

NFL Roundtable

The NFL national tournament is where extemp legends are made. With a format of thirteen rounds, two differentiated forms of extemp, three rounds of cross examination, a final round that takes place in front of hundreds of people, and \$6,000 in scholarship money going to the winner, NFL is an experience unlike any other.

To provide a preview for this tournament, Extemp Central has brought together three national finalists to discuss their preparation for the tournament and the work that had to be done in the trenches to get them onto the national final stage.

Panel:

Michael Garson: Michael competed for Freehold Township High School in Freehold, New Jersey. He is a three-time state finalist, twice in International Extemporaneous Speaking and once in Public Forum. Michael is a graduate of the University of Texas National Institute in Forensics (UTNIF) in the summer of 2005. The following spring, Michael placed 4th in the Tournament of Champions in Extemporaneous Speaking at Northwestern University and 5th in the National Forensics League Nationals in International Extemporaneous Speaking. An academic All-American, Michael also reached the level of Outstanding Distinction.

He has taught extemporaneous speaking at the Metropolitan Forensics Institute (MFI) at Seton Hall University in the summer of 2006 and at the National High School Institute (NHSI) at Northwestern University in the summers of 2007 and 2008. Currently a junior at Northwestern University, he maintains involvement through his high school's and Northwestern's speech teams. He is the Co-Tournament Director of the 2009 Tournament of Champions in Extemporaneous Speaking (TOC Extemp).

Mark Royce: Mark Royce was the runner-up in International Extemp in 2002 (and placed third in 2001). He then coached the event at Montgomery Bell Academy for several years and ran draw at its annual Round Robin. He earned his B.A. in European Studies from Vanderbilt University, his M.A. in International Affairs from American University, and this fall will enroll at George Mason University for his Ph.D. in Political Science.

Logan Scisco: Logan competed for four years for Danville High School in Danville, Kentucky where he was coached by Mr. Steve Meadows. He also competed for two and a half years for Western Kentucky University. He was the 2003 NFL United States Extemporaneous Speaking Final Round National Champion, a CFL finalist, a two-time NFA finalist in college, a two-time Kentucky state champion in extemporaneous speaking, a two-time MBA invitee, and was a four-time qualifier to CFL Nationals in extemp and a four-time qualifier to NFL Nationals in U.S. Extemp. He has coached two Kentucky state extemporaneous speaking champions, an MBA finalist, eleven extemp national qualifiers, a CFL finalist, and a NFL finalist (IX). He currently teaches social studies at Grant County High School in Dry Ridge, Kentucky and coaches for Grant and Boone County high schools.

Topic #1: How did you prepare for NFL Nationals?

Garson: I think it's important to remember that everyone prepares in a very different way. Above all else, every extemper needs to know his/her groove. Nationals was doing my Finals Week and graduation, so I had academic obligations to tend to as well. Therefore, the only way I

could get my time in was to make sure I was enjoying it. As a competitor, I hated practice speeches, so I didn't do them. The three or four weeks before were spent reading and reading and reading. I only carried two boxes, so I never filed that much. I focused almost exclusively on journal articles and books. I so doubted my ability to every esoteric topic that I relied on developing a keen understanding of the multiple trends throughout different regions and the world.

Royce: I was very fortunate to have nearly a month to prepare, since my school let out so early. In addition to the usual clipping and filing, I constructed speech outlines according to the formula I outline in "Extemporaneous Speaking at NFL Nationals," available on this site. Both at home, to my mother, and at CDE pre-nats camp I gave practice speeches leading up to the tournament, probably between forty and fifty total.

Scisco: Over my four years of attending NFL my preparation was spotty. For three years I would do a few speeches after CFL and that was it. My junior year my preparation was more focused, as I gave a speech about each of the thirteen topic areas, with my questions written by my coach. I found this to be incredibly helpful as I was able to test out some ideas and theories that I would use in actual rounds. I remember specifically that a framework I practiced on how to handle a question on state economies came back to help me greatly in round eight that year in Atlanta when I drew a question about what states could do to help their economic problems. Therefore, I greatly recommend that extempers give lots of speeches before the tournament, one on each topic area so they learn what they need to work on in the weeks leading up to the tournament. I have used this strategy with great success with the extempers I have had qualify to NFL the last two years.

Topic Area #2: What do you believe is the best strategy for getting out of prelims?

Garson: I had a really risky strategy for prelims. Coming off my performance at TOC, I realized two things: 1. 9 speeches in two days is mentally draining and 2. the only way to survive is pace. I knew that I had to pace myself and couldn't go full-tilt for all 6 prelims and expect to have anything left for outrounds. It is my hope that the readers understand what it means to go "full-tilt". Extemp should be an exhausting activity, when done right. I applied just enough of myself mentally to survive and advance. With that, I also knew that the schematic is a crapshoot. I didn't know who was "good" and who was "bad", because many competitors come from nowhere. I did what I could and I did what I needed to.

Royce: Perfect your technique and do what you always do. I simply spoke, seldom giving much thought to what round I was in.

Scisco: In prelims you are going to be put in flighted rooms. This means that you compete against four other competitors in your section, but the judges who judge you have to judge both flights, which means 10-11 competitors in total. If you end up in the second flight, judges are sick and tired of hearing speeches. I love extemp and even I do not know if I want to listen to ten speeches about the U.S. economy. With this in mind, you need to be engaging and memorable. You do not necessarily have to be funny, I never was. However, you do need to be passionate about the issues you are talking about. If you go in dull that will be your downfall. However, I have found that the best way to get out of prelims is to have a solid structure, be smooth with your delivery, and be engaging with your audience. That will get you into the top 60 and the tournament resets at that point.

Topic Area #3: What rounds of the tournament do you believe are the most critical?

Garson: I don't know about "critical", but I found the octafinals to be the most dangerous. Getting a tough room and giving a relatively bad speech can bounce even the best of extempers. Also, getting those "1"s and "2"s are crucial to building a cushion to protect you in later outrounds.

Scisco: I have always said that semi-finals decides the tournament and I am not backing off of that statement. Finals has more ballots, but as far as positioning for the final goes, I believe semis is more important psychologically. You get ten ranks in semi-finals and these days cross-examination is to be employed in semi-finals (they forgot to last year) so this round becomes even more critical. I have known extempers who came out of quarters in first place and picked up loads of bad ranks and failed to final. For all elimination rounds at NFL you need to adopt this strategy: get the 1's. Since NFL is a cumulative tournament you MUST try to win every round. You need as many judges as possible to give you 1's so that you can build distance between yourself and other competitors. In semi-finals, if you manage to go straight 1's or close to it, you can gain a ton of ground on the other thirteen people who are in it. Although obtaining straight 1's in semi-finals is nearly impossible, you have to avoid 5's, 6's, and 7's. Those will tank your score and put you behind the eight ball well before you get to the final round (if you get there at all).

Topic Area #4: How do you cope with the pressure of being in semi-finals/finals?

Garson: I've said in multiple writings that every extemper has their "oh #\$\$%" moment. I had mine at TOCs, so I was immune to it. Going into a tournament knowing that I can hold my own was a huge psychological advantage.

My second semifinals speech was the int'l econ round. I got a question on how to fix the third world and I focused mainly on the problems and pitfalls of globalization. It was early in the morning and most of the people were really wiped out from a long week. I knew that my strength was energy and personability, so I ripped off a few jokes about Britney Spears and Starbucks as primary causes of third world poverty. I knew that the only I would get out of those rounds was to be myself. Extempers often try to reinvent themselves, because they think they have to. In the end, I tried to be the same extemper and not stray from what made me successful.

Royce: Just doing what I always do, but I might add specifically that many semi-finalists, most of whom have never been there before, tend to tense up and become robotic. Just relax, smile, and try to genuinely enjoy yourself. Act human: don't speak like a computer.

Scisco: I was freaked out about being in semi-finals my sophomore year in 2002 and honestly, I was just happy to be there. Although I did okay, I was beaten very soundly by Jay Ward and Amanda Knight in both of my semi-finals and exited the tournament after round 12. I found it easier to focus the next year in 2003 since I had already been there.

I always tell my students before big rounds that if they were not nervous they would not be human. Stress is part of extemp, especially because as an extemper you have no idea what you draw and everyone worries about being forced to speak on something they do not know much about in front of lots of people. If you make finals, the night beforehand feels like being on death row. It is very hard to get sleep and you keep playing scenarios of different speeches over and over in your head. Everyone goes into the final not wanting to screw up, since they do not want

to be the person on the tape that everyone looks at years later and says “How did that person get there?” However, keep in mind that even for these big rounds that the event and what you have to do does not change. It is the same structure and the same seven minute speech. Just follow through with the basics and have fun, especially in finals, because you never know if you will get this opportunity again.

Topic Area #5: Any suggestions on how to handle CX?

Garson: Never ask the "last question". Ask a series of direct questions that could lead to a contradiction. Instead of asking the last question to reveal the fallacy/inaccuracy/contradiction, don't. Asking the last question gives your opponent a chance to wiggle out. Judges are smart enough to see what you're doing and will respect the strategy.

Royce: I discuss that in detail in my article, so I might simply refer readers to the above.

Scisco: The NFL may not like me saying this, but you do get told before the final round not to use CX to make your opponent look bad (or at least we were told this prior to the 2003 final). While I agree CX should not be used for personal attacks or to embarrass your opponent, I do believe that it serves a function of exposing the analytical flaws in an opponent's argument. The best thing you can do in CX is to include some facts your opponent glanced over in their speech in your question. For example, in Barkley Forum finals in 2004 I CX'd a speech on India-Pakistan. The speech argued that India-Pakistan relations were stabilizing, but in my CX I included the fact that two of the three wars India and Pakistan fought had been over Kashmir and this played well with the judges. If your answering questions, I suggest always hitting back to your answer, be clear in the position your advocating (NEVER straddle the fence), and hit back to parts of your speech. Do not forget about your speech in CX, relate your answers to your opponents question back to the analysis you just spent seven minutes explaining.

Topic Area #6: What is your overall description of the NFL Nationals experience?

Garson: Everyone's is different. Without a real coach and coming from an "un-predigreed" school, my coach treated it as a vacation. When I wasn't competing, I was sitting by the pool and skimming the Economist. While trying to squeeze in practice speeches may be the preferred schedule, I was as relaxed as anybody at the tournament.

Royce: The biggest, longest, hardest, but greatest speech and debate tournament. A league of its own.

Scisco: NFL is an endurance test, it is the way the tournament is built. By semi-finals everyone is tired and people start making mistakes. Everyone's fluency starts to go and people are not as sharp as they were for round one. You also do not get a lot of sleep at the tournament, especially because postings sometimes go up late and then you have to be back early in the morning. It is fun to look back at and realize that you went through so many rounds and it is an interesting experience to sit in the finals room and reflect on the other 190+ competitors who are no longer there that started with you in the gym on Monday morning. However, be prepared to be mentally drained by the end of the tournament.

Topic Area #7: What makes NFL Nationals different than any other major tournament (MBA, TOC, local state tournament)?

Garson: I don't think anything. It is very large, very long, and very diverse. While it is considered the "national" championship, I hesitate to build it up over any other highly-competitive tournament.

Royce: Nationals is of singular size, length, geographic diversity, number of rounds, and objectivity. No one wins Nationals by being rich or having lots of friends on the national circuit.

Scisco: It's larger than any field you will compete against all year and you compete against people from all around the world (i.e. Saipan and Guam). You hit people who you may never have seen before that pack a mean punch, because there are people who do not travel the national circuit. There is also \$6,000 on the line in scholarship money, but nobody thinks about that while the tournament is going on.

Topic Area #8: What is your favorite NFL memory?

Garson: I'll give two.

First, the 30 minutes before draw of the final round. We were at the Hyatt Regency ballroom, and everyone was congratulating me and wishing me luck. Seeing people I knew from camps, tournaments etc. reinforced the notion of "family". It was a great way to end my career. Steve Moss came over and reiterated something I remember him telling me 15 months prior, "Only 6 competitors (IXers and DXers I suppose makes 12) finish their career on a stage. Only 6 (12) people have their career end with someone saying their name. The hundreds of other people end their career hearing their name NOT called. You will end your career never being told you weren't good enough". I'd be lying if I didn't say those words were echoing in my mind throughout all outrounds.

Second, I went down to Dallas with my advisor and a fellow competitor from my high school. In all honesty, my mom was my de facto coach. Though she never saw me give practice speeches, she would talk to me about politics and challenge me. She also was my emotional rock and knew exactly what to say, when to say it, and how to say it. My dad was a rhetoric major in college, and he always knew how to light up a crowd. Growing up in my house was get preparation because my mom was the mind and my father was the face. Anyway, I called them before and after every round. Once I told them that I broke to finals, my mom said that she and my dad already booked a flight to Dallas. They flew down that night and watched my final round speech. I have a particularly fondness for this moment not just because it's dramatic or to give props to Mr. and Mrs. Garson. Instead, it reminds me (and hopefully the readers) that extemp takes place in a larger context. Family, and friends, are more important than any shiny pieces of plastic and pewter. My parents never let me forget that, even if it required a last-minute flight to Dallas.

Royce: Either my Finals speech my junior year or winning Wake Forest as a senior. Those were the two mountaintops.

Scisco: I have a lot of great memories from NFL, but I would have to say that the highlight is having my name called at awards for winning the final round of U.S. extemp. I was disappointed when they called me off in third place, but I remember on my way back in line I said "I've got a chance [to win the final round trophy]." (Since usually only the top 4 have a shot at winning it). When they called my name it completely changed my mood, but that's not what stood out as much as realizing that all the work I had put into that season paid off and that was a

feeling I'll never forget, especially because I never believed I would be holding the final round trophy.

Topic Area #9: If you could have one moment back in your NFL Nationals career what would it be and why?

Garson: I only got to NFLs my senior year as New Jersey was an extremely competitive district. I qualified for NFLs by 1 rank and skipped my hs graduation to attend. Considering the way everything panned out, I wouldn't change a thing. If I fixed one fluency break, added one more source, or truncated one necessary sentence, it wouldn't have been what it was.

Royce: I moved immediately following the tournament, and have since lamented that I did not properly bid farewell to all my high school friends. In the midst of ambition, do not ever let life pass you by.

Scisco: This might sound incredibly dumb, but I really wish I had not signed my district contract for U.S. extemp in 2004 and had signed for International extemp instead. Although I did U.S. extemp for four years, I believe that I was much better at handling International issues and after 2003 had very little to achieve more of in U.S. extemp. I never accepted the challenge of International extemp and not giving it a shot to this day still bugs me.