes (similar to the AFA-NIET system) or eliminating pentathlon awards entirely.