

Music and Movement

THE ART OF MARCHING BAND

by Miriam Mogilevsky

At first I was mesmerized by the explosive drums and the magic of 200 people working together, making moving pictures on a field. As time went on, I began to notice details: the glint of the instruments in the autumn sunlight, the whirlwind of notes played by flutes and clarinets, and the steady drive of the tubas and baritones. I saw how the band members carried themselves: backs straight, chins up, with pride.

I'm not ashamed to admit it: I was just a little bit in love with my high school marching band.

That was when I was a freshman in high school. I had played flute for four years in concert band but hadn't considered joining an extracurricular music group. A year later, with the encouragement of some friends, I showed up for my first band practice.

Our band director doesn't believe in auditions. He wants everyone who loves band and can play an instrument to have the opportunity to join. There were ex-cheerleaders and kids who gave up fall sports to march in the band. There were guys who brought Nintendos to band camp and traded Pokemon during breaks. We had future valedictorians and people with GPAs just high enough to be eligible for band. There were talented musicians who, we were sure, would tour with a professional jazz group someday, and others who could hardly pass playing tests but loved music anyway. Plenty of people joined the band because they, like me, hadn't found their niche in high school and wanted something incredible to look forward to.

When I walk into the band room for the first time in the summer after my freshman year, I never want to leave. People are friendly, coming up and introducing themselves and asking me what instrument I play. There are little cliques, of course, but almost everyone wants to meet new people. It is the exact opposite of the rest of high school.

The band practices rigorously all summer. At the beginning of each rehearsal, we jog the length of the school from the band room to the parking lot where rehearsal is held. There, everyone stands with their sections to stretch. Marching band may not seem very physically demanding, but our muscles tell us otherwise the next day, so we take stretching seriously.

After we stretch, the drum major announces a number, usually between 5 and 25. The entire band has to do that number of jumping jacks, counting silently, perfectly in sync. If even a single person does too many or too few, or

makes the smallest accidental movement at the end, the whole band has to do push-ups until the drum major tells us to get back up. We try the jumping jacks again, this time a greater number.

Like most new band members, I don't understand at first why the jumping jacks are so important. But we all gradually learn that it's an exercise in focus. As our band director says, "If you can't even do jumping jacks, how can you march a whole show?"

After jumping jacks, we pick up our instruments and warm up. Then our band director, sitting on top of the band truck parked in the parking lot, tells us his plans for that rehearsal and suggests things for us to focus on. The rehearsal begins as soon as he announces a set number for us to go to.

Sets are the various "pictures" that make up a marching band's routine. The show consists of moving from one set to the next while playing music that goes with each set. Shows vary in how many sets they have, but both years that I marched in the band, our shows each had 43 sets.

Each band member has a specific spot to be in for each set. These spots are denoted by numbers that indicate the distance, in marching steps, from predetermined football field landmarks such as yard lines, sidelines, and hash marks. These are a bit like x and y coordinates.

One of the hardest things about marching band is memorizing all these numbers. We write them down in little notebooks that we take with us to each practice. For each set, each band member memorizes on which side of the field her spot is, the horizontal and vertical



Miriam (bottom right) and the rest of the Beaver Creek High School Marching Band flute section.

locations of the spot, and number of counts that the set lasts. For a 43-set show, this means 172 numbers to know by heart.

Much of summertime band practice is devoted to finding our spots for each set, marking them down on the pavement, and marching back and forth between all the sets for hours at a time. For most of July, we practice marching: forward, backward, sideways, quickly, slowly, and with eyes closed (not kidding). By late July, we're learning where our sets are. During the first week of August, we memorize music and put it with our movements. This week is known as band camp.

In our band, we stay at school rather than go away for camp, so we still go home to sleep each night. Of course, since band camp ends at 11 p.m. and begins at 8 a.m., little sleep actually occurs. By Wednesday and Thursday, we all have blisters and sunburns, as well as new muscles. Freshmen often begin band camp in a state of terror—not just because of the imminent strenuous physical activity, but also because memorizing ten minutes of music and 172 random numbers in five days seems impossible. It isn't.

By the end of the week, our show is imperfect but complete. We have made dozens of friends and established countless new inside jokes. We sport attractive tans (well, some of us do) and have nightmares about forgetting our next spot.

Before we know it, we're playing the national anthem at the first football game of the season, and school is starting—and along with it, our much-awaited competition season. During the next two months, we will compete each week except for Homecoming, travel to one or two other states, and probably be named grand champions several times. We will also make quite a few indelible memories.

I remember all those competitions. Some of them we tackled like the proud band that we were. Others, we let our focus slip and made mistakes that we kicked ourselves for all the way home on the bus—forgetting to play with expression, messing up a formation, allowing the tempo to rush. I also remember all the jokes and stories we told and retold, and the speeches our band director made, speeches that motivated and inspired us at both rehearsal and performance.

I remember little things, too, like the smell of the evening air in September and how everyone in the band would point at each other before a show to symbolize that we're all in this together. I remember the stripes

on our uniforms, representing discipline, citizenship, dedication, focus, and unity—the five things that our band director believed made a marching band great. To me, they also made it magical.

Tonight, a football stadium in Ohio is alive with movement, light, and music. An announcer's voice echoes periodically through the air, cutting through the din. Smoke from the grill down by the concession stand wafts up into the crisp autumn night. The spectators, holding up handmade banners and eating hot dogs and pizza, cheer on their children and friends down on the field. Nobody knows what the scores are yet, but they already have an inkling of who will win tonight.

On the back sideline of the field, the scene could not be more different. Two hundred uniformed high school students stand along the line in silence, preparing for their turn on the field.

We are about to compete.

We stand with backs straight and chins up, holding up our instruments in their carry positions. We are each lost in our thoughts, running through the show in our minds. In our ten minutes on the field, we'll excite the audience, play some of their favorite songs, and, hopefully, send shivers down their spines as we play Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven" while making a staircase formation, or U2's "One," standing still for a few seconds to raise our instruments to the sky.

The preceding band finishes and we take the field. After we reach our initial spots, we turn away from the spectator stands and toward our band director, who conducts a warm-up. We play proudly and loudly, with ringing harmonies that quiet the audience and hint at the beautiful performance to come.

We finish and the announcer says, "Beavercreek High School Marching Band, you may take the field in competition."

And we do. ■



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