Tips for New Coaches (that I learned the hard way)

Learn your school rules
I am not a teacher, so this information was mostly new to me. The school will have rules for:
- Students driving themselves
- Arranging Transportation, types of vehicles / drivers you can have
- Overnight trips
- Checking kids out of school early
- Tournament behavior
- Chaperone requirements
- Very important – understand the rules governing your interfacing with students.
- Expense / reimbursement / purchase order process

The athletic / assistant athletic / band director can be a great help, especially if they have been there a few years.

On the flip side – be kind to your school’s administration. Some things they appreciate:
- Give them the tournament schedule as absolutely soon as you can.
- Keep them up to date when the schedule changes.
- Let attendance know in advance who is out of school at a tournament.
- Keep them informed of the team’s successes and progress as the year goes on.
- Invite some teachers to judge at a tournament.
- Give a “showcase” performance for the school after the season is over

Financials
Many schools have “volunteers” or people in roles they are not best suited for. Whatever the reason your accounts will, at some stage, get totally messed up. Keep your own set of books, keep copies of all receipts, etc. The rear you save may be your own! Make a budget. What type of activity fee are you allowed to charge? Do you make use of the AZ tax credit? What expenses does the program cover vs. what do the kids have to pay for themselves? Will you do fundraising?

Assistants and other Helpers
If you are the head coach, you are responsible for any assistants you may have. Many of us use former debaters and college students. Be picky. Don’t take any volunteer just because you need help. Answering for the inappropriate behavior of one of your helpers is not fun. I require my helpers to obtain a fingerprint clearance card. That, to some extent, weeds out people that are not serious. Even so, make sure (esp. college students) understand they aren’t “one of the kids” any more and you expect certain standards. Hold them to it and don’t be afraid to tell them to take a hike if they don’t.

Judges
Finding judges will be one of the most frustrating things you have to do. It gets easier as you have students graduate that will come back and judge for you. Some tips:
• Hold a judge training session for parents and friends, or invite them to sessions like this weekend at Brophy.
• Other schools may be hosting a judge training session and will let your parents come to it.
• Again, you have to answer for poor / inappropriate judges. Maintain a high standard. It is tempting to grab anyone, but you make no friends by bringing untrained judges!
• Make your students leave you a cash judging bond that they get back when their parent judges a tournament. If their parent doesn’t – use the money to hire a starving (qualified) college student.
• Don’t rob another school’s dependable judging pool – be polite ask their coach.
• Ask your judge about any potential “baggage” before the tournament (“Oh by the way I helped coach at Springfield last year”, or “The Rio Lindo High coach is my girlfriend”)

Parents
If they want to help – by all means teach them to judge. Get them to bring snacks to tournaments. There are a lot of little jobs they can help you with so you can focus on the kids. Every year you’ll get a parent read you the riot act because you did something wrong. It happens.

Permission forms and paperwork
Each year all students get a “Team Manual” that spells out all the rules and expectations of a team member. Both the student and their parent has to sign it. There should not be any surprises. Cover everything from tournament behavior to dress code to when you travel. Mine is 13 pages long – but it is all spelled out.

Tournaments
It is very easy to forget something at tournaments. Here is a list of tips from the School of Hard Knocks…
• Make up a First Aid kit for the team table. Include Tylenol (or Ibuprofen), female hygiene products, cough drops, eye drops, band aids. (Find out the school policy for giving kids Tylenol).
• Have a “repair kit” with needle and black thread, scissors, tape
• Other items to have on hand: a spare black book, paper, pens, stapler
• If you loan out a stopwatch to anyone other than a direct relative – consider it gone forever. It will save you much grief. You are never going to get it back. I tried asking for a first-born as a security deposit until someone actually gave me one…
• Insist kids sign out when they leave. Texting is OK. Otherwise you’re looking for them at 11PM on Saturday.
• Kids will leave lots of stuff behind.
• Pair up “newbies” with older team members for the first tournament.
• Get there early and learn the layout of the school.
• Never forget the extemp bins!!! (or policy tubs) (Ask how I know about this one…)
• Don’t forget to pick up your ballots when the tournament is over
• Help your judges find their way around
• Charge kids that fail to show to a tournament and weren’t sick (“I forgot I had the SAT today…”) $10 works.
• Small tournaments, like the VCHS (when it’s on) are excellent, friendly venues to start out.

National Forensic League
If your school is not a member – you need to join. www.nflonline.org. There is a lot of material for the new coach. The cost is $99 per year. If your school is completely new, you will be an “affiliate” chapter. If you have an established program, you will be a “charter” chapter. Once you are signed up, request an ID so you can log onto the web site and enter points. The web site gives complete instructions on how to this. Read them carefully. It is a whole lot easier to fix mistakes now. It used to be you had to ask the national office to fix an entry mistake. Some tips:
• Enter all tournament results the same weekend after the tournament finishes. With any luck the TD gave you a results sheet in your ballot packet.
• Don’t give kids their ballots back until you have entered the results in NFL.
• Know the point entry rules! For example, you enter ONE score for each speech. So when you get THREE ballots back for semis or finals, you enter ONE score, not all three. Averaging works.
• Hand out the NFL certificates at your end-of-year dinner or whatever you have in April or May, or the kids will lose them.

Resources
As I mentioned before, the NFL has a TON of resources for you as a coach. The constantly add new things to their web site. There are lesson plans, links to other web sites, videos, etc. There is also a FREE video tape library. I’ve rented many of these. They range from excellent to real sleep-inducers.

National Federation of High Schools (NFHS.org)
They have a lot of very low cost pamphlets that will get you started, along with a binder just for new coaches. This was all I had when I started. It’s very good and cheap - $20 if I recall. You can order them off the web.

Joy Of Tournaments
Set up a school account on www.joyoftournaments.com/AZ. I recommend NOT having multiple accounts, and not letting students have access.
• Have students sign up for tournaments and give them a deadline in advance of the tournament deadline. I use a signup sheet at the meeting.
• JOT is easy to use – don’t be intimidated even if you are not a “computer person”.
• Enter your judges by name not “Judge 1” just to fill a quota – it really screws up a tournament.
• Don’t wait until the last minute!
Other Coaches

By all means ask other coaches when you have a question – no matter how dumb you may think it is. I’m still asking dumb questions and will be for a while. Arizona is lucky to have a number of top quality coaches. Any time I’ve asked about something they have been marvelously helpful, for which I am grateful. All of us are passionate about this activity and want to make it an educational, fun and memorable for these students. Welcome to the wonderful world of Speech & Debate!