

## **20 TIPS FROM CONTEST JUDGES**

### **Compiled by Mike Mastandrea**

The following ideas have been expressed by several members of our judging panels during competition season. We, at M.A. Dance and Marching Auxiliaries, hope that these comments provide you with a more complete perspective on “the mind sets” of most judges.

1. Have your music professionally cut and recorded. CD use has begun to surpass cassette tape use. Usually, the quality of a CD is better than a tape.
2. Take time in the selection of your music. Look for music that will be different from most other teams. The music should be exciting, fully orchestrated, contain several accents, syncopated beats, etc. Avoid music that is monotonous in nature containing relatively few tempo changes or interesting characteristics. Great music is the key to great choreography.
3. Avoid making too many mixes or cuts in your contest music. It is better to develop a concept than to have a routine composed of “bits and pieces”. Usually, several cuts create “phrasing” problems in a routine.
4. Prepare at least 2 copies of your music on different CDs or tapes. You never know when your music will malfunction. Try to limit one recording to one tape or CD. This eliminates the possibility of the soundman playing the wrong music.
5. Avoid repetition. There should be no repeats within a competition routine. The best length for a contest number is about 2 1/2 minutes.
6. Judges are impressed with quick set and break down of backdrops, staging, and props. Avoid taking too long to set up for a routine. It is like building up a movie—it is always a disappointment. Judges (and your audience) have a tendency to get restless simply waiting to critique a performance.
7. If you are going to have backdrops/props, use them! Make them an integral part of your routine. Backdrops and large props should hide performers, costume changes, be moved around to make interesting shapes, forms and patterns on the performance floor. Just setting up black backdrops, for example, to provide a framework for your performance is not worth the effort. Good judges will focus upon the contents of the routine.
8. Check your spacing and alignment before the routine begins. This does not have to be a long, time-consuming ordeal. But, the captain should make sure that the routine does begin with the correct floor positioning and spacing.
9. Work on your transitions. It is more impressive to be able to create forms which center on multiple people rather than ones that always seem to center around the same individual. This will help to make your transitions smoother.
10. Judges look at detail and each adjudicator has his/her own pet peeves. For example, a judge may focus upon arm movement or foot closure, or back leg extension, or sickle feet on kicks, etc. Pay attention to technique details. That caption is worth several points on a score sheet.
11. Judges are finding that although the routines tend to exemplify a much higher technical composition, directors are not spending as much time carefully examining

spacing, alignment, and floor positioning. High technical content cannot overcompensate for poor spacing and floor positioning.

12. Make your forms visually pleasing. Avoid spreading out the team to the extent that your forms cannot be captured easily by the judge's eye. For example, you would not want to have a team of 15 form 3 circles of five—one under each basketball goal and the other in the middle of the court. A judge cannot get the visual picture created because there is too much distance between forms. It is really the smaller teams that must be sensitive to creating forms on the floor.
13. Formation changes and transitions should contain as much choreography as the routine itself. This is the downfall of many otherwise great performances. Transitions require smoothness. Good transitions cannot be distinguished from the routine itself. Think of it as “dancing through” your floor positions.
14. Ultimately, your routine has to be entertaining. Sometimes, we seem to forget that and try to win points through routines with “deep messages” and unusual artistry. There is nothing wrong with being different. However, ultimately you must connect with your audience and judging panel if you expect to receive high scores for general effect.
15. Showmanship, energy and projection (eye contact) cannot be overemphasized. It is more impactful to look at the judges' faces and that of your audience. This sells routines. In the past, some great routines have lost points because the performers have not created a “connection” with the audience and judges. Showmanship and projection can be taught and rehearsed. This is one area that does not depend upon advanced training and high talent level.
16. Keep your ideas for routines fresh and exciting. It is important to remember that most of the judges who work a competition have been around for several years and have seen most everything. If you are going to use music that has survived through the years, like “Grease”, “Thriller”, and “West Side Story”, then have a new twist to your performance.
17. Have a clear-cut definition of the routine category you have entered. This is especially true for modern versus lyrical and novelty vs. prop, etc.
18. Costume for the largest member on your team. Even though appearance is only 10 points on most score sheets, a distracting costume hurts your overall production. Be very careful that the appropriate undergarments are worn with your costumes. There were several “embarrassing moments” for performers this year at competition. It is also important to note that costume selection must be appropriate for the age group of the performers.
19. Choreograph “age appropriate” movements that aren't too provocative. Judges are as objective as possible when critiquing a performance. However, they are human. Don't take a chance with seductive choreography that may be deemed offensive.
20. Judges appreciate difficult and challenging performances. However, be careful not to over-choreograph your team. For dance, judges would rather see everyone do a single or double pirouette perfectly than watch 10 girls nail a triple and 10 others fall out of the turn. For flags, judges would rather see good timing on spins and tosses than what we refer to as a “visual mess”. Consider dropping everyone down to a less difficult skill if the more difficult skill is not yet mastered, or highlight those

performers who can execute the more difficult skill with solid technique. Difficulty is important, but not at the expense of proper technique and clean, uniform execution.