



NATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL MOCK TRIAL CHAMPIONSHIP



Welcome to Nationals!: **A Guide for First-Time Teams**

Dear Coach,

Congratulations on making it to the National High School Mock Trial Championships! Your students are joining a group of amazing teens from around the country and halfway around the globe, all of whom share their passion for this competition. Over the past few years, we have heard from coaches that taking a first-time team to Nationals is especially challenging, and we are hoping that this document will help a little with the transition from state to national competition. In preparing it, the Long Range Planning Committee of the National Board spoke with coaches, coordinators, and others who had just gone through this experience, soliciting their input on what advice and information you would need. We hope you'll "pay it forward" by sharing your own experiences with us about what you think we should add, remove, or modify in this document.

The Basics

First, a little about the competition. For more than three decades, National High School Mock Trial Championship Inc. ("NHSMTC") – an independent, non-profit organization – has invited teams from its member states to send their champions to a central location in May to compete against one another.

To put on the competition, NHSMTC partners each year with a different host state, which provides the logistical and financial support to make the competition a success.

Currently, NHSMTC has 46 member organizations, spanning 43 U.S. states, plus Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, and South Korea.

In order to maintain fairness, each year the National case is brand new, written by the host state in conjunction with the National Board's Case Committee. Many hosts include local color in their problems, but the cases are always complex and challenging. The National case releases at midnight on April 1.

The Weekend

The schedule for Nationals varies slightly, but it follows a fairly consistent format. The four rounds of competition are on Friday and Saturday, with two rounds each day. The two finalists will also compete on Saturday afternoon, their (exhausting) third trial of the day.

Teams can arrive whenever they like, but most choose to come in on the Tuesday or Wednesday before competition. On Wednesday and Thursday, teams typically practice or scrimmage one another in

informal trials in the hotel conference rooms. The Host Committee may try to help facilitate connecting with other teams if you would like to scrimmage.

Thursday afternoon, there are several important meetings. After the state coordinators meet, there are simultaneous sessions for coaches and for the student timekeepers. Around this time, the courtroom artist competition and courtroom journalist competition participants also meet. You *must* have your timekeepers attend that training. The coaches' meeting is an invaluable chance to meet the people running the weekend and to get information about logistics, courtroom locations, round posting, and the like. It's a great place to get any questions you have answered, and it is where the National Board and Host Committee distribute information about any last-minute changes to the program and solve any on-scene issues that have arisen. At least one of your coaches should attend this meeting, but all are welcome.

Nationals formally kicks off on Thursday night, with a pin exchange. The pin exchange allows students to circulate informally – usually with finger foods and in a cool location – exchanging trinkets from their home states or cities, often stickers, pins, pens, or the like. Many teams are able to obtain these via donation from local tourism boards, colleges and universities, or state and non-government organizations. Some state committees also coordinate buying enough of these items in bulk to cover several years of pin exchanges. Approximately forty trinket-items **per student** will be enough, although some teams may bring fewer items and let more active students take trinkets their less active colleagues are not using.

After the rounds on Friday, hosts usually – although not always – sponsor a fun event for the students. We want them to have a chance to relax and unwind. To keep costs down and fun up, the food at this event is most often snack or dessert fare, rather than a sit-down meal. No team is required to attend this event, but passing it up entirely is a *huge* mistake, even if your students are tired. If worst comes to worst, we urge every team to attend for at least a portion of this event.

After the rounds on Saturday, there is a break while the finalists compete and the remaining teams decompress, eat dinner, and get ready for the evening. Our Saturday evening Gala is where we announce our top ten teams and the top performing witnesses and attorneys from the competition. The National Board also honors individuals who have made a special contribution to high school mock trial, and it hands out its favorite trophy, the Larry Bakko Professionalism Award, to one competing team.

Coaches and coordinators are typically welcomed to enjoy the hospitality suite one or more nights during the competition. It's a great way to unwind while your students should be sleeping and/or to trade tips, tricks, or good-natured complaints with your fellow coaches and coordinators from around the country.

What's Nationals Like?

Well, the vibe we are trying for is “intense but fun,” a sort of “work hard, play hard” attitude. We are equally bummed if teams don't find the competition stimulating and draining as if they find the entire weekend a slog from one round to another, without joy or catharsis at the end of their long days of competing.

From a competitive perspective, most teams report that they find Nationals to be at the high end of mock trial competition, as one would expect. Every team is a champion, and so knowledge of the

rules of procedure and evidence is a baseline, with theatricality, polish, and adjustment in the moment differentiating the best teams. Many teams also report that the witnesses are more theatrical and combative than they're used to in their state competitions.

From a social perspective, it can be a great experience for both students and coaches. We are acutely aware of how much work goes into a successful mock trial program, and we know how "into" mock trial these students are. We also know that they're likely not used to meeting four hundred other students who are just as excited about the same nerdy passion that they are. Our goal – and we hope yours – is to allow them to explore that connection in lots of fun ways, even while they are competing with one another.

So What Are Some of the Issues Teams Face?

There are a number of things teams consistently mention about Nationals. The first is that getting there is a challenge, compared with state competitions. During the time between states and nationals, coaches and coordinators become cheerleaders, fundraisers, and travel agents, all while trying to build up the team. The May competition dates can coincide with AP exams, making travel arrangements trickier, and while many member states contribute financially to the travel costs, not all do, and most do not cover all of those costs.

Many parents and relatives also like to attend, creating additional complexities for both the students and the coaches. It is critical that these individuals be registered in advance, so our Competition Operations Committee can do their best to ensure that teams are placed in courtrooms that can accommodate the spectators they are bringing. (For trials involving two large groups of spectators, we sometimes cannot provide seating for everyone, so parents should be prepared to stand or to rotate through to focus their time on the trial segments their children are performing.)

If you contact the Host or the National Board, we can point you to "old hats" who can help give you ideas on how to manage these issues, but coaches are almost universal in saying that they're surprised of how much time they spent preparing for Nationals that was not, actually, coaching the students for trials.

Another issue is related; the National Board is blessed to have been able to rely on volunteer hosts for its entire existence. This means that we go where we're welcome, and *that* means teams from one coast or the other are almost always fighting jet lag in addition to dealing with the stress of competition. And all the teams are fighting the exhaustion of travel. (Before you complain, remember that Guam, the CNMA, and South Korea flew literally halfway around the world, so they're competing in the middle of their night!) For this reason, veteran coaches strongly recommend that you arrive a day or two early (i.e. on Wednesday, or even Tuesday if you're traveling a long-ish distance), rather than coming in Thursday and jumping right into the events. Staying an extra day adds to the financial and logistical challenges, but teams have almost universally found it to be worthwhile.

Coaches of first-time teams have also suggested that adjustment to the level and style of competition can be jarring. They recommend scrimmaging with other teams as a way to help ease the process of getting used to the differences between state and national competition. This also weighs in favor of arriving earlier on Wednesday or on Tuesday, so there's time to run a scrimmage on each side

of the case, if you'd like. (There is also a danger, some believe, in over-scrimmaging, especially when your team will be trying the case four times in only two days once the competition starts.)

Teams also expressed that the registration for events and the tournament is tricky. We are working on this, and we welcome your thoughts. Unfortunately, there is no uniform guidance on who (the state, your team, etc.) pays for what events we can offer, because states do things differently from one another. The Host and National Board generally provide all-access passes with your team registration for eight team members, one attorney coach, and one teacher coach, but you should check this each year with the Host, in case it has changed.

Finally, there may be differences between your local mock trial rules and the National ones. Take a good look at the National Rules to make sure you're not accidentally doing something that's fine at home but a problem in our competition. We have had issues particularly with team construction and which team members can perform which roles, so pay special attention there.

Who Can Help Me when I DO Have a Question?

Lots of people! The one thing we are not short on is high quality, engaged people committed to this program. Generally speaking, it is best to channel questions through the Host Director(s), who will usually be identified on the Host website. They have the ground-level understanding of most issues. For questions best answered by the National Board, the Host Directors also know who is the best person to ask, and they'll frequently be able to direct you to the deepest well of information.

For case-related questions or concerns, check the front of the case materials. They explain how to submit questions to the Board and case authors.

For questions about the national rules of competition, you should contact either the Host Director or the Chair of the National Board, who will often loop in the Rules Committee if the issue is a complicated one.

What Happens if I have an Issue During the Tournament Itself?

During competition rounds, members of the National Board and Host Committee are either judging or are in the Tabulation Room, where the judges gather and the scores are received following each trial. Courtroom Liaisons are typically assigned to each courtroom, and they can help you find the Tab Room. The Host Committee will address logistics issues, and competition issues will likely be directed to members of the Dispute Resolution Team of the National Board. Despite its name, the Team also has purviews beyond allegations of violations of the rules of competition. The Team – and any members of the National Board who are not judging – stands ready to assist with any issues that arise.

Between rounds or during events, you should just look for any Host Committee or National Board member or ask your state coordinator to do so, if s/he is on scene. All Board members and Host Committee members wear identifying badges, and you'll meet some of us at the Coaches' Meeting and the pin exchange. Every year brings an unexpected challenge or two, so don't hesitate to reach out and ask for an assist. Maybe we can help, maybe not, but we will *always* try.

Anything Else I Should Know?

Probably tons, but we'll try to hit a few highlights:

1. Make sure to check early on to ensure your students all have ID that will allow them to fly. The fees for last-minute passports or other REAL ID compatible identification can be high, and you'll reduce your stress levels later if you know this is ok.
2. Keep reading the case, even once you have your initial questions and answers developed. You'll rarely catch everything on the first go-round, if we're doing our jobs well.
3. We announce the round pairings on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, so follow and like us and encourage your students to do the same! Our handle is @nhsmtc or on Facebook search for our full name. It's also a great way to check out the tremendous photography of one of our National Board members.
4. Let your team know early that each round, they may exchange a Best Witness and Best Advocate certificate with the other team. We'll provide those.
5. It's better to ask for permission – or, better yet, guidance! – than for forgiveness.
6. Bring a few unmarked copies of the exhibits, so when your team accidentally leaves them with the scoring judges after a round, you're not scrambling looking for a copier.
7. Bring 15-20 copies of your team roster for each side of the case, on the required NHSMTC roster form. Scoring and presiding judges like to keep these, and you'll go through them more than you think.
8. Relax.
9. Breathe.
10. Remember: your first job is not to win it all; it's to make sure your students have a great time and get the incomparable experience of academic competition at a national level.
11. It's gonna be great!

Very Truly Yours,

The Long Range Planning Committee of
the NHSMTC Board of Directors