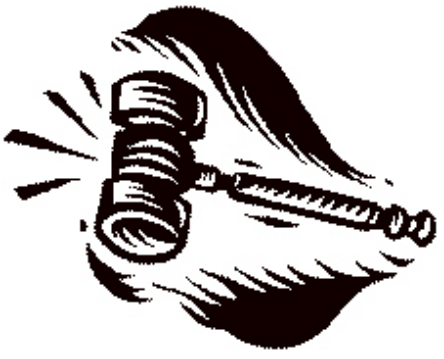
*Congress Connection*

A Coach's Retrospective:

# How I Stumbled Into Congress



by Adam J. Jacobi

In high school, my forensic experience was limited to speech events (I specialized in public address events, but dabbled in limited prep, interpretation, as well as Model United Nations). I started coaching part-time at my alma mater when I first worked for a public relations firm, and later as a legislative aide to a Milwaukee city council member. I enjoyed that engagement with local politics, and enjoyed seeing the legislative process in action.

My introduction to Congress was quite by accident – as is the case often in District Tournaments, other coaches encouraged me to enter some students in Congress to meet our quota for qualifying multiple students to Nationals. One sophomore Extemper/Policy Debater came back from that experience so inspired that he became determined to qualify himself someday, and did so as a senior, becoming my first student to make the NFL National Tournament. I was excited to see this new craze blossom within my program, because I saw my students participating in a microcosm of what I did at City Hall. After attending my first National Tournament in 2001, I came home and resigned as a legislative aide to pursue a different kind of public service: teaching.

As a young coach, I was tipped off to a February 1997 *Rostrum* issue dedicated to Student Congress. There, I found such articles as "Towards Making Student Congress an Optimal Forum for Leadership Training" by Minh A. Luong (Yale University) and Mary Menzik Moulton (UT), "Student Congress: Throw the Bum (Practices) Out" by alum James Talley (KS), "A Look at Student Congress" by Harold Keller (IA), "Most Commonly Misunderstood Points of Parliamentary Procedure" by Tammie Peters (CO), and "Student Congress – Forensically Complete," by Sherwin Bennes (NV). All of these articles gave me perspective on the educational benefits of this activity, and how to approach training my students. They are all available at **www.nflonline.org/Rostrum/StudentCongress.**

Bennes' article makes compelling arguments for the benefits of participation in Congress, quoting Fayetteville nationals host Jackie Foote as describing Congress as showcasing the best of all forensic events. My coaching philosophy has been to foster students who are well-rounded specialists, meaning they have experienced a variety of events – and the skill sets that come with each – to make them better in their primary event. While all of the events involve public speaking as a medium for communication, Congress especially emphasizes interpersonal dynamics. Plus, students all work toward a common aim of solving some problem in society through their debate on legislation.

What's encouraging is that in the ten plus years since that *Rostrum* was published, most of the improvements touted by the authors have been implemented. Congress has evolved, but still upholds the central simulation of student-centered lawmaking that the first Congress had in Wooster, OH in 1938. And, respect surrounding the event has gained momentum, with Dr. J.W. Patterson adding it a few years ago to the Tournament of Champions for debate at the University of Kentucky.

For all its educational benefits, Congress seems to intimidate coaches, but it doesn't need to! In additional to the aforementioned archived articles – and more – online, there are several affordable resources available, including videos and an accessible primer, *Student Congress Debate* (part of the NFL Library of Public Speaking and Debate instructional books in the NFL Store). While parliamentary procedure forms the structural basis for debate, it's easy for a new student, coach or judge to pick it up quickly. There are other guides, judging rubrics and sample tournament forms under the "Resources" section of the NFL Web site.

http://www.studentcongressdebate.org

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.