

National Points Race Champion Interview with Stacey Chen

By Logan Scisco

Last year was the first official year of the Extemp Central National Points Race and Stacey Chen of North Allegheny Senior High School in Wexford, Pennsylvania emerged victorious by a wide margin over the rest of her competitors. Chen's season saw her win the Glenbrooks, the Harvard Invitational, the Extemp TOC, and arguably her biggest title of the year, the International Extemp national championship at NFL Nationals. She also managed to win the final round national championship, and the tournament, by one rank over Will Rafey of Bellarmine College Prep in California enabling her to capture the National Teams Points Race trophy for her team as well.

Stacey has agreed to become a writer for the Ex Files this season and as her first assignment, she decided to sit down and discuss her goals, accomplishments she earned last season, and offer advice to extempers who would one day like to achieve her level of success.

Logan Scisco: Thanks for deciding to sit down and share your thoughts with the extemp community Stacey and congratulations on being last year's first Extemp Central National Points Race champion.

Stacey Chen: You're welcome! Thanks for the opportunity to share with the extemp community... I apologize in advance for rambling.

Scisco: That should be okay, more is better than less with these interviews. Tell us how you got started with extemporaneous speaking.

Chen: I actually joined forensics accidentally; in my freshman year, my friend heard about the intro meeting and needed help finding the library, so I went with her. Extemp sounded new and fun, the team members at the time seemed like interesting people, and I enjoyed giving presentations, or just talking too much, so I decided to give it a shot. I ended up staying because I loved the team and my coach. Extemp itself was okay too, I guess!

Scisco: When did you recognize that you had some talent in extemporaneous speaking and that it was "your" event?

Chen: Well, I started out in extemp and didn't try another event besides Congress, which every member of my team does, until my senior year when I dabbled in public forum. I was only on the team the first half of my freshman year during which time I went to practice a couple times each week and competed regularly at locals, but I never had success; I just enjoyed learning about current events and being on the team. I rejoined the team the beginning of sophomore year and really started working hard, so I did okay at locals. Then my teammates decided to go to Harvard to check out a national tournament for the first time, and I figured I'd go to get some experience and watch a ton of outrounds. Well, Harvard '07 was definitely an adventure... I got crazy lucky but, predictably and deservedly, crashed and burned at the end, yet for whatever reason (alright, I was hooked), after I finished crying and having a seizure, I decided to keep traveling nationally with my teammate Jack to see where it went.

Scisco: Is there anyone you looked up to as you were competing? If so, who was it and why?

Chen: There are SO many people I admired as both extempers and friends – there's absolutely no way I could list them all here! But the first and most obvious one was my teammate, Jack Grennan. He really gave me a solid foundation in extemp and continued teaching me and serving as an example and resource until he graduated after my junior year; I have to thank him for putting up with me for so long! Otherwise,

I have tremendous respect for all the other members of my GMIF '07 lab (Billy Strong, Hunter Kendrick, Max Webster, Preeti Willemann, Madison Grinnell) for being a wonderful support group to learn with. And finally, I have mad respect and love for Becca Goldstein, who totally repped the girls and was one of the best examples of an amazing, inspiring competitor who was always friendly, hilarious, and willing to give advice.

Scisco: Is there anyone you modeled your style after? If so, who?

Chen: I don't think I really ever modeled my style after a particular person or strategy. People would tell me I had a certain problem, and I'd try to fix it. I did love watching other extempers and trying to figure out what I liked about them though –Becca, for example, showed me that you have to be assertive and confident yet relatable and have fun at the same time. It's natural to pick things up from watching people frequently, whether they're teammates like Jack or other national competitors like Becca. In the end though, I strongly believe that extemp is really just explaining your thoughts to an audience, so the best style is always your own conversational voice, whether it includes things like humor and sarcasm, which I love, or not.

Scisco: Which person would you say had the biggest impact on your extemp career? Why?

Chen: Ouch, it's pretty impossible to pick one person in the forensics world. Obviously Jack is way up there for being a great teacher and extemp role model without ever seeming like a competitor against me. Also, all of my instructors at GMIF were incredible and inspirational, particularly my lab leader Adam Johnson and the extemp director Jason Warren (they're beyond wonderful!), who permanently shaped my understanding of extemp... and definitely my coach, Sharon Volpe, for always supporting me and being the ridiculously awesome person that she is.

Scisco: Prior to your senior year, you had been a CFL finalist. What steps did you take in the off-season that made you such a dominant competitor last year?

Chen: Hmm I just kinda kept plodding along – reading, printing, and filing. I didn't get the chance to return to GMIF, so I did my usual thing. Practices for me were mostly about working on the tubs and helping novices instead of giving practice speeches. I like to think of extemp as a really good time, so I only worked hard and waited to see where it would take me! I was really, really blessed my senior year, and I'm tremendously thankful that my extemp journey took the path it did.

Scisco: Did you feel any pressure going into NFL as the #1 ranked competitor in the national points race?

Chen: Sure, there's always pressure, but there are different kinds of pressure. The first is outside pressure – it's definitely hard to not let it get to your head and freak you out when your coach, team, and friends have high expectations, but at the same time, you have to maintain perspective. The most pressure I think came from myself – I wanted to do as well as possible, but I absolutely didn't expect anything. Every tournament is different, and you never know what's going to happen. The main thing to remember is not to let nerves and competition overwhelm you – I wanted to remember NFL as a time to savor my last extemp competition and reunite with some of my best friends, not as an intensely stressful week of rounds and breaks.

Scisco: Were you satisfied with your final round speech @ NFL? Why or why not?

Chen: I was actually really happy with my final round speech, which is weird because I usually focus on the flaws in my speeches. I think the special thing about NFL finals for me was that I knew it was my last

tournament and my last speech... a last hurrah. Before the round, I thought a lot about why I did extemp and recognized that I was in it almost completely for the people and the experience, so I didn't want to blow my last speech by focusing on the big stage and the judges and the results. I was almost surprisingly comfortable walking out onto the stage because of all the tournaments I'd been at before and all the speeches I'd given in the past, so I just went and gave a fun speech! I'm sure there was plenty to pick apart, and I probably would remember a lot more of those aspects if I were still competing, but as it is, I was just really honored and happy to have the chance to speak one last time in such a wonderful venue with all my teammates and friends watching. Going back and analyzing the speech would only ruin a happy ending!

Scisco: Out of all your victories last season, which do you think was the most important to you and why?

Chen: Haha that's a really hard question! I'd obviously like to say NFL just because it was my last tournament, and I think to some extent that's true. But each tournament has some special significance to me – Yale was awesome just because I love the people and place, Glenbrooks was cool because my mom was with me, GMU was like returning home, Harvard felt full circle after 3 years and it being my first tournament, etc. I don't think I can pick one because all of them were an integral part of my extemp experience, and I wouldn't like to forget any of the good times that came with each of them. Victory at a particular tournament shouldn't be a goal – it's just another step in the extemp learning experience.

Scisco: What advice would you have to other extempers who want to achieve your level of success?

Chen: Two things: work hard and have fun!!! First, unlike what many people would like to believe (I was included in this category as a newcomer haha), extemp is not an easy event just because you don't have to write cases and memorizes speeches in advance. There's a lot of depth to the event, a ton of different strategical approaches, and a massive workload in terms of preparation. Reach out, explore, ask questions, seek help, teach others, and most importantly, find out what works for YOU as an individual. There's no formula for a successful extemper: what works best is simply being yourself and having a combination of solid analysis and memorable personality. Second, remember why you do extemp. It can't be about winning tournaments or putting it on your college resume. Your motive really HAS to be a true love for the material, event, and people. Remembering that you're having fun is the best way to relieve pressure and nerves while allowing your personality to shine through in speeches. You can tell when someone's just up there sharing ideas because they want to, and those are the people you enjoy listening to.

Scisco: What made you decide to join the staff of *The Ex Files* this year?

Chen: Umm I like extemp a lot. Haha what an understatement there. It's still really surreal being "done" with my extemp career... I don't think it's even quite sunk in yet. But there are innumerable people who have made a difference in my life through forensics, and I feel so much gratitude to the extemp community in return. Extemp is about learning about the world, but at the same time and on a much deeper level, it's about learning about yourself as a person. I don't think I could possibly sound any cheesier! But it's really true. I love being available as a resource to other extempers going through the same experiences I did, and I want to maintain a connection to a world filled with people I love and admire because those are the people who shaped my high school world and accepted me for who I am while teaching me so much about myself. Oh wow, that was a ridiculous teary-eyed, nostalgia-filled, enormous run-on sentence!

Scisco: Thanks again for being willing to do this interview with us Stacey.

Chen: Again, thank you Logan for the chance to help out with *the Ex Files*! You're fabulous.