

# The Must-Know Handbook

for Novice Coaches of

# Odyssey of the Mind™

by

Judge Vic Fleming



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## *Preface and Acknowledgments*

As the 1999-2000 Odyssey of the Mind season was getting underway, amid whirlwinds that had not blown in past years, it was mentioned in a series of Internet postings that "Wouldn't it be nice if we had a 'Must-Know' pamphlet for new coaches." Some gremlin at my keyboard guided my fingers through the message, "This is something that I might be able to do, with some help from others." Next thing I knew, I'd been appointed. Or volunteered.

Thank you, Carole Micklus, Dr. Sam Micklus, Sammy Micklus, Diane Rynders, Michael Rynders, Jeanette Enzor, Lisa Love, Susan Fisher, Dave Luck, Kelsey Alexander, Janet Jones, Jimmie Jones, Diane Hay, Betsy Zachry, Joelle Cabassol, and others whom I am unintentionally forgetting to name, for the various suggestions that you made, either generally or specifically, either recently or long ago, that have come together to make this pamphlet possible.

As is the case with so much of the stuff that I write, there's not an original thought in the pages that follow. But I hope that you, the novice coach of Odyssey of the Mind, will find in these pages the type of information that I did not have until after I had put in more than a year of coaching. Without further ado, with very little elaboration and practically no editorializing, and only a minimum of motivation, here are 25 or so Must-Knows for the novice coach.

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Little Rock, Arkansas  
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*Note: Vic Fleming, a municipal judge and author of three books, began coaching Odyssey of the Mind in 1993 and has taken five teams to State and one to World.*

## **The Committed Communicator**

(Learn this, if possible, before your first meeting of any sort.)

Coaching an Odyssey of the Mind (“Odyssey”) team is a commitment of time, talent, and money. As coach, you must set an example early. Stressing the mutual nature of the time and talent commitment. Also the importance of open and frequent communication among everyone.

Frequent phoning, e-mailing, postcards, and hand-delivered notes should be fostered and encouraged. Everyone must remain fully briefed on what’s happening and when. Reminders should be the rule rather than the exception. A calendar, with meeting and competition dates marked, is useful.

There’s a cost limitation on the value of materials used in the long-term problem solution. Unless the team members are superior “scroungers,” it’s probable that more than this amount will be spent. Materials used and discarded do not count toward the cost of the team’s solution. Get an understanding early of where the money is going to come from. All families should chip in a certain amount. You are special for being willing to coach. Parents and team members should respect this and divide the costs incurred by the team.

Also, there is the consideration of feeding these kids snacks and/or meals, which cost money. Get a clear understanding as to how this will be handled. **As much as anything else, a coach must be a committed communicator.**

### **Relax, Enjoy, Ask**

#### **Rule One: “Have fun.”**

This applies to you, the coach, as well as team members. Remind them of it repeatedly. Have them remind you of it. The problems are not yours to solve. If you, as coach, keep the kids working and having fun, you are doing fine. Relax and enjoy yourself.

Stress will increase as competition dates draw near. Foreseeable stress can be minimized with good planning. Involve the team to the greatest extent possible in planning, recognizing that they will need some guidance to keep matters realistic. There will be times when “I don’t have a clue” will be the inevitable conclusion in a given scenario. Relax. Do not panic. It won’t help.

Lots of people are “out there” to offer help – other coaches, school coordinators, Odyssey of the Mind regional and state officers and directors, even unnamed people on the Internet. Learn who these people are, especially your regional and state officials. A sense of humor, especially the ability to laugh at yourself, will serve you well and keep your team happy.

### **Selecting Your Team**

Two ways to get started as an Odyssey coach are (1) to be assigned a team and (2) to be a part of recruiting a team. Often, school officials will have already determined the procedure for team selection.

If you've agreed to coach and have no team yet, or only part of a team, when selecting keep in mind the kids' potential. It's great to have creativity on the team. It's also great to have potential, which you can help develop. Among the ways of selecting a team are:

- tryouts, with pre-assigned creative tasks,
- volunteers, on a first-come basis,
- invitation, based on recommendations, grades, etc.

At a gathering designed to select a team, use index cards to get names, addresses, phone numbers, and special interests or talents on the card. Explain commitment to the group.

Teams consist of up to seven people. All team members may actively participate in presenting the long-term problem solution at competitions. The teams create their own solutions and make all necessary decisions for the competition. Since the number of members who may be in on long-term problem solutions is 5-7 (assuming a team of at least 5), if seven start and one drops, the team must continue with six or replace the drop and take an Outside Assistance penalty.

Kids must make a commitment to the team. Eventually you may have to make the final decision as to who is on each team.

### **Set an Example Early**

Once the team is known, call and personally welcome each member to the team. Model qualities you expect from each team member. Be and show that you are respectful, open-minded, flexible, adaptable, and reliable. And enthusiastic. Make them want to be that way, too. Your job is that of a facilitator. Ask open-ended questions that will help open their minds. Be a "guide on the side" not a "sage on the stage."

### **Preparation and Where and When to Meet**

While "the kids do all the work," the coach must prepare for each meeting. In Divisions I and II (and with younger Division III teams), a coach will probably attend and guide each "meeting" of the entire team. Meetings may take place at school, at a team member's home, the coach's home, or some other place. Choose a spot where both you, as coach, and team members can be comfortable and yet have plenty of room to spread out and get work done. You are a special person for being willing to coach. Parents and team members should respect your right to schedule meetings and activities at your convenience,

Some coaches try to structure their team practices after the analogous concept involving school-sponsored athletic teams — kids go to the locker room after school and are picked up after practice. Doing so may preclude participation by athletes with desirable talent or potential. Also, some schools do not necessarily offer a user-friendly atmosphere, meaning change that or meet elsewhere.

By illustration only, some teams meet once a week at a coach's home after school from 6:00ish to 9:00ish, with parents dropping off, picking up, and rotating the task of providing a meal. Others meet after school, ending at 6:00ish, with team members rotating the task of bringing snacks. Others meet on weekends. And some do various combinations.

While this is a decision that you may brainstorm with your kids, as coach, you should consider where you would be able to do the best job for your team. Cleanup should be part of the team's responsibility at the end of each session.

### **How Long is a Meeting?**

How often and how long does a team need to meet? As with many other questions in this program, there is no clear-cut answer and the team should be involved in resolving the issue. Whatever the team, with your guidance, chooses, it should be calculated to achieve goals and objectives established by the team. It also should be such that team members commit to regular attendance and keep their commitment.

How much time you, as coach, spend with the team members depends on you. One or two hours a week is about right, even with newcomers to the program. Getting a late start (early November or later) may indicate a need for more or longer meetings. During "crunch time" – the two or three weeks immediately prior to a competition – you'll spend a lot of extra time together.

Meetings will be most productive if the kids work additional time by themselves or in smaller groups to accomplish specific tasks that are less feasible when the whole group is together.

### **First Meeting: Parents and Children**

At your first meeting attendance should be mandatory for at least one parent with each child. Explain the ground rules. Discuss contingencies. For example, what is to happen when the team is meeting at someone's house and one child's parent has not picked him up on time (this *will* happen)?

Parents need to know from the start what is expected of them. As coach, you need a ready reference list, not only of phone numbers but also of names, addresses, dates, and comments. Tell the parents at that first meeting what they must do regarding transportation, providing refreshments (or meals), etc. Also, explain the Outside Assistance rule to parents in the presence of their kids and prepare them for the fact that you will repeat yourself frequently about that.

And then . . . frequently repeat yourself – about Outside Assistance and just about everything else. When the kids start to say, "Enough, we know that already," then make them repeat yourself to you. Also, tell parents and kids the program history, background, and philosophy.

## **Rules and Forms**

This program is full of rules and there are a variety of forms to be filled out as a necessity of entering any competition. There may be as many as three separate sources for rules – the long-term problem itself and the Program Guide from program headquarters. Don't assume anything until you've read these materials.

This pamphlet, as previously mentioned, is a Must-Know primer. You must know that you'd better plan early to acquire copies of the rules and the forms in the Program Guide. Introduce the team members to these things. Get ready to get comfortable early with a bunch of stuff that you may not have been used to in life as you know it.

Forms are a necessary part of preparing for competition. Make sure you read what paperwork is required for your regional meet and teach the team to fill it out. (Division I teams may dictate to the coach.)

The forms you will use are the Outside Assistance Form, Style Form, and Material Values Form. Beyond this, there is usually a Staging Area Judge's document or list that is required by the terms of a problem. Also, Clarification Forms must be used to obtain official clarifications. Clarifications that change something about the problem are published and your team should send for copies of these periodically. Make sure registrations and fees are mailed on time. This might mean doing it yourself or it might mean calling your local officials.

## **Ground Rules**

Establish ground rules at the first meeting. Remind of them frequently thereafter. As coach, make clear your expectations about time commitment.

A very important rule is that negativity and put-downs are off limits. They close things off or out. Odyssey is about opening things up and letting things in. An idea that sounds really strange may spark other ideas. Emphasize that the best ideas often come "later." Problem solutions are the collection of ideas and adaptations.

Respect is the basis of a good team. Insist that all team members respect each other and you. Insist that they accept all ideas as possibilities and avoid negativity. As coach, create an accepting environment. Reward risk taking! Encourage appropriate humor and good-natured fun.

## **Food**

Snacks are a must for hungry kids at after school meetings. Meeting through a meal period is a possibility. Spread the responsibility for food service around among parents. It's costly unless divided up.

Have limits on snacks and keep meals simple – *i.e.*, cookies or fruit or items that can be consumed within 10 minutes or so are preferable to bags of munchies that make noise, encourage mischief, and make noise throughout a meeting. A quick pizza and some cookies are easier to finish and get back to work from than a three-course meal.

While Rule One is "Have Fun," it's important to remember that this activity is a competitive learning experience. Thus, a work atmosphere is appropriate for meetings.

**"Uh, generally speaking, what do I do now?"**

There is no *one way* to coach an Odyssey team. Most people are nervous about making mistakes. Go ahead; be nervous. Make a mistake or two. Then get over it. Everyone makes mistakes. Mistakes are part of the process. Relax, and everything will go just fine.

Here are two extreme coaching techniques, **neither of which is recommended**:

Team A comes in before school to work on long-term and practice spontaneous; stays after school for more of the same; and practices every weekend until competition. Given the autumn through spring commitment, this deprives kids of other valuable experiences.

Team B is given a dollar figure (“Don’t spend more than \$\_\_\_\_”) and told when the bus will leave for the first competition. Given the purposes of the program, this deprives the kids and the coach of valuable interaction and assets to be gained from it.

Competition encourages teams to work their hardest, but it’s the process, not the product, that is important. Showing off their solution and their creativity is a better goal than winning a prize.

Brainstorming is an important process in Odyssey. There’s no such thing as a bad idea. All issues are subject to brainstorm sessions for multiple solutions. Have the team write down all possible solutions. You . . . Relax, enjoy, and have fun.

### **Odyssey of the Mind History, Background, and Philosophy**

The Odyssey of the Mind program was founded by Dr. Sam Micklus, a professor who gave his design classes unusual problems, such as getting around a lake without a boat; designing machines to throw pies at the professor; and building vehicles without wheels to cross campus.

In 1978 Dr. Micklus developed problems and ran a competition for 28 New Jersey schools and Odyssey of the Mind was born. Its primary objectives are developing creative thinking skills and teaching teamwork. Coaches have been teachers, parents, workers of all sorts, including a former governor of Colorado and a sitting municipal judge in Arkansas.

Competitive divisions have been established, by the ages and grades of team members. A team competes in the division applicable to its oldest member. A team must compete in the lowest division for which it is eligible.

- Division I - in the fifth grade or less
- Division II - in the sixth, seventh, or eighth grade
- Division III - attending high school
- Division IV - Collegiate: All members must be enrolled in at least one course at a two/four year college/university.

### **Team-Building: Encourage Laughter and Creative Zaniness**

Spend time during the early part of the first few meetings making sure that your team members get to know each other. Let them tell about themselves. Make notes of birthdays. Remember them. Celebrate them. Celebrate other things as well. Look for reasons to have team members give each other rounds of applause.

Engender positivism in their every endeavor. Tell them repeatedly how proud you are of them. Reward their smallest accomplishments. Never focus for long on any negative. Never embarrass one kid in front of the others (try to avoid embarrassing anyone at all).

Encourage laughter, make it mandatory. Occasionally make the team engage in 30 seconds of fake laughter. It’s relaxing, soothing, and healthy. And contagious.

Encourage creative zaniness. Use simple party games, word games, and verbal exercises to keep creativity flowing during these sessions. Encourage the telling of jokes with appropriate non-toxic humor.

Team building is the basis of a good team. Team building activities may be as simple as an outing to the hardware store or may be a specific exercise. Team building should be fun and promote recognition of each member's strengths.

### **Choosing a Long-Term Problem**

Some coaches will come aboard a team that has already selected a long-term problem. Some won't. Techniques to facilitate selection of a problem are the same as those employed in goal-setting exercises that should be part and parcel of the first meetings.

Posture things, as much as possible, in terms of problems to be brainstormed. This places with the kids the decisions that rightfully must be theirs in this experience. For example, if the kids are torn between two problems, you might divide the group into two subgroups and have them meet separately for a spell with the assignment that when they come back together, each will explain the problem they've studied and present arguments in favor of choosing that problem.

You will learn a lot about the group as you observe how they discharge this task. Some may not want to read a long problem. Some may never dig to understand confusing terms. You can use these observations to phrase questions later, the answers to which may help resolve certain key issues. For example, if you see that three members are totally frustrated, you might ask, "Who will do what to ensure that the entire team will fully understand the problem in time to pursue realistic solutions within your time line?"

CAVEAT: Consider working only on spontaneous until you are certain all team members are committed. If a team member drops out before the team discusses the Long-term problem, he or she may be replaced. Once a specific Long-term is discussed, Outside Assistance rules kick in if someone drops off the team.

### **Establishing a Plan for the Year**

Setting up a time line for achievement of certain objectives, help the team be realistic. Some kids, under the influence of a great idea, will tell you that they will write a skit "tonight." A week later you see that they have two pages in longhand and are totally amazed that the skit only lasts 25 seconds.

Plan for editing and rewriting. Observe your team to identify the writers, the editors, the artists, the engineers, the actors, the comedians, the dancers, etc. As coach you must facilitate their deployment of personnel. Otherwise the stronger personalities and the more popular kids will dominate the experience. And potential will go unrealized.

### **Long-term Problems**

The long-term problem is where teams prepare their solutions in advance and bring them to the competition. Long-term problems are written in such a way that there are numerous possible solutions.

Performance teams often say, "Time!" at the end of their presentation. This is usually not required, but it's important to have a clear signal to judges that they're done. This helps avoid overtime penalty.

Team members often have questions about long-term problems. They should be encouraged to read the problem and all program literature carefully. When a question arises for which there appears to be no written rule, the team may use the problem clarification process. Problem Clarification forms, found in the Program Guide, must be used.

As coach, you should point out the structure of the problems – the statement of the problem; the limitations or rules for the problem; the site and set-up conditions; and the scoring elements. Make sure everyone understands the general rules in the program literature apply to every long-term problem.

Coach them into breaking down problem elements, to facilitate better understanding.

### **Master Your Team's Problem**

If you do not have a reasonable understanding of the long-term problem your team has chosen (or problems your team is considering), make arrangements to do so quickly. It's important that you get comfortable with the problem your team chooses.

Teams should be coached to ensure that their long-term solution take into account that one or more members could be absent or otherwise unable to perform on competition day.

Coach teams to divide the labor, recognizing that tasks never divide in a completely equal manner. Team members may be assigned specialties: one is to know the problem inside out; another the rules; another the limitations; another the site set-up and pre-staging requirements; another the scoring.

There are time limits (usually 8 minutes) for each long-term problem. Performance problems usually have penalties for exceeding the limit. Teams should be coached to end in less time than is allowed. Many factors come into play. Have the team brainstorm the issue. Long-term technical problems are usually stopped at the end of the allotted time. Teams should be coached to implement plans for possible technical breakdowns.

Don't be alarmed if long-term technical problems seem overwhelming. Embrace this. Celebrate it. Then coach the team to divide and dissect, comprehend and tackle. Your comparisons of problems' similarities to real life are always appropriate. Someday, they may even be appreciated.

### **Spontaneous**

There are three types of spontaneous problems: verbal, hands-on and a combination of those two. There's a lot of literature out there on techniques and sample problems. You'll do well to study it. Here are some must-knows:

Verbal Spontaneous is typically a question calling for a list of answers. Speed and creativity are involved, as the team will be given a short time to think (*e.g.*, one minute) and a longer time to respond (*e.g.*, two minutes) with "ordinary" answers receiving one point and "creative or humorous" answers receiving either three or five points.

Sometimes members respond in sequence – take turns. Sometimes they turn over cards and respond according to an identifying number. Practice both ways. However, since this part of the competition is



designed to see how the team members have learned to think creatively and to pull together, the team should be prepared for any type of technique designed to designate which team member is to respond at a given time. Emphasize speed, creativity, understandability, appropriateness of responses, conciseness of responses, and volume. Bottom line: The team with a cross between the MOST and the MOST CREATIVE wins. Examples of verbal spontaneous problems:

- *Name things that are red (or blue or green).*
- *Name uses for a fire hose (or windmill or pepper shaker).*
- *The answer is "Light bulb"; what is the question?*

Hands-On is typically an assignment to create something out of a finite amount of materials. Again, speed and creativity are involved, as the team will be given a short time (e.g., five minutes) to complete the task and will be scored on cooperation, planning, creativity, and execution. Examples of a hands-on spontaneous problems:

- *With three pipe cleaners, three rubber bands, two pieces of paper, two pieces of adhesive tape, and a pie pan, build a children's toy and give it a non-traditional name. You have one minute to plan and ask questions and five minutes total to complete the task.*
- *Using one pound of silly putty, two feet of PVC pipe, 10 drinking straws, and four tennis balls, transport a brick from point A to point B without the brick's touching the floor.*

Combination, as the name implies, is a blend of the two other types of spontaneous problem. An example of a combination spontaneous problem:

- *Using these materials (whatever), each person create a children's toy (three minutes). Then (two minutes), all five present and describe their toys, after which the team selects the most creative toy. Then (two minutes), list all possible uses for the toy.*

In hands-on and combination problems, there's often a scoring line item for "How well the team worked together." Thus, coach your team to be and appear organized, cooperative and cohesive whole. The book you received with your competition packet contains spontaneous problems. Use them for practice.

Make sure not a meeting goes by without spontaneous practice. Championships are won or lost on spontaneous scores.

### **Divergent Problems and Open-Ended Questions**

Creative thinking can be developed. The best way to develop creative thinking skills is to solve divergent problems, ones with numerous solutions, as opposed to convergent problems, which have a single correct answer. Questioning techniques will help a team get past blockades. Always keep questions open-ended, so ideas will be the team's own. Ask, "What are ways to put things together?" not "Have you thought of glue yet?"

Avoid questions that steer a team to a solution in YOUR mind!

### **Blameless**

Coach the team to avoid wasting creative energy by *blaming*. The team creates its own solution and if something goes wrong, it is the team's responsibility. The team should try to have a crisis management plan so it knows what it will do when something breaks down.

Blaming others is poor sportsmanship. Blaming yourself is noble. Sharing the blame with others is nobler. Coach the kids to be noble.

## **Outside Assistance**

The Outside Assistance Rule is in the books. Get those books and read it thoroughly. Until then, follow these guidelines. Coaches may not offer opinions, but may guide the team toward alternate thoughts and opinions through careful Socratic questioning. Non-team members should not offer opinions. If they do, the opinions so offered are not usable by the team member who heard it.

Parents who want to sew costumes, help engineer solutions, or build props will see their teams penalized. The rationale of the rule is that the “outsider” is taking away from the experience the program is to provide to the kids. Be sure everyone is clear on Outside Assistance – team members, PARENTS and you.

The solution must be completely thought of, constructed and performed by team members. If the team members do not have a skill or it is too dangerous, then THEY must brainstorm alternative means of producing the desired result.

Field trips, guest speakers, etc. are encouraged, but anyone involved must avoid Outside Assistance. *E.g.*, an artist can lead a discussion of finger painting techniques, but may not tell someone what or even how to paint a particular item for use in a solution.

Let the team provide the answers. When in doubt about doing something that borders on Outside Assistance, DON'T DO IT!

## **Odyssey of the Mind Scoring**

In each competition there is a possibility of scoring a maximum of 350 points.

There is a maximum of 200 for the long-term problem solution (raw and adjusted), awarded in this fashion: There is usually a finite number of points per line item, with the maximum of all the line items adding up to 200. The team receiving the highest “raw” score gets the 200. All lower scores are “percentaged” off the top score. For example, if the top score is 150 and the second highest is 75, these two teams would receive scores of 200 and 100 respectively.

There is a maximum of 50 points for Style (raw and adjusted). The team with the highest score gets 50, with lower scores percentaged to the top score. For example, with a top score of 40 and second place score of 30, the two scores would be 50 and 35.5, respectively.

There is a maximum of 100 points for the spontaneous problem solution. Often, spontaneous raw scores have no ceiling; that is, a team may have a raw score of more than 100. Lower scores are percentaged off the highest score, which receives the 100. If the two top scores were 250 and 125, then the adjusted scores would be 100 and 50, respectively.

## **Penalties**

Long-term problems list several types of penalties. They are listed to assure that a team doesn't bend or break rules, cause a safety hazard, delay competition, or misbehave. Study them. Learn them.

The Spirit of the Problem penalty is aimed at teams attempting to circumvent the intention of the rules, in either long-term or spontaneous, ranges from 1-100 points.

Unsportsmanlike conduct penalties can occur if teams (including coaches) are impairing another team, being disruptive, using inappropriate language, and the like.

Outside Assistance penalties of 5-200 points are assessed if a team uses help from someone other than its members. There are other penalties specific to the problems.

### **Style**

Style, defined in Odyssey literature, is said to be an “elaboration” of the long-term problem solution. Many first-time coaches don’t “get” this on their own (at least I didn’t). Getting it early will alleviate long-term frustration and help a good team achieve goals.

Think of Style as a specified combination of individual aspects of the long-term solution – where your team may automatically stand out or exert a special effort in order to stand out. For example, if one of the Style categories is “appearance of the clock,” your team will spend a lot of effort on making this one prop look super duper. If one of the categories is “free choice” and you have a talented ballet dancer, then your team may insert a dance into its solution.

The scoring of any long-term problem has five Style categories, each worth up to ten points. Each team must complete a Style Form, listing areas to be scored and explaining how the specifics of their categories relate to the solution. The team must be careful in choosing a style category not to overlap any other line item on the scoring sheet. If a vehicle problem has a scoring category for the vehicle’s appearance, then the team cannot list the vehicle’s appearance as one of the Style categories.

Style is a part of the team’s requirement. Be sure you know what is required for your team’s problem, and be sure your team chooses an *exact element* for each “free choice.”

### **In Summary**

Relax and enjoy yourself.

Do not panic.

Laugh at yourself.

Celebrate and embrace  
the creativity of the experience.

Be respectful,

open-minded,

flexible,

adaptable.

Be enthusiastic.

***Have fun.***