

Bursting at the seams

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

Wednesday, 02 February 2011 21:49 - Last Updated Wednesday, 02 February 2011 21:52



High numbers compete in GHS speech.

Groggy-eyed, they stumble to a waiting bus and van in cold and darkness.

5:30 to 5:45 a.m. sharp is typically boarding time for out-of-town meets on Saturday mornings when other students are deep in slumber, grateful for extra hours of sleep.

As the vehicles zoom down highways and the interstate, some students sleep, others listen to iPods and some eat what parents provide for breakfast.

Still others, like junior Jeramie VanAcker are so full of adrenaline that they periodically yell and awaken sleeping teammates.

Once they arrive at their destination, members of the Gothenburg High School speech team must be wide awake and ready to perform.

Varsity members lead the team through a variety of warm-up facial, vocal and physical exercises.

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At a typical meet, most members of the speech team perform two to three events three times throughout the day.

That leaves barely enough time to grab lunch or use the rest room.

Why do they do it?

“I ask myself that every Saturday morning,” said Mackenzie Brand with a laugh.

Despite daily pressure to perform well at practices and meets, early-morning departures and the need for a steady dose of adrenaline on meet day, a record number of students have signed up for the team this year—the most speech adviser Dan Jensen has had since he’s been involved with the program.

As a speech coach for the past 15 years, he speculates that the large number—54—is because of the success the team has had in recent years.

“I think people in general like to be involved in activities that are likely to yield success,” he said.

A glass case in the Main Street hallway tells about those successes with trophies and plaques the Swedes have won through the years, including Southwest Conference, district and state speech champions.

Josh Clark, a junior, pointed out that the team, in recent years, has won the most state and district championships of any activity at GHS including sports.

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Several members of the Swede speech team agree that success has attracted others who want to be successful.

Fellow junior Jeramie Van

Acker said students want to be part of a winning team.

“It’s the tradition,” said Maddy Costello.

Jensen said there are other reasons kids sign up, noting that the number of kids in the program fluctuates from year to year.

“Some grades just have more kids interested in the arts than other grades,” he said. “And this year, we happen to have a large number of younger kids who are interested in and do well with this activity.”

Although the program’s growth spurt is welcomed, fitting in practice times with coaches is challenging.

Between 70-90 events must be practiced each week with a coach.

“I find it challenging to continue to coach meaningful and productive practices with a student when there are always more students in the room waiting for their turn to get some help, Jensen said.

To accommodate team members, Jensen and assistant coach Keri Dudley are assisted by former national speech contenders and GHS graduates Chauncey Brown and J.C. Meridith.

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A “mentor night,” Wednesday after school, pairs younger students and/or first-time speech competitors with older and more experienced teammates to practice their events.

Several first-time Swede speech competitors, at a Central Nebraska Forensic League meet in Grand Island Saturday, shared why they signed up for the activity.

Freshman Brett Mann said public speaking and acting gives him

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