

# Inside the Extemp TOC: An Interview with Michael Garson

Interview by Logan Scisco

*Gearing up for its seventh installment, the Extemp TOC at Northwestern University has gradually established itself as one of the premier tournaments for extemporaneous speaking. Seeing its talent pool continue to increase in quality over those seven years, the Extemp TOC is now the place to be in early May prior to CFL and NFL Nationals. Michael Garson, former NFL IX finalist, Ex Files contributor, and current co-tournament director of the Extemp TOC sat down to discuss his experiences at the tournament, some changes the tournament is making for the 2009 edition, and what competitors can expect at Northwestern University this weekend.*

**Logan Scisco:** Thanks for sitting down with us Michael to discuss the Extemp TOC. I think a question from those who may not know you is how long have you been involved in the Extemp TOC and what made you want to be involved in running this special event?

**Michael Garson:** I first got involved back in March 2005, when I met Dr. Steve Moss at my NFL Districts tournament. It was there that Dr. Moss suggested that I "go national". TOC Extemp was my first foray into top-notch competition. I haven't checked the old tab sheets, but I think I finished somewhere around 42nd out of a pool of 47. Needless to say, it was a very humbling, and educational, experience. In 2006 I went if for no other reason than to visit Northwestern and finalize my college plans. At that time, I barely qualified for NFLs and was resigned to mediocrity. Through a combination of luck, attitude, and a style particularly well-suited to the TOC Extemp, I ended up finishing 4th.

Part of the reason I came to Northwestern was the TOC Extemp and the NU Speech Team. I have since stopped competing to pursue other endeavors, but I haven't left the tournament. For everything that it gave me, I just can't let it go.

**Scisco:** I think many observers could comment that each year the TOC field continues to get stronger and stronger. What efforts have Northwestern University made to make this tournament one of the premier events in the country?

**Garson:** The best thing about the TOC Extemp is that it almost advertises itself. Frankly, there is no unified national title that brings together competitors of all states, backgrounds, and league affiliations. I think that coaches and competitors recognize that this is a rare opportunity to go toe-to-toe with the entire extemp field.

Another important selling point about the tournament is that it is entirely extemp-centric. With 6 prelim rounds and 2 judges per round, competitors will get 12 ballots from 12 extemp coaches. The quality of the field virtually guarantees a high-quality judging pool. The tournament also brings in some of the top private coaches, college competitors and coaches, and extemp personalities to round out the field.

We're constantly trying to improve the tournament. The best way to do that is to listen to competitors and coaches. A problem that I noticed when I competed was the poor timing of the tournament.

**Scisco:** That poor timing brings me to my next question. The Extemp TOC has traditionally taken place in the second weekend of May, a week after the debate TOC in Lexington, Kentucky. This year the tournament changed to the third weekend in May. What was the motivation behind this switch and do you think you will get a higher attendance because of it?

**Garson:** Being on Mother's Day and in between AP testing made it impossible for many to attend. Registration is still rolling in, but we are hopeful that attendance will increase. Even at this early juncture, I am seeing high schools register that have not been able to make it in previous years.

**Scisco:** Are any changes in the works for this year's edition of the TOC compared to past years? Are there any changes that you would like to see made to the tournament?

**Garson:** This year the tournament will move to the Hotel Orrington for Sunday's outrounds. We were able to negotiate great room rates for guests and secure beautiful rooms. As much as I love Northwestern's academic buildings, moving outrounds into ballrooms will give these rounds the mystique and credence they deserve. Also, we are working on tweaking the schedule to make Saturday tolerable and give impromptu contestants a chance to see the extemp semifinals, as well as the finals. The beauty of being involved with the tournament for five years (2 as a competitor, 3 as an administrator) is that I have watched it evolve. Sometimes unforeseen problems arise, but we learn from them and try to keep improving.

**Scisco:** How does an extemper earn a qualification to the TOC?

**Garson:** A student can earn an automatic qualification by finaling in his/her state tournament OR reaching the outrounds in two of our designated tournaments. These two ways offer an opportunity to those who do not travel often and those who do travel, but are in unusually competitive states. If a student does not automatically qualify, he/she can file an at-large application.

**Scisco:** What is the judging pool for the TOC like? Are there any "big names" who will be judging at the tournament?

**Garson:** The tournament routinely draws one of the most impressive judging pools in the country. While I cannot name names at this point, there is an illustrious list of former national finalists and champions, coaches of national champions, and extemp camp staff. Having such a high-quality field of competitors means we also get a high-quality field of coaches.

**Scisco:** As co-tournament director, what steps do you think can continue to be made to improve the quantity and quality of the competition at the TOC?

**Garson:** Growing our tradition and reputation will continue to increase our attractiveness as a post-season tournament. Because we are the only tournament devoted solely to extemp, we hope to spread the good word about our niche. Talking to coaches, competitors, and personalities creates momentum. Also, this article might help.

**Scisco:** Who knows, it just might. As you have indicated before, some schools are registering for the TOC that have not registered before. Since you will have some new competitors at this tournament, or prospective competitors reading this interview, briefly explain the format of the Extemp TOC (number of prelims, pairing policy, number of outrounds, number of judges in each round, etc.).

**Garson:** The tournament has 6 prelims with 2 judges each. As the tournament progresses, we start to seed the field throughout the prelims. We break to 24-person quarterfinals with sudden death outrounds cutting the field down to 12 semifinalists and then again to 6 finalists. A unique part of the tournament is that we have cross-ex in all outrounds.

**Scisco:** I agree that cross-examination in all outrounds does make the tournament unique. However, Will the CX style being used at the TOC be NFL style (2 minutes) or more along the lines of MBA (which has 3 minutes)?

**Garson:** Without trying to incite a riot, I have no idea why cross-ex would be cut down to 2 minutes. As someone who spent a lot (read: too much) time honing my craft on cross-ex, I think 3 minutes is the perfect amount of time to build a convincing counter-argument. In the interest of allowing good cross-ex and the building of solid dialogue and clash between competitors, we will continue to use 3 minute cross-ex.

**Scisco:** Having competed and finaled in the Extemp TOC before, provide some insight into your experience at the tournament and any possible suggestions for people coming to the tournament.

**Garson:** My TOC experiences may have representative of the two types of competitors who attend. My junior year, I came with no idea of what to expect. I had my two boxes filled with random clippings from Newsweek, Time, and the Asbury Park Press (eek!). I banked on style and assumed that arguments didn't really need evidence. I remember meeting Kevin Troy in the prep room and not wanting to wash my hand for days. Seeing Kevin Troy, James Hohmann, and a slew of other greats confused and excited me. I couldn't put my finger on it, but I immediately noticed that they were competing in a different event than me. They acted, thought, and spoke on a higher level. Likewise, I think a lot of competitors come to learn and see what extempers are capable of.

My senior year, I came in knowing what the tournament was about. Perhaps more importantly, I had a close group of friends on the national circuit. Being in the prep room with competitors like Dan Rauch, Alex Stephenson, Sally Hudson, Tony Romm, David Kumbroch and Joe St. George seemed less scary. I knew them all personally, even if I didn't feel I was on their level as a competitor. I was much more relaxed.

I barely broke and was the 21st seed out of 24 in the quarterfinals. I told myself that the rest was gravy, and was as relaxed as I have ever been. I remember my round being an absolute gauntlet. Joe St. George (2x NFL finalist), David Kumbroch (2x NFL finalist, NFL champion), Simin Lee (GMU Champion), Tony Romm (NFL finalist), and Sally Hudson (TOC finalist) were my competition. I love to tout the quality of the TOC Extemp field, but that was an unusually hellacious round. Somehow, I got through and moved on to the semifinals. I was with my mom at the time and remember thinking that me in the semifinals was ridiculous. Before that, my greatest accomplishment was getting to the Wake Forest semifinals on a tiebreaker and getting into Octofinals at Harvard.

As relaxed as I was in the quarterfinals, I was that nervous in my semifinal round. The topic was Southeast Asia...not exactly my strong suit. Also, I was being cross-ex'd by Dan Rauch, who I knew well since we competed against each other for four years in New Jersey. The first person I saw was Kevin Troy, who was then a freshman at Duke and one of my judges. It was at that point that I had my "Oh, %\$@\$" moment. I stopped for a half-second and said, "Oh, %\$@\$! I'm not supposed to be here. I'm not that good." I got lost in the pressure and the moment. Somehow, I pushed through a mediocre speech and got roughed up pretty good in cross-ex. I developed a good offensive cross-ex, which might have been my saving grace and got me into the finals. I think that most extempers have their "Oh, #@\$%" moment. It might be in a local

tournament or at the NFL Finals, but everyone reaches a point where they are not sure if they are worthy or competent enough for the moment. The trick is to recognize that you are in that round for a reason. Luck is, to a certain degree, overrated. Nearly every year, someone cracks in an NFL final and gives a sub-standard performance. It's really unfortunate, but there's nothing we can do as an audience. It is up to the competitor to soldier on. The reason you're nervous is because the stakes are so high. If the stakes are so high, that is all the reason to not throw in the towel and keep fighting.

The final round was really exciting. I remember almost not caring about the speech. I had proven to myself that someone who had no school-year coaching, having his mom as his judge (incidentally, Francine Garson is no slouch as an extemp judge!), and coming off a horrendous TOC performance in 2005 could make the finals. I told more jokes than I planned and my intro ran 2 minutes and 30 seconds. While I'm sure that my friends cringed at what appeared to be gross informalities, I was enjoying the moment. I got 4th place, which was extremely gratifying. I always try to tell friends, students, campers, and even prospective NU students (I'm a tour guide for Northwestern, so Go Cats!) that accomplishments don't make you better or worse. You are exactly as good, or bad, as you are whether or not a judge gives you a 1 or a 6. That ranking has zero effect on the quality of your speech. All you can do is control your seven minutes. Use those seven minutes to show off what you have and do not worry about what others think. Judging is a fickle mistress. Competitors are rarely as good or as bad as they think they are. Despite my accomplishments, the TOC taught me that satisfaction should come in knowing that I worked hard and think that I improved. Having a trophy is nice, but I take far more solace in knowing where I came from. No trophy can ever describe how many hours of hard work were put in. No trophy lists previous failings, obstacles, and problems. It is those who understand where they are as in relation to where they were who will be most successful.

**Scisco:** For the competitors who do not break in extemp there is a supplemental impromptu portion. Considering that impromptu has different rules around the country, what format does the Extemp TOC use for this?

**Garson:** We are still hammering out the details, but we will likely employ a single-quotation set up where each competitor speaks on the same quotation. They will have 7 minutes to prepare and deliver a speech. Since high school extemp rules are so diverse, a helpful balance of styles appear.

**Scisco:** The Extemp TOC has a coaching award and a extemp service award. How are these winners chosen and have they been chosen for the 2009 edition yet?

**Garson:** We solicit suggestions and recommendations from competitors, coaches, and those around the circuit. I would say whether or not we have made our decision yet, but that would definitely ruin all the fun of it. Wouldn't it?