

Better Team Judging?

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The authors are at it again. The two of us shared judging experiences recently that were not only exciting but which, if adopted or adapted on a broader scale, might improve the judging experience for judges and for exhibitors.

A serendipitous planning meeting helped us be better judges

The stereotype of a stamp collector is the lonely person staring at bits of paper through a magnifying glass in a semi-darkened room. When we prepare to judge a stamp show, we don't quite fit that image, but we almost always do our preparation in isolation. We read the title pages and synopses, make notes, and consult references (suggested by the exhibitor, found in our own libraries and recommended by the APRL) as well as those we can find on the internet. Once in a while we even approach our fellow judges or philatelists to improve our subject knowledge. Yet all of our preparation is fundamentally done alone.

An outgrowth of doing our preparation in isolation is that when we are judging with the jury, it often feels as if we don't have enough time for a substantive discussion about exhibits. There is not really enough time while we are standing in front of the frames, and it has always seemed there is no other time available. Certainly while we are judging we discuss main points such as the focus of the exhibit as represented by the title page and the material in the exhibit, elements of treatment and the other categories on the UEEF. But too often there seems to be insufficient time to discuss our 'philosophy' of the exhibit: what we expected to see, rarities we know exist, our reactions to the synopsis and the results of the high level of preparation we have brought to the exhibit.

The two of us recently had an experience that opened a window for us into what could be an additional element in preparing for team judging. Both of us attended the opening of the American Philatelic Research Library and both of us were judging the same upcoming show. One evening we sat in the hotel and discussed the exhibits for the upcoming show. We reviewed each title page and each synopsis, and we considered what they said and what we thought they might have omitted. To the extent we were confused about a point or about the logic flow, we discussed what we might expect to see in the actual exhibit. We shared our reactions to the paperwork and how we had prepared to judge the exhibits. It was fantastic! We were preparing like a real team: working together – rehearsing / practicing – so that our "performance" would be stronger and smoother.

In contrast to each of us preparing in isolation and only coming together in front of the frames to share our thoughts about the exhibits, we had the opportunity to learn from each other and to resolve many (but not all) individual questions or concerns. Other than not having the actual exhibits in front of us, our time together allowed us to discuss the exhibits in more detail than we would have time for at the show. Where one or the other of us had an insight or a good reference source, we were able to share it. We were not pre-judging the exhibits, but instead preparing to judge what we expected to see at the show based on our now shared interpretation of each exhibitor's submissions. This process helped us focus our preparation so we were better prepared when we arrived at the show and enhanced our

ability to be discerning judges. It was an unplanned encounter where we had time, copies of title pages and synopses, and we were both judging the same show. As we live several hundred miles apart, it would never have happened if we had not been at the Library opening.

So how might we or another jury be able to repeat this? Would a judges' pre-show conference call be worthwhile? If there are three to six people on a call, would there be time for everyone to express themselves? When should a pre-show conference take place?

And, of course, might two or three judges have a conversation even if the entire team cannot meet? We did (the remaining judge on the jury was not at the Library opening) and it served us well. The next thing we did, also unplanned, helped the entire jury to be better judges at the show.

By deliberately not judging on the eve of the show, we judged better the next day

The two of us (with the third member of the jury) had a related jury experience at the same show we mentioned above. It gave us another insight into how we could improve our judging.

Usually the jury walks through the exhibits the evening before the show opens. Frequently this is an opportunity to record preliminary observations and to begin pointing the exhibits. We tried something different.

We walked through the exhibits without UEEFs or pencils and focused on the exhibits. We talked about what we saw and how it matched (or didn't match) our expectations. We looked closely at each exhibit, and where one of us saw something we didn't quite understand or that confused us, we all talked it through. And, where we saw things well done, we discussed that as well. This process allowed us as a group to more clearly see the "gestalt" of the exhibits and not just the components of the UEEF.

We focused on the *contents* of the exhibits, not the *judging* of the exhibits. When we started judging the next day we felt incredibly well prepared. Based on the in-depth review at the APRL opening and our discussions at the frames the evening before the show opened, the jury judged the exhibits in greater depth (and more quickly) than we would have otherwise.

We look forward to hearing other opinions and related experiences. Feel free to weigh in!