
The Mentality and Mantra of Championship Consistency

By Jim Clancy

The goal for any chorus aspiring to become better should be to earn the right to compete at the Barbershop Harmony Society's highest level, the International Chorus Contest. For The Vocal Majority, the months leading up to this event are the most exciting of all, as our competitive nature motivates us to become the best we can be.

Our preparation begins with the selection of good music. While having a compatible package is preferred, we think the most important thing is to have the two strongest vehicles possible, usually a ballad and an uptune. If we have already performed the package at our preliminary contest and it has been deemed worthy of International competition, so much the better. However, in most cases we find ourselves choosing new songs for the big event.

After the songs have been chosen and arranged, we record a learning CD. We try to produce one of such quality that the men really enjoy listening to it, just as they would a top caliber quartet. They will hear and emulate not only the words and notes, but the interpretation, complete with all the dynamics, word sounds, etc. that we would like to hear from the chorus. The mixing is done so that each voice-part can be isolated from the other parts with any balance the listener prefers.

Each man is issued a copy of the CD and the music. A set is also sent to our choreographer so that she can begin to create the visual plan, and to our coach, who is also a very important member of the performance team. Some of the men are off the music within a week, while others may require two to three weeks to learn it. As a side note, I should mention that we seldom begin both songs at the same time. In a perfect world the men would have received their CDs and music during the Christmas holidays so that they are ready to sing them at the first rehearsal of the New Year. There have been times when we began our ballad as late as the middle of April, but I certainly don't recommend it!

After 6 to 8 weeks of work on the music, we are ready to begin the choreography. By this time our choreographer has taught the plan to our two 'presentation men' in the chorus, and the three of them present it to the chorus.

The last few months before competition are crucial, with most of the rehearsal time spent on the two contest songs. These are the months that our mantra, "hard work is fun when improvement is evident," is best understood. These are the times we work the hardest, and yet nothing could be more fun than feeling continual improvement and experiencing the awesome rush brought on by moments of absolute perfection. During this time, section rehearsals become increasingly important, and each section leader is given the opportunity to add his expertise to the product, working to perfect each of the unit sounds. For the last 6 weeks, the men are asked to come an hour early each week to work exclusively on the choreography. A short extra rehearsal is added to the schedule, as well

as at least one all-day Saturday session with the entire performance team, including our choreographer and our coach. There are many talented coaches available within the Society who are willing and able to help your chorus become better.

As contest time draws closer, more and more time is spent running the contest set from curtain open to curtain close, so that the men can get a good feel for the overall performance. During the time lapse between the final rehearsal at home and the first rehearsal at the contest site, the men are asked to work on their own thinking through the entire set and practicing their moves.

By the time we arrive at the contest site we should be ready to perform. The final rehearsals there are basically spent polishing. We usually have two or three fairly intense rehearsals, then on the day of the contest we take it slow and easy with a gradual crescendo leading up to the time we enter the pipeline. At this point psychology enters into play. Each man must enter the stage knowing that no one who performs on that stage that day could be better prepared than he is. As directors, we each have our own methods of motivating. In my opinion, the single most important thing to do at this point is instill confidence in every man. I have heard it said that amateurs practice until they get it right, while professionals practice until they can't get it wrong. I like for my men to think of themselves as professionals, with the contest plan so implanted that they couldn't possibly fail to perform at the highest level. I never mention "peaking on stage." This to me implies that the quality of the stage performance is left to chance. By this time we should be so well prepared that we could perform our best set 10 times in a row if necessary. When you hear someone say "we left it in the dressing room" you are hearing someone whose director is missing the point.

The actual time on stage should be the most rewarding time of all and the most fun. It is our opportunity to thoroughly entertain for the best and most knowledgeable audience we could ever have, people who understand and appreciate barbershop harmony as much as we do. Their applause is our reward for the thousands of man hours we have spent preparing for these few minutes on stage. It just doesn't get any better than this! These moments are to be cherished for the rest of our lives.

There is one more thing that I should mention. In reality we are constantly preparing for competition. We should try to make every rehearsal a masterpiece. Every week we should reinforce the basics of good singing, which in my opinion begin and end with singing in tune, or more specifically, not singing flat. We should always practice expressive faces, even during a warm up or a craft session so that they get to be second nature. We should take the same approach to every song in our repertoire as we do to our contest numbers. Why should we sing only two songs really well? If we practice these things weekly, when contest time comes around we simply apply these same techniques to our new music.

I think it is important to remember that just appearing on the International Contest Stage is a privilege. Every man in the chorus competition is already a champion. This should be the ultimate learning experience that can only make us better regardless of where we finish. I have been the Director of the Vocal Majority since 1974, and I can tell you that

we learned more from our 2nd place finish in 1978 than from all our gold medals combined.

I believe it's important for each chorus to set ambitious but realistic goals. For some, simply finishing in the top 10 or even the top 20 might represent a considerable accomplishment. Earning a 5th place medal for one might be just as meaningful as winning the gold is for another. The important thing is to learn from the experience and then strive to improve. Winning doesn't happen overnight, but with a burning desire to be the best, a commitment to excellence from every man and continual improvement, amazing things will happen.

Good luck, guys. See you at the next International.

In (tune) Harmony,

Jim Clancy