

Building a Competitive Team: A 12 Step Program

by David Riley, Loyola Academy, Wilmette, Illinois

In a short five years, I have seen my team advance from a rather disorganized collection of individuals to one of the top teams in the state. I certainly cannot take all of the credit for that, but several people have asked me, "What is the secret to build a competitive team?" Obviously, you and your student's dedication and knowledge base go a long way to make it happen, but here are some tips that you may want to consider if a competitive team is your goal.

1. Are academics high on the list of priorities at your school? Look around you: Are there honors/AP classes? Accelerated classes? Electives for enrichment? Are there other academic activities, such as Math Team or JETS? Are winners of National Merit Scholarships, science fairs, and so on recognized and celebrated within the school community - or limited to a space-filler on page 17 of the local newspaper? The "culture of the school" that praises academic achievement as a method of positive reinforcement is essential to the development of a competitive team.
2. Play as often as your budget and you and your team's schedules permit. If possible, play tournaments outside of your own local or regional areas, and if you have won one of these, consider a national tournament ... these generally prove to be eye-openers for both you and your students. Consider hosting your own tournament. It will give you more insight into, and appreciation for, your colleagues who host tournaments, and it's a good chance to showcase yourself and your team. If your team moderates, they will get valuable experience. If your team plays, then they will do their best - after all, school pride is at stake!
3. How much time do you have (or want) to spend? All of the coaches I know who have championship teams from year to year spend a *lot* of time outside of the classroom working towards that goal.
4. Recruit by getting recommendations from your faculty colleagues, or ask them if you can give a presentation to their honors classes. General announcements are not the best idea - you will get a lot of students who will join to get an activity on their transcript or people who will otherwise not make much of a contribution to the team. Hosting a fun and successful junior high tournament for your feeder schools will also promote a positive image and will net you some outstanding players.
5. Limit the number of students on the team. There is no hard and fast rule here, but the total number should be based upon other conflicts such as participation in other activities, jobs, and so on, and the number of matches and tournaments that you expect to play in a given year. For example, if you play four interschool matches and four tournaments per year, allowing thirty people on the team will negate the experience for everyone - everyone will play so rarely that few will feel the need for any commitment to the activity.
6. If the size of the student body permits, give equal attention to a frosh/soph team. They will look forward to varsity play, and will generally be much a better team than if you begin with juniors.
7. Pay attention to students' strengths - you don't want to take five math specialists to a tournament that is predominantly humanities questions, or vice versa.
8. Emphasize from the outset that Scholastic Bowl is a *competition*, not a club. It is fun, but the competitive arena is important.
9. Promote and publicize your team and its activities as often as you can through school announcements and press releases. If you have to make a pest of yourself to do this, then so be it!
10. Don't overlook parent resources. They can be a tremendous help and are often happy to look after the more mundane tasks so that you can spend your time coaching. Chances are they'll have more experience than you with fundraising activities, and will often be your (and your team's) most valuable asset in other ways (like moral support, publicity, and positive reinforcement). Parent volunteers can also be some of your most vocal supporters!
11. Take every opportunity to praise and reward your team for a job well done. Kickoff cookouts, awards banquets, a trip to a national tournament - there are a number of ways to do this. Use your imagination!
12. Finally ... never, *ever*, apologize for Scholastic Bowl. In this age when educational concepts such as "inclusion" and "cooperative learning" are often misinterpreted, it is unfortunate that there are a number of people who look upon Scholastic Bowl and any academic competition as an elitist activity. Perhaps it is, but then, would you expect the football coach to start his weakest player in the big Homecoming game? Why should academics be any different? Show your students and the world that academic competition can be both fun and a positive experience as well as a competitive one.

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