

Catching the Worm at the Wake Forest National Earlybird

By Max Webster¹

After a summer of camps, workshops, practice speeches, and filing, it's finally time to shake off the rust, hop back into your suit, and begin the '09/'10 season with the first tournament of the year: The Wake Forest National Earlybird. Wake was always my first tournament every year, and I can honestly say that it was one of my favorites. It's well run, competitive, and located in a great college town. But like any tournament, there is much to Wake beneath the surface, which years of attendance and talking to former competitors will help you to uncover. I hope to provide some of that insight for you. I will share some of the quirks, secrets, and tricks of the tournament that I learned during my years at the Earlybird to help you maximize your potential for success and get the most out of what should be an enjoyable event for everyone. Many of the strategies and concepts I will discuss are also applicable to just about any tournament you attend, so you can use this article as a guide to aid in your preparations for other upcoming competitions as well.

The most important aspect of any tournament is your pre-tournament preparation. The weeks before a tournament that you spend getting your files in order and doing practice rounds with teammates or coaches are the best indicator of what kind of a tournament you'll have. I truly believe that practice makes perfect and the work you put into extemp well before it's show-time will pay off in big rounds when you can tackle an obscure question with ease or put a thoughtful and unique spin on a more commonplace question that will keep your judges attention throughout the round and land you the one. This mantra of hard work and preparation is particularly applicable to Wake Forest. During the much-needed summer respite from school, there is usually no coach or judicious teammate pressuring you to file and speak. But if you have been doing that work on your own, then it will certainly show at this tournament more than any other where you will have a huge leg-up on your competition.

Even if you haven't had time to work a tremendous amount on extemp over the summer – don't panic. You still have two weeks to put your preparation into over-drive. There are two main areas of focus you should have between now and September 11. The first is making sure you have thorough and well-researched files on all of the recent hot button issues. Although the questions at Wake are authored by the same person who writes for other major tournaments including St. Marks and The Glenbrooks, the questions never seem to be quite as obscure or difficult here. Take advantage of that and make sure that your files on issues like healthcare reform and the Iranian protests are perfect. The second area of focus is on practice speeches. The topics you speak on don't matter as much as making your speeches simulate a real round. Get a friend to watch. Treat him like a real judge: walk into the room, hand him your question, ask for appropriate time signals, and deliver your speech as you would at a tournament. Going through these motions will give you a critical advantage in the prelims of Wake, when

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most people will be freaking out and stumbling over themselves as they deliver their first speech in months. Don't let that person be you. Your goal is to appear in mid-season form by round one.

Now that we have addressed pre-tournament preparation, the next important area of focus should be on specific tournament planning. Before you arrive, make sure you know the schedule of rounds, meal breaks, etc. Unlike most tournaments, Wake spans three days and two locations. You will have one prelim Friday night and three on Saturday, followed by semifinals on Saturday evening and a final round on Sunday morning. Prelims and semifinals will both be held at North Forsyth High School, while the final round will be in a large lecture room on Wake Forest's campus. Once you get to the tournament, you should plan how and where you plan to prep. Prep is held in North Forsyth's auditorium (except for finals, where prep is held in a Wake classroom) with plenty of seating and pacing space, but little to no writing space. Figure out whichever way is best for you to adapt to these circumstances before your first round. I would store files in chairs, grab pertinent documents, outline on the floor, and pace in the side or back of the auditorium until it was time to leave for my round. Although it may not seem like a big deal now, prepping efficiently is key to easing your nerves and building your confidence before your first few rounds.

Now, to address rounds. My experience with Wake has been that the judging tends to be heavier on the presentation side, with some obvious exceptions. This is largely because, although Wake holds a concurrent esteemed debate tournament in LD and Policy, almost all of those judges are at a different site. So your judging pool will mostly be all of the other IE judges. Now this is not to say that you should try and become overly theatric and skirt on your analysis, because your judges will be smart and capable of following good, logical arguments. It does mean, however, that you should put extra effort and focus into being personable and confident during rounds. Let's take a look at one place where this tip can functionally be applied: introductions and conclusions.

Make sure your introductions and conclusions are silky smooth and flawless, as this is where performance focused judges often distinguish their ones from their threes. This is NOT to say you should be rehearsing intros that are superfluously cute and witty and can be linked to any question ahead of time, as I am not a proponent of "canning." Aside from the questions of integrity, I think that the major reason not to do so is because it will hurt you in the long run. Canning makes you seem more like a salesman than an extemper and ANY judge, whether flow heavy or not, can spot a gimmicky performance from a mile away. Appearing too slick and marginally topical out of the gates will kill your legitimacy with the judge from the start, making it unlikely that he will take the rest of your speech and analysis (even if it is killer) seriously. But I digress. Focusing on intros means that you should allocate enough of your prep time to practice your intros all the way through enough times to clear any blemishes or mistakes so that the first minute and a half of your speech is smooth and natural. Focusing on conclusions means that you should have some idea of a concise and clever sentence or two to end your speech so that you don't ramble to a halt. Confidence and cool in the beginning and end of a speech can literally make or break any round, but is especially important with judges who aren't super fixated on the flow.

We've now covered how to handle The Wake Forest National Earlybird from pre-season through round, but my last piece of advice is by far the most important: have fun! Being a year removed from extemp, I've got to tell you that I don't remember my exact ranks at Wake, my judge critiques, or even what my final round question was. What I do remember is what a great time I had with some of my best friends in high school, both from MBA and all over the country. I remember late night runs to IHOP with my teammates, hitting up local Winston-Salem burger joints with a couple of my close buds from Pittsburgh, introducing myself to countless new

friends in the cafeteria during the never-ending dead periods between rounds, and, of course, the all-night drives back to Nashville arriving with only a few hours to spare before my school-week began on Monday morning. I remember the weeks of printing, filing, highlighting, and speaking I did in the run-up to Wake, the excitement I would get when I grabbed a question that was especially thought provoking or unusual, and the satisfaction I had in knowing that I had done everything possible to do my best at the tournament. These memories are what extemp is really about - the research and presentation skills that will carry you wherever your college or career aspirations take you, the relationships you forge that can last a lifetime, and, most importantly, the fun you have in taking a reprieve from high school to do something that you genuinely enjoy. Think about how many of your friends would love the opportunity to skip school on Friday and hang out on a college campus for the weekend while enjoying a community of intellectually curious and vibrant peers from all over. So before you get too caught up in whatever competitive goals you have for this tournament, or any other for that matter, take a deep breath, relax, and enjoy yourself! You're lucky to do an activity as awesome as extemp. Best of luck to you all at Wake Forest!