

Editor's Corner: The Grand Slam

By Logan Scisco

Welcome to the first installment of *Editor's Corner*, which will become a regular column in *The Ex Files*. In this column, I will devote time to discuss trends in extemporaneous speaking, strategies, and issues that impact that extemporaneous speaking community at large. If extempers have any suggestions for future editions of *Editor's Corner*, please e-mail them to me at logan.scisco@wku.edu.

The subject of this month's column will be the "Grand Slam" of extemporaneous speaking. Chances are that there are not many people out there who know anything about a Grand Slam of extemporaneous speaking. The phrase was coined back in the 2004-2005 season, when Kevin Troy of Eagan High School in Minnesota went on the most amazing winning streak that arguably any extemporaneous speaker has ever had. Troy, who had captured the 2003 NFL United States Extemporaneous Speaking title in his sophomore year, tore through the national circuit his senior season and won four notable tournaments: the Montgomery Bell Extemporaneous Speaking Round Robin, the Extemporaneous Speaking Tournament of Champions, the Catholic Forensic League national championship, and the National Forensic League International Extemp championship. The victories at the TOC and at NFL were also highly significant. In the case of the TOC, Troy successfully defended his championship and is the only person to ever win the event twice. The NFL victory was also historically significant because it was the first, and only time since, that an extemporaneous speaker has captured both the United States and International championships in their career. Shortly after Troy's victory at NFL, the victorybriefs.net website declared that Troy had achieved a "Grand Slam" during the season.

Some sports, notably golf and tennis, have major tournaments. In the case of the PGA Tour golf circuit and the WTA and WTP tennis circuits there are four tournaments each season that are considered more important than the others. This special designation makes them "major" championships and some of the greatest who have played those sports have preserved their legacy by winning those championships. Without a major, you are seen as someone who is lacking something significant, something that makes you stand out from among the rest.

So the question becomes, does extemp have major championships? Better yet, does it have a clear four major championships to make up a Grand Slam?

In answering these questions, I think that it is obvious that there are major championships for extemporaneous speakers and I also believe that the four tournaments Troy won in 2005 can count as a Grand Slam. The most notable is the NFL national tournament. Qualifying to the national tournament is an honor, but making it to the final round, where a competitor endures the stress of giving a seven minute speech in a large setting and that is filmed for all-time is a setting unlike any other. Couple this with nice trophies, a special national recognition for the winner of those final rounds, and \$6,000 in scholarship money awarded to the winner and you have a recipe for arguably the most prestigious forensic event in the country.

Of course, there is also the Montgomery Bell Extemp Round Robin in Nashville, Tennessee each January, which invites the top sixteen extemp competitors from across the country to bash heads over ten rounds of competition prior to a special Exhibition Round. The accolades that come with being selected and the high quality of judging at the tournament make it a unique experience. A listing of distinguished champions in the past also adds prestige to the event.

Finally, there is the Catholic Forensic League national tournament and the Extemp TOC, both of which occur in May. The main criticism in extemp circles of the CFL national tournament is that its judging is

not of the highest quality and the tournament tends to favor delivery over analysis. Another criticism is that the tournament does not attract as high a quality of field as senior competitors have chosen to not attend to the tournament due to graduation or other prior commitments. Also, some states, especially in the West and Southwest, do not attend the CFL tournament as much as other regions, which knocks down its prestige. For the Extemp TOC, the tournament has had fluctuating participation over the years. Nevertheless, putting aside last year's level of participation, the tournament was growing and its 2008 field attracted a healthy level of competition. In fact, the 2009 version's top four featured the MBA champion, the MBA Exhibition Round champion, the eventual NFL IX champion and final round champion, and an NFL USX semi-finalist, not too shabby a list considering that outside of those accomplishments those four individuals would eventually win seven of the tournaments in the National Points Race. However, the Extemp TOC could still see wider participation to make the tournament stronger because in its current incarnation it is more like golf's PGA Championship: a nice tournament but not of the same degree of recognition as the other major tournaments.

The larger implications of if we recognize that there is a Grand Slam in extemporaneous speaking is that we could have a better measure of ranking the best competitors since 2003, when the first Extemp TOC was held. Based on their number of major championships, we could have a better way of resolving some of the arguments of who the greatest extempers are. This recognition could also give goals to aspiring extempers, who wish to win the "career" Grand Slam in extemporaneous speaking, something that only Troy has ever managed to accomplish.

To illustrate who are the major championship winners under this system, I thought I would go back and tally up victories for competitors in these four tournaments since 2003 and rank them below, with a notation made for each of their victories.

6:

Kevin Troy—Eagan High School, Minnesota ('03 NFL USX, '04 TOC, '05 MBA, '05 TOC, '05 CFL, '05 NFL IX)

3:

Alex Stephenson—Eagan High School, Minnesota ('06 MBA, '07 TOC, '07 NFL USX)

2:

Stacey Chen—North Allegheny Senior High School, Pennsylvania ('09 TOC, '09 NFL IX)

Becca Goldstein—Newton South High School, Massachusetts ('08 MBA, '08 NFL USX)

James Hohmann—Eastview High School, Minnesota ('04 NFL USX, '05 NFL USX)

Akshar Rambachan—Eastview High School, Minnesota ('08 CFL, '08 NFL IX)

1:

Matt Arons—Millburn High School, New Jersey ('09 MBA)

Reid Bagwell—Scarsdale High School, New York ('08 TOC)

Josh Bone—Milton Academy, Massachusetts ('04 MBA)

Tex Dawson—Plano West High School, Texas ('07 MBA)

Alex Draime—Howland High School, Ohio ('09 CFL)

Dan Hemel—Scarsdale High School, New York ('03 NFL IX)

Jack Hsiao—Lamar Consolidated High School, Texas ('03 TOC)

David Kumbroch—Collierville High School, Tennessee ('07 NFL IX)

Evan Larson—Bellarmine College Prep ('09 NFL USX)

Courtney Otto—Kentucky Country Day, Kentucky ('04 CFL)

Ishanaa Rambachan—Eastview High School, Minnesota ('04 NFL IX)

Akshar Rao—Leland High School, California ('07 CFL)

Dan Rauch—Millburn High School, Massachusetts ('06 TOC)
Spencer Rockwell—Palisade High School, Colorado ('06 NFL IX)
David Tannenwald—Newton South High School, Massachusetts ('03 MBA)
Gautam Thapar—Leland High School, California ('06 CFL)
Greg Wagman—Dallastown Area High School, Pennsylvania ('03 CFL)
Colin West—Rocky Mountain High School, Colorado ('06 NFL USX)

From this list, we can see that no one will probably catch Kevin Troy's mark in the near future. To do so would be to put together either an amazing run like what he did his senior season in 2005 or to have two dominant years. With more programs competing in forensics today and with many students not achieving a high level of success until late in their junior or senior seasons, winning just one major championship is an amazing accomplishment, let alone multiple ones. What also stands out from the standings above is that Eagan High School in Minnesota has the top two finishers and the state of Minnesota has four of the top six major championship winners, with Eagan having nine majors and Eastview having four, all of which are national championships, an amazing feat.

In closing, you may not believe in a Grand Slam for extemporaneous speaking. You may believe there could be a Grand Slam but tournaments like Harvard or Glenbrooks need to be considered prior to creating a framework to evaluate the best competitors. Such criticisms are valid and debates such as that is what makes the event exciting. However, visualizing major extemp events like major championships, each with their unique formats, fields, and obstacles, does make the season more interesting and can provide a way to measure extempers against each other long after they have left the prep room.