

2-year chorus rotation?

At the Society's request, for more than a year, members of the Society Contest & Judging Committee (SCJC) have been investigating an idea that would nearly double the number of choruses eligible to compete on the international stage—dividing the most talented Society choruses into two equal pools to compete on alternating years. The suggestion was proposed by multiple sources, with arguments and anecdotal support compelling enough to request the SCJC research.

There is a precedent for this plan: A two-year rotation model used by Sweet Adelines since the early 1970s is overwhelmingly popular among its members. Of course, we are the Barbershop Harmony Society, with different traditions, desires and expectations. Such a substantial change to the Society's chorus contest structure should not be entered into lightly, and it is by no means certain that the proposed change will go forward. This article:

- summarizes a proposal that has been recommended by the SCJC.
- outlines the major arguments for and against the proposed plan.
- summarizes the research, polling and changes that have occurred so far.
- shows you where to go for more information and where to make your views known.

Just what are we talking about?

Currently, our champion choruses are prohibited from competing in international contests for the ensuing two years, making the third year following their championship their next opportunity to compete. This gives them some breathing room and allows other choruses to “step in” and “step up.” For many years, the Vocal Majority and the Masters of Harmony would each win in their respective year, and a third chorus (Westminster Chorus, Ambassadors of Harmony, Alexandria Harmonizers, New Tradition Chorus) would win when these two choruses were not competing. The proposal being discussed is somewhat similar, but for all competitors, not just the champions.

Simply put, if you were to compete and make it to the international stage, you would not be eligible to compete at international the following year. You may take the year to recover, or to build your war chest for the following year, or to do something different like travel, but you are not permitted to compete at the international level. You may still compete at the district level if you so desire.

Under this proposal, a chorus that competes in Portland in 2012 would not be eligible to compete again until Las Vegas in 2014. Toronto in 2013 would host a different group of choruses, none of which competed in Portland. A proposed formula would ensure the 2012 and 2013 fields were equally strong.

Potential advantages of a two-year rotation

Proponents of the two-year rotation plan believe it may address many needs among Society chapters and individual barbershoppers: Increases district participation in international qualifying contests. There has been more than a 20% drop since 1996 in the number of choruses appearing in district contests to qualify for international. There is some statistical evidence that choruses capable of achieving international qualifying scores skip these district contests because one or two other higher-scoring district choruses are expected to win any available international berths. Were outcomes no longer perceived as a foregone conclusion, more chapters may be inspired to vie for open slots. If these “on the cusp” chapters believed the price they must pay to improve would now be rewarded, more may be motivated to acquire the resources and recruit the additional members needed to excel at the next level.

Relieves financial burdens on chapters and individuals. The time commitment and costs associated with preparing for an international contest can be difficult for active chorus members to meet every year, and could be a deal-breaker for some potential members. A year off would ease financial and scheduling expectations, which could improve member satisfaction, recruiting and retention. Creates incentives for a more balanced chapter experience. A year off may reduce “two-song syndrome” (where chapters constantly refine contest packages at the expense of repertoire) and increase incentives for greater variety during chapter meetings. More time could be devoted to non-contest repertoire, fund-raising, membership growth, and on improving their community profile. The two-year layoffs for international champions may help explain their multi-faceted chapter strengths and long-term staying power. Regular one-year layoff may similarly affect other international competitors.

Boosts international attendance and revenues. Those who attend international conventions tend to love the experience and want to return; yet, the pool of potential attendees has been shrinking. Lower convention profits also mean less funding to apply to the Society’s non-contest needs. A broader talent pool at the international contest would equal a broader pool of first-time attendees who can catch the “bug” and return again. A higher number of family and supporters could likely afford to accompany competitors bi-annually than can afford to do so annually, possibly boosting overall crowd sizes.

Increases member enjoyment at international conventions. International chorus competitors typically have limited time to enjoy the week due to extra rehearsals, mandated curfews and other constraints. Off years will give these proudly fanatical barbershoppers the rare opportunity to attend all contest sessions, enjoy more tagging on more evenings, and generally savor the casual pleasures at and around international conventions. Chorus contest fans may also enjoy seeing new groups each year and may be less inclined to skip years because “it is mostly the same groups every year.” Multiplies creativity. Competitive choruses that are in an off year may find that watching all the other choruses (currently impossible for most competitors) may give them a better sense of creative possibilities and help spur them to greater heights.

Potential disadvantages of a two-year rotation

Of course, not all Society members are in favor of a two-year rotation. Current international competitors and district officers in particular have expressed concerns that they want to see resolved.

Lowers attendance at district competitions? Not all District leaders are convinced that the proposal will increase participation enough at fall contests. They worry that their biggest and best chorus may skip their fall contest every other year, harming attendance and district finances. The core of the concern is whether “off-year” chorus members will have enough incentives to participate. For example, could districts allow an “off-year” chorus to compete in the fall for the district championship? Could an “off-year” chorus host the fall contest, give a headliner performance, sing away the trophy, put on master classes, or all of the above? Many additional options are still available for exploration, but this concern remains a major item on the table. In any case, a feared drop in fall contest attendance may be avoidable.

Why mandate what can be done voluntarily? While many top choruses already skip years voluntarily, many of their members don’t want rules changed to mandate a year off. In the end, this becomes a question of balancing their concerns against those of “on the cusp” choruses, who always have a mandated year off because current rules restrict the number of open slots.

Loss of momentum? Some members of top choruses suggest that momentum may be lost if they skip every other year, or question why medalist choruses are not exempt from this proposal. All options are still on the table, but this concern must be weighed against concerns of choruses seeking to start whatever momentum could be generated by a realistic shot at international competition. Again, note that international champions typically come back in improved form after their longer two-year contest layoffs.

Watering down the field? Today’s “on the cusp” choruses indeed average slightly lower scores and fewer members than the current field. Some contend this proposal would reduce the number of A-level choruses performing on a given year by half, backfilling their numbers with current B-level choruses and thereby lowering contest quality and prestige. This is a valid concern, as long as it doesn’t include potentially misleading math and assumptions. For example, any given year’s line-up already excludes many top groups that sit out voluntarily—“cutting that number in half” is not wholly accurate. More importantly, the hope is that the small gap between today’s present and “on the cusp” international competitors will close once the incentives of international competition take effect on newly motivated choruses.

There may be precedent in looking back on when the Sweet Adelines instituted their two-year plan by placing all “second tier” choruses in the same rotation. Our sisters report that within a few years, the weaker choruses had closed the gap and that both rotations are now strong. While our Society’s proposed plan creates equivalently weighted rotations from the outset, we could likewise soon forget which groups once were “second tier.” If

more choruses have incentives to reach for higher performance goals, wouldn't that increase the number of high-level choruses at the district and international levels?

What's next?

Based on its study and feedback, the SCJC has recommended transition to a two-year plan. Their recommendation requires Society Board approval, which will consider member feedback. A decision will likely take place in less than a year:

- If the Society Board accepts this plan at or before its Jan. 2011 meeting, rotations will be based on Fall 2010 district scores, or choruses averaging an 81 score or higher in Philadelphia.
- If the Society Board accepts this plan at its June 2011 meeting, rotations will be based on Fall 2011 district scores, or choruses averaging an 81 score or higher in Kansas City.

The sooner the decision is made, the more the affected chapters can begin planning their calendar for whichever flight they are placed.

Highlights of the proposed two-year rotation

The Society Contest and Judging Committee has formulated a transition plan that would create two equivalent "flights" of competitors, one for 2012 (Portland) and one for 2013 (Toronto). Proposed dates are the committee's recommendations and are subject to change.

- Qualification for the 2011 contest in Kansas City will follow current rules, i.e. based on 2010 Fall District Contest scores.
- All choruses scoring 81 or higher during the 2010 district chorus contests (or if they do not compete in fall 2010, based on 2010 international scores) will be divided into two groups based on a set formula.
- One group will receive invitations to qualify for slots in the Portland 2012 International Contest. The other group will receive invitations to qualify for slots in the Toronto 2013 International Contest. (Requests from choruses will be honored to the greatest extent possible.)
- These will only be invitations to qualify for international competition on specific years; invited choruses must still post high enough qualifying scores at their Fall District Contests held 8-9 months prior.
- The remaining international slots for 2012 will be filled based on 2011 Fall District Contest scores. Remaining international slots for 2013 will be based on 2012 Fall District Contest scores.
- Districts are guaranteed at least one representative every year.
- All choruses that compete in an international contest on a given year will be ineligible to qualify for the next year's international contest.
- All choruses are eligible to compete in district contests for score and for district championships in any year, regardless of international eligibility.

- Any chorus that didn't compete at international on a given year—no matter what the reason—will be eligible to qualify for the next year's international contest.
- International champs still sit out two years, effectively switching from A to B rotation.

Reactions to the proposal so far

A committee composed of C&J members, judges, district officers and Society Events committee members began studying a two-year plan in 2009. They generated a system by which two alternating pools of roughly equal talent could be created and investigated the potential advantages and disadvantages of such a plan. They then e-mailed details to directors of the Society's top-scoring choruses and to district officers. Each group was asked nine questions related to the proposal. Each group was presented with an earlier proposed model, in which choruses would have about 20 months to prepare after qualifying for an international contest. (Based on negative feedback, this element was later dropped.) In response to the earlier model:

Chorus directors: 24 of 45 responded. When asked whether a two-year rotation would be a positive move for the Society, 58% agreed, 29% were neutral, 13% disagreed. Possibly related, 75% reported financial pressures among members due to attending international every year, 17% were neutral, and 8% reported no financial pressure.

District leaders: 32 of 63 responded. When asked whether it would be a good move for the Society, 41% agreed, 25% were neutral, 34% disagreed. However, when asked whether their district would see increased participation due to more openings for international competitors, 28% agreed, 25% were neutral, 47% disagreed.

After reviewing the C&J committee findings (details available at www.barbershop.org/2year) at their January 2010 meeting, the Society Board of Directors asked the committee to continue investigating the two-year chorus rotation. A brief description of the proposed plan appeared on page 8 of March/April 2010 issue of *The Harmonizer* and pointed readers to details and a poll available on the Society's blog at www.barbershophq.com/?p=1310. barbershopHQ.com. By July 2010, the post regarding the plan had generated a lively discussion with 183 comments. The unscientific poll (the self-selected sample was dominated by current international competitors) had logged 547 total votes:

- Overall, 61% were in favor, 39% not in favor
- 304 votes came from members of currently competitive international choruses, 51% were in favor, 49% against
- Among 89 polled who believe a rule change could put international competition within their chapter's reach, 87% were in favor, 13% against.

