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Meet Kerry Cottingham



Kerry Cottingham coaches at Mauldin High School, SC.

By Liz Leach
NFL Staff

What was your first NFL experience?

I remember first learning about the NFL when my family moved to South Carolina from Georgia in 1989. I was in middle school then, but my older brother Chris joined the Mauldin High team under Coach Debbie Barron. My parents and my brother loved forensics, so I remember being eleven or twelve and reading under tables set up for garage sale fundraisers or tournament concessions. When I started high school in 1992, I joined the team, reluctantly, at the prodding of my parents. When I found out that I didn't have to do LD like my brother, but I could compete in Interps, I was hooked within a week, and I have been ever since.

When did you decide to be a teacher and/or coach?

First off, I wanted to be a journalist, and I wanted to continue acting in some capacity. I also considered law school. Then I worked as a camp counselor one summer while I was in college, and I found that I really enjoyed working with young people. I was able to develop my own curriculum that summer, and I asked my campers to develop a program that incorporated public speaking and drama with environmental education. Still, I didn't really consider coaching as a possibility, until I received a call from my former debate coach at Mauldin High. I was teaching at a lower income middle school then, and I loved it, but she convinced me to come out for an interview anyway. At first I was told that I would just be assisting the current debate coach,

but I think they already knew what I didn't – that he'd give up coaching at the end of the year, and I'd be given the opportunity to coach on my own.

What is your team philosophy?

I believe that winning a competition should never be the ultimate goal. To that end, I believe that anyone who's willing to work should be given every opportunity to compete. I will never be an elitist – I just don't have that in me. At some point, the trophies will end up in a box in the attic or in the junk pile, but you don't forget the skills that you learn from speech and debate, or the friendships that you make. My priorities are to simultaneously make sure that my kids are having fun, make sure they know how to prepare themselves for any type of public speaking event, and make sure that they're supporting one another.

How many hours do you spend with this activity a week?

Seven class hours a day – the team has grown so much that I now teach nothing but speech and debate – and a two hour team practice once a week. I also spend an average of three hours a week coaching individuals beyond the team practice. Add a 14 hour tournament day or a 48 hour tournament weekend and a couple of hours worth of paperwork, maybe a 2 hour parent meeting here or there... and I've lost count. Sometimes it's hard, but most of the time it doesn't even feel like work. I still look forward to tournaments, anyway.

What is your vision for the future of the NFL?

More connectivity between programs and more publicity in our communities. I'd like to see more unity and more positive competition among the different regions, which would enable us to give more support to one another. I'd love for the NFL to continue seeking out the opinions of coaches and district chairs from across the country, like they're going to do this summer. I'm excited about the NFL's new scholarships for coaches to attend summer institutes, and I'd like to see that program expand. I'd like the NFL to serve almost as a sort of union presence within our communities to help with funding, maintaining student interest, building new programs, and increasing coach retention. Finally, I'd love to see the NFL continue to develop in other parts of the country.

What is exciting about being an NFL coach in the State of South Carolina

The coaches here are just spectacular. I'd say that while there is a healthy air of competition in our district, the coaches are not nearly as competitive with one another as we could be. There's a genuine camaraderie among the coaches in SC, and that goodwill filters down to our students, who also tend to treat each other well. At the same time, there is a lot of room for growth in South Carolina. While many successful programs have been around for decades, there isn't much publicity for forensics, and funding is atrocious – often less than ten dollars per

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student for the entire competition year. Having more than one coach at a school is a luxury that most coaches around here can't even fathom, and this limits growth due to burnout. Stipends for coaches are abysmal and barely cover gas expenses. I'd say these obstacles are "exciting," though, because the potential is certainly there for coaches in SC to really do something positive for our students by promoting forensics to our state and local boards.

What's unique about the Mauldin as an NFL chapter?

Mauldin has a long history with the NFL – it was the first public school in South Carolina to join. We've been lucky to have principal after principal who is willing to support the program by giving kids recognition and by allowing time to travel and compete. The MHS Booster Club is probably the strongest of its kind in the state. The Booster Club, I think, is largely responsible for keeping the MHS program kicking during a few years of lower numbers. Also, Orlando Jones, the 7-Up guy, was a co-captain of Mauldin's team in the early 80's. I'm fairly certain we're the only group that can say that.

What qualities do you look for when recruiting students for your program?

I think every coach knows that the beauty of forensics is that almost any type of student can flourish in the program. Like anyone else, I'm always on the lookout for bright students, for natural performers, for kids who seem more interested in politics or justice than their peers. However, sometimes the quietest or the most challenging student could eventually turn out to be a state champ, a national qualifier, win a scholarship, or turn out to be the greatest team cheerleader. Our program's pretty open at this point – if a student shows a decent work ethic and a willing attitude, then he or she is welcome.

How has the NFL changed since your days as a competitor?

I did compete in the NFL, and I think that several rule changes have been great for competition. Duo Interp wasn't a national event until my senior year – before then, we competed with folders in our hands, side by side, completely still. Based on National finals in the past couple of years, I think Duo, and really all of the interp events, are just on a whole different plane than when I was a competitor. I know a lot of people lobby for stricter rules in Interps, and I'm even somewhat of a purist when it comes to the piece and sticking to the script, but for the most part I think that performances have really benefited from more movement and artistic freedom – kids are really "interping" for the most part, and I think that's great. I competed in Oratory a lot, but I haven't seen as many changes there. But LD? Congress? Quite different from the early 90's, and I'm dragging my feet with some of those changes, but in general, I think that change is healthy, and I'm glad to see all of these events flourishing. Finally, PFD. I love PFD and I wish it had been around when I was a student. I'm loving watching this event mature.

What is your favorite memory from a National Tournament?

When I was a student, Nationals was in Fort Lauderdale one year. There were sand fleas ravaging the beaches, so everyone was stuck in the hotel playing a card game that for the sake of decorum, I will refer to as "ERS." ERS involves a lot of yelling and lots of slapping the table. We drew up tournament brackets and everything. I can proudly say that I was the runner-up to the ERS champion, a student from California, who played so brilliantly that he slapped right through a glass coffee

table in the lobby, and we all chipped in to replace it.

What is the greatest challenge as a coach today?

For me personally, it's the time commitment. I'd like to go back to school at some point, but I haven't figured out how to balance everything yet. Still, I'd rather have this problem than have a problem with finding willing students to participate.

Are there any rituals/lucky traditions that you employ as a coach?

We're a very superstitious team. There are four main ones: first, we have a stuffed team mascot every year, which is a tradition that runs back to at least when I was a student. Each year, a new mascot is selected, christened with a name that relates to the national tournament (yes, this year it's "Tex"), and carried to rounds with various babysitters at every tournament. Secondly, our district tournament has fallen on or near St. Patrick's Day for at least fifteen years, so each student wears a shamrock sticker on the inside of a suit jacket or a sleeve at Districts. Third, I didn't have any national qualifiers my first year of coaching, but I took a group of observers to Salt Lake City, and they picked up pebbles in Utah and wrote each team member's initials on them. Students still carry those pebbles. Finally, my team chants "Whether the weather be cold or whether the weather be hot, we'll be together whatever the weather whether we like it or not" before and after every tournament.

What's your favorite weekend tournament food item?

The parents at Riverside High School in Greer, SC make this fabulous homemade potato soup every year, and I can't walk by that stuff without grabbing a bowl.