

Proposals to Improve Competition and Move It to the Next Level

by Mike "Buster" Bednarek

Dear Red Nose Reader and Fellow Joey:

Competition at clown gatherings like conferences and conventions is being discussed and debated at the local and national level. To that forum, I offer ideas which have come about from my personal experience of 18 years in clowning as a performer and entertainer, instructor, coach, advisor, writer, competitor, and judge, as well as from some highly spirited conversations with my clown friends and colleagues in the Northwest and across the country.

*First presented to the COAI Board at its annual meeting in April 1997, where they received enthusiastic support, these proposals also appeared in The New Calliope for review and reaction by the entire COAI membership. For more information, please write me at: **PO Box 364, Salem, OR 97308**; or, e-mail me at: **mbednarek@comcast.net**. A big, red nose THANKS to you!*

com•pe•ti•tion

n. 1. the act of competing; struggle or rivalry for supremacy, a prize, etc. 2. a contest for some prize, honor, or advantage. 3. the rivalry offered by a competitor. 4. a competitor or competitors. 5. rivalry between two or more persons or groups for an object desired in common, usually resulting in a victor and a loser or losers but not necessarily involving the destruction of the latter.

-- The Random House Dictionary of the English Language

The subject of competition within our clown community triggers a number of questions, none of them with simple answers:

Why do we hold competitions? Why do we compete? [And why, at times, do we choose **not** to compete?] How do individual clowns benefit, learn, and improve by competing? How does competition advance the art of clowning and strengthen us as a community?

While these are not simple questions, they are the questions that should be asked and answered **before** discussing any changes to be made to competitions. It's important that we, as a clown community, have ownership in the same sense of purpose. Only then will changes in philosophy, format, or forms of recognition have a basis and common agreement.

What is a clown?

As a starting point, consider this working definition of a clown:

A unique, comical character who uses appearance, actions, and skills to entertain and make people laugh.

The "clown," then, is a product of three things: 1) the visual representation and **appearance** of a comic character, 2) the projection of that character through **actions**, and 3) the demonstration and performance of clown arts **skills**. **Clowning is a performing art** -- it exists only in relationship to an audience, it advances only through study and

practice, and it demonstrates certain levels of competence through the response it elicits (by and large measured by the degree to which people laugh and are entertained). So, when we look at other clowns and ourselves to assess “how good a clown” they or we are, we should be examining the **complete** clown: how the clown looks, how the clown acts, and what the clown does.

Great clowns = image + character + skills

When we think of a great clown, we think of a unique visual image, a strong character, and a practiced and well-developed set of skills that engage, involve, entertain, challenge, and amuse us. In modern day terms, we think of Bill Irwin, Kenny Ahern, Steve Smith, Rowan “Mr. Bean” Atkinson, Avner “Avner the Eccentric” Eisenberg, David Larible, Arthur Pedlar, Annie Fratellini, and Oleg Popov. Historically, we think of clowns like Charlie Chaplin, Lou Jacobs, Grock, Lucille Ball, Otto Griebling, and Emmett Kelly.

These clowns may be considered masters, role models, and exemplary practitioners of the art -- each a “unique, comical character.” We would no sooner be able to compare and rank them as we could the great painters, pianists, teachers, or actors -- nor would we want to.

Why do we compare clowns to each other?

Clowns, by their very nature, defy comparison. Normally, we celebrate their uniqueness and discourage sameness. Competitions, on the other hand, generally compare one clown to another, and then put them in a rank order. You have to wonder whether this has had a cloning effect on clowns, making them more similar than different.

Consider these questions as well:

Has competition -- especially makeup -- (grease) painted itself into the corner occupied by the old adage that “beauty is only skin deep” by concentrating on aspects other than the heart and soul of the clown (character) and the tools of the trade (performance skills)?

And, are we truly recognizing and rewarding excellence by giving out 3 (or 10) honors? What if more are deserving? What if **fewer** are deserving of recognition?! What has that done to the value of the honor?

Focusing the positive aspects of competition inward

Certainly, the positive aspects of competition are worth retaining-- setting goals, shooting for high standards, recognizing excellence, using creativity, taking risks, taking pride in one’s art in the presence of peers, trying out new material in front of a collegial audience, and receiving critiques on strengths and areas needing improvement from experts. Perhaps it is time to take those positive aspects and turn the focus of competition **inward** and focus on becoming better, more complete clowns, rather than “beating” the competition and “winning” a plaque. Winning a plaque, by itself, is an accolade and a good thing, especially if it’s recognition of achieving some level of excellence. However, if

it's seen **only** as the acquisition of something to hang on a wall and reward for having beaten a competitor, it loses its shine.

No matter how new to clowning or accomplished an individual clown might be, he or she could benefit from being evaluated against a certain set of standards for appearance, character projection, and performance skills.

By so doing, that clown receives individualized feedback on strengths and areas to improve, excellence is recognized and rewarded, individualism is respected and celebrated, and the art of clowning is advanced.

Suggested new goals for competition

In that spirit, consider these suggested goals for competition:

- 1. Advance the art and craft of clowning.** Competition should be based on a view of clowning that reflects a completeness in appearance, character projection, and skill.
- 2. Recognize and reward excellence in clowning.** Awards and recognition should be based on **high levels of accomplishment** for the art of clowning. **All** clowns deserving of recognition should receive it -- the more winners, the better, if they meet certain standards for excellence.
- 3. Make it a positive learning experience for all involved -- performers, audience, and judges.** Competitions should measure each participating clown's own merits, and help each one become aware of strengths and improve on weaknesses -- **not** be comparisons of one clown to another. They should be held in an atmosphere that is supportive, enabling, non-threatening, inclusive, festive, and celebratory.

If clown gatherings -- such as conferences, festivals, and conventions -- hold competitions at all, then competitions should be based on these three very important principles.

What could be considered for change, and how?

For us, as a clown community, to achieve these goals, five changes should be considered to improve and enhance competitions as they currently exist:

- 1. Adopt a new vision and purpose for competitions at clown conferences and gatherings.** The philosophy, principles, and goals stated above are offered as a starting point for study, consideration, and discussion.

As a clown community, we need new benchmarks against which we can measure what we do. Clown governing bodies and those individuals and groups committed to the ongoing improvement of the art of clowning -- including the focus of clown education, the quality of learning and training experiences available, and standards of excellence in the art -- must establish new ground on which they can agree. Only then would changing or retaining any current practice make sense.

2. Include makeup competition as a component of other “complete” clown competitions – not as a separate, stand-alone competition. Over the years, makeup competition **has** served to upgrade the appearance of clowns -- both in makeup application technique and costuming. Unfortunately, with that heavy emphasis on “looks” and the stresses of competition, it has also reinforced one-dimensional clowning, in which no character is projected and no skills are performed.

Makeup, costuming, and appearance have become an end in themselves, rather than being the first step in projecting one’s clown character.

That famous quote -- “**A clown is a poet in action.**” -- drives home the point that clowning is **NOT** a static art form. If you agree with the premise of what a clown is, stated earlier in this article, then you might also agree that makeup competition is not clowning at all. It is, simply put, a beauty contest and fashion show.

Makeup and costuming should be viewed as **just one** of the three layers that comprise good clowning, and should be judged and evaluated accordingly, as it is now in paradeability. Merging and combining the rating of appearance (which would include makeup design and technique, clothing, and accessories) into all other competitions, evaluations, or critiques would bring us back to a broader focus on the art of clowning.

How this might work and how a competition rating sheet might look are discussed in the following proposal.

3. Conduct competition to reinforce the ideal of the complete clown, recognize excellence, measure each clown’s own merits, and help each clown become aware of strengths and improve on weaknesses – NOT as a comparison of one clown against another.

In affect, competition would then become more akin to a music festival or adjudication. Each performer, or artist, is judged or evaluated on his or her own. After all, isn’t that how we view works of art?

Everything does not have to be put in a 1st, 2nd, 3rd . . . place rank order. The cereal we eat, the artwork we hang in our homes, and the comedy we laugh at all are matters of personal taste and preference. They depend on audience or consumer reaction.

If competitions focused on evaluating merit and accomplishment, pride could be taken and recognition given in having attained and demonstrated a certain level of artistic competence -- **NOT** in having beaten so-and-so.

There would be a move away from winners-and-losers, and the view that competitions exist to “be better than” another fellow clown. There also would be a move away from “winning hardware” (e.g. trophies and plaques) and toward attaining and demonstrating competence and excellence in the clown entertainment and performing arts.

The potential benefits and likely results of such a change include the following:

- 1) the gap perceived by those who feel they “aren’t good enough to compete” will be lessened and perhaps eliminated (which could result in more clowns choosing to participate),
- 2) recognition would reinforce and uphold the value and importance of “the complete clown,”
- 3) clowns will receive recognition for having accomplished a certain level of competence and excellence in the art,
- 4) those clowns deserving of recognition would still receive it,
- 5) as many (or as few) clowns deserving of recognition at that particular festival or event would receive it,
- 6) the potential arbitrariness of 1st, 2nd, and 3rd place finishers would be eliminated, and
- 7) participants would receive more specific feedback on strengths and suggested areas for improvement.

Those competing also should be allowed to observe and learn from the performances of others by being part of the audience. This would contribute to a more collegial, supportive, enabling atmosphere within the competitions themselves.

The philosophical change brought about by Proposal 3 would create a new spirit for both self-improvement and artistic pride, as well as build a sense of community for the “professional” clown. This change also would have a great impact in how judges view and carry out their roles.

Instead of conscientiously -- and quite seriously -- trying to discern the difference between a score of 16 or 17 in “originality” because the competitor’s composite score determines his or her rank (and a possible award), judges could take a more positive, enjoyable, and holistic approach to evaluating merit and accomplishment. They would be seen as being supportive, enabling, coaching, and “on the side” of the individual participant. And, they could actively participate as members of the audience, instead of as stoic observers.

How would judging work? awards and honors?

Judging and awards would radically change. Judging could turn into a **rating of accomplishment** in four areas -- appearance, character projection, skill, and overall. Ratings in each could be given on a 5-point scale: 1 – Needs Attention, 2 – Fair, 3 – Good, 4 – Excellent, and 5 – Outstanding.

Comments on related areas would be added by each judge or evaluator, again considering the merits of each clown. Instead of a score card, you might see a rating sheet like the one on the following page. Awards would recognize levels of accomplishment -- and **not** be a comparative ranking -- and all clowns deserving of recognition would receive it.

FESTIVAL RATING SHEET

Participant / Number: _____

Type of Performance: _____

Judge / Evaluator: _____

Directions: Festival participants do not compete against each other; rather, each is rated on his/her own merits. Ability and potential should be considered along with the present level of overall clown accomplishment.

Ratings: Evaluate the level of accomplishment in appearance, character, skill(s), and overall merit on a **5-point scale: 1 – Needs Attention, 2 – Fair, 3 – Good, 4 – Excellent, and 5 – Outstanding.** Comment on strengths along with giving suggestions for improvement in each area in the space provided.

Appearance	1	2	3	4	5
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- Considerations: makeup, costume, accessories
- Comments and suggestions (use back of sheet for more space):

Character projection	1	2	3	4	5
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- Considerations: presence, consistency, facial expressions, body expressiveness, voice (if used), movement, actions, how funny
- Comments and suggestions (use back of sheet for more space):

Skill(s)	1	2	3	4	5
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- Considerations: evidence of preparation, technical expertise, comedic technique, use of prop(s), beginning-middle-end, pace and timing, audience involvement, creativity and originality, how entertaining, staging and involvement (if group performance)
- Comments and suggestions (use back of sheet for more space):

OVERALL	1	2	3	4	5
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- Considerations: overall strength and levels of accomplishment in appearance, character projection, and skill(s)
- Comments and suggestions (use back of sheet for more space):

For example, clowns rating an overall level of “Outstanding” or a 5 would receive a “gold” - perhaps a ribbon, medallion, or other appropriate symbol. Those rating an “Excellent” or 4 overall would receive a “silver,” and those rating “Good” or 3 overall a “bronze.” All others participating in the ratings activity should receive some form of recognition, perhaps a “red nose commendation” as a Festival Participant.

This kind of rating system is used today in many music festivals and wine judgments, where it is not unusual for more than one artist, performer, or product to be judged as superior or outstanding and receive equal, top level recognition. Almost certainly, this kind of a change in competition philosophy to the evaluating and rating of an individual clown’s merit would require extensive re-education of competitors/participants AND judges.

4. Transform skit competition into a performance and entertainment showcase.

Clowns are entertainers, and they entertain and amuse with a variety of performing art forms: skits, physical comedy, storytelling, face painting, balloon sculpturing, pantomime, juggling and manipulations, magic and illusions, vent, puppetry, ministry, joke telling, interactive theater, bubble blowing, rope throwing, balancing, song-and-dance, music-and-song, care-and-humor bringing to hospitals and care facilities, meet-and-greet, walkarounds, educational and theme stage shows, paradeability, school assemblies, birthday parties, fire eating, yo-yoing, trained animals, unicycling, paper folding and sculpture, cartooning, caricature sketching, chalk talks, improvisation, . . .

The point is that clowns use **many** different forms of performance skills to enliven their characters and entertain their audiences. In fact, stand-alone skits may be one of the least used venues for the working clown. Let’s provide a true showcase for the wide and impressive range of talents and skills we have!

What **should** be retained from current skit competitions? Consider: 1) judging or rating based on the “complete” clown -- appearance, character projection, and skill (as outlined in the previous section), 2) recognition of creativity, originality, entertainment value, and humor, 3) judging and critiquing by a panel of experts, 4) principles of beginning, middle, and end, 5) specific time frame of a pre-determined number of minutes, 6) option to perform solo or in a group ensemble, 7) opportunity to perform for an audience of supportive peers, and 8) option for non-participants to observe, learn, and participate as an audience.

The philosophy of evaluating individual clowns outlined in Proposal 3 -- **reinforce the ideal of the complete clown, recognize excellence, measure each clown’s own merits, and help each clown become aware of strengths and improve on weaknesses** -- would still satisfy each and every one of the “desirable” traits now found in skit competition. Likewise, the sample rating sheet on the previous page would work as an evaluating tool for such an expanded performance showcase.

Lastly, consider one more set of changes to the current approach to competition:

5. Supplement competitions with critiques, coaching sessions, and open mics. If you can agree to the three suggested new goals for clown competition stated earlier in this article -- 1) advance the art and craft of clowning, 2) recognize and reward excellence in clowning, and 3) make it a positive learning experience for all involved -- then think about what could happen if the public granting of “awards” was minimized.

The same kind of public presentation of character and skill could take place in front of an audience and a panel of clown experts. Since there would be no need to add up or aggregate the rating sheets, the panel could spend more time giving constructive critiques and written comments. After the rating sheets were completed, they'd be given directly to the festival participant. That's it!

These **critique sessions** and opportunities could even be focused on specific aspects of clowning -- such as makeup, wardrobe, or movement-- to give participants detailed feedback. This might be especially appropriate for First of May, less experienced, and/or potentially “stage struck” clowns.

In fact, experienced and master clowns who have “been there and done that” in judged competitions, and have been regularly awarded top prizes, might consider this venue as a way to further their own character development and skills and to try out something new.

Coaching sessions -- in which a participant is matched one-to-one with an expert, experienced, or master clown -- would give a clown a non-public opportunity to demonstrate a bit, model a new clown face or outfit, or perform anything of his/her choosing and receive immediate feedback, constructive comment, and suggestions for improvement in a supportive, non-threatening environment.

Open mics give clowns a stage on which to perform a routine and a supportive audience from whom to receive immediate response, reactions, supportive comments, and suggestions.

Offering critique or coaching sessions at the same time during a conference as judged competitions might provide clowns with a good alternative if they don't quite have the confidence or performing competence to get up on a public stage. This same-time scheduling also might serve as a transitional phase while traditional competition formats are being changed and participants are becoming more comfortable with those changes.

So, what's next?

Change of any kind in our lives can be difficult. The “old way” is known, and it has a predictable and comfortable routine to it. We don't want to change if the need is unclear, or if it's something with which we disagree. Perhaps it's because it's inconsistent with our culture, values, or norms.

Also, if the benefits don't outweigh what we'd be giving up, if we have to learn a whole new set of skills, if we perceive a possible loss of personal or organizational power, or if the change is being imposed on us, we tend to resist it.

Think of your life and the changes you've been through: jobs, relationships, homes, and yes, even your clown character. We're more likely to support changes if we understand their cause and purpose, if we can help design those changes that are going to affect us, and if we get support and training along the way. And, it helps to view change with some practical optimism: **"change creates opportunity!"**

Norman Cousins once said, "Progress begins with the belief that what is necessary is possible." There seems to be a growing consensus in the greater clown community that change is needed to improve the way we conduct competitions. It **is** possible. Consider this ambitious set of proposals an invitation to be what we are (and can be): proud practitioners of the performing art of clowning.

What can we do?

It's been said that "The distance is nothing; it is only the first step that is difficult." Let's put on our over-sized shoes and take that first step together as a clown community. Here's what we can do:

1. See if we generally agree that there's reason to change.
2. Communicate with and actively involve all the stakeholders in the discussion -- individual clowns, master clowns, organizations, and policy makers.
3. Develop and reach agreement on a vision, purpose, or set of goals to set the new direction for what will be.
4. Create a work plan, divide up the tasks, and set (and keep!) reasonable timelines.
5. Try out some of the new ideas on a smaller scale, such as the state or regional level, to see how well they work, better assure success, transition new formats in and old practices out, evaluate the changes made, make improvements before national and international consideration, and report to the board which oversees competition.
6. Support and coordinate these efforts with leadership, time, information, and training.
7. Be open with, respect, and trust each other; and maintain a sense of humor and perspective on what's really important.
8. Assess and evaluate the changes made, and be willing to change them further, or change them back, depending on the results.

If you believe, like I do, that if you stop getting better, you stop being good, then **NOW** is the time to get started! Thanks for your interest in this issue, and for reading and considering the entirety of these proposals. **May belly laughs and the spirit of joyfulness be yours!!**

"Whatever you do, do it with all your might. Work at it, early and late, in season and out of season, not leaving a stone unturned, and never deferring for a single hour that which can be done just as well now."

-- P.T. Barnum