

Methods and Strategies for a Winning Marching Band

July 20, 2012 - 2:45 p.m.

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GOALS TO CONSIDER DURING THE MARCHING SEASON

1. Establish procedures for before, during and after school as far as how the students are expected to enter the band hall, what is expected while they are there, and how they are to leave. This not only includes the obvious behavioral expectations but it also includes the level of focus, effort and motivation that is required in order to have an effective program. It largely has to do with an atmosphere of concern and respect for the school, the band and its traditions, the directors and other members as well as care for the equipment, uniforms and facilities. Ultimately, if all these things are in place from the beginning of the school year and maintained throughout the football and marching season it will be much easier to experience success in everything that follows.
2. Keep in mind that when there is an established care and concern for the facilities and equipment, the administration, custodial staff and other Fine Arts staff within the building will have a lot more respect for the band program and you. A consideration is to make sure that there is absolutely no eating or drinking in the Band Hall or Fine Arts area. This also includes meals that are eaten before marching performances so that the band hall is kept as clean as possible. A solution is to designate another area for this purpose, possibly in the school cafeteria, and put band parents and band officers in charge of making sure that it is left clean. At the very least, never dismiss students to go home after a football game or contest unless the instrument storage room is clear of marching clothes, water bottles, personal effects, etc. and insist that it looks neat and organized before going home for the weekend. This will speak volumes to your custodial staff. Some consideration could even be given to this same idea after every after-school or evening marching rehearsal. If uniforms are checked in after performances make sure that they are hung up properly and placed in numerical order and that all instruments are stored appropriately.

3. Set a standard for individual accountability for students by requiring them to play off the music that is required for marching contest, as well as playing off technical skills that will help them to become more proficient players. When the students are made to play off, be sure to document the quality of their performance, and offer feedback for improvement. If grades are used for assessment purposes allow retests by a particular deadline so that the students have the opportunity to improve their grade. This will insure a better overall performance quality of the band which is the ultimate goal. Having chair tests to create competition among members within sections is a good motivator, and could allow students to move chair positions appropriately. However, the director should not change student's assigned instrument parts as a result of a change in chair position. If time allows, have the students who will be trying out for All-Region Band to play off their TMEA or ATSSB Tryout Music in short excerpts during the marching season. This will encourage the students to be reminded that All-Region preparation is not strictly a November to December activity and eliminate the problem of "cramming" at the last possible minute for the tryouts.
4. Once band camp has been completed there is a tendency to stop holding the students accountable for marching fundamentals. With the implementation of more music in the drill each week, the director is often tempted to ignore this facet of student learning hoping that their marching skills will continue to improve through repetition. A solution to this problem is to conduct brief "drill-downs" or "march-offs" by squads which could be administered by the Section Leaders or Drum Majors. The creative director can even develop a competitive aspect by holding the students accountable for marching skills, which could also improve the overall marching execution of the band.
5. As the director, utilize as much of your own creativity as possible with respect to drill and music so that your band's performance, or show will be personalized for your taste, as well as to fit the marching and playing skills of the students. If someone else writes your drill and music, there is always a need to "tweak" things as necessary. Do not be guilty of taking someone else's drill or music selection decisions for your band 100% literally, because there is no possible way that they can know the dynamics of your kids or their potential. The more the director can personalize the drill and music selections, the better the direction of instruction will become.
6. Allow time to get to know your students on a personal level. They are not just "marchers", they are individuals. Allow as much interaction with the students on a non-band level, always maintaining appropriate parameters. Consider giving rewards after rehearsals, such as ice cream sandwiches, pop cycles, etc. or even a full band motivational activity at the end of a rehearsal.

7. As the director, be sure to allow enough personal time away from the band hall to take care of the mental health aspect of who you are. Marching band is hectic, and the time you can spend with your family or friends will keep you from being one dimensional. In fact, you will be a more well rounded person. If you don't have a hobby, start one ... you DO have the time, and it will help your attitude about your job and keep things in a better perspective.
8. Work to keep your administration and faculty on your team by getting out of the "band cave". Let your colleagues, who also work in your building know that you are a real person who can communicate on a non-band level. Periodically, a visit with your principal or supervisor will allow you to give updates on what you are doing inside your program, and if time allows ask that they come briefly to one or two marching rehearsals for the purpose of encouraging the students.
9. Be involved in your student's academic efforts and stay abreast of their progress. Do not wait until the end of the reporting period and simply "take what you get". Monitor student's attendance to teacher's tutoring sessions and get confirmation concerning their progress especially when making up poor grades. Consider utilizing some of the time either before or after-school to set up your own band tutoring program using some of your top academic students. This will take time to organize but can be very effective if it is maintained.
10. Do not get so engrossed in the rigorous hours and intensity of what is required for the marching band so that other required aspects of the job are neglected. This includes turning in attendance (especially 2nd Period ADA), consistently being at your duty station, following proper procedures for accounting and purchasing, attending faculty meetings, etc.
11. If you have students who are involved in other activities, such as athletics, attendance at their events will be extremely encouraging and supportive.
12. Review the operations of the band from last year and find things that were successful or marginal from an operational point of view and make changes of those aspects that were not as effective. Change is always good, and necessary.
13. At the end of the day don't leave the band hall unprepared for the next day, but do not be guilty of carrying it out of the door even to the point of feeling the need to return later that same evening.

MARCHING FUNDAMENTALS

1. The Freshman or “new marchers” always present challenges as far as marching fundamentals are concerned. It is important that the director be very selective about which fundamentals are introduced insisting that they be executed correctly before introducing additional fundamentals. It is important to be PATIENT and to not get so “contest drill happy” that the director forgets to establish good marching habits early in the season. It takes time and numerous repetitions for students to be successful marchers.
2. It is unreasonable for the director to be expected to conduct frequent fundamental teaching sessions with students who are behind in their marching skills. A consideration is to appoint students who can assume a title, such as Section Leader, Drill Leader, Drill Tech etc., and to be assigned a limited number of Freshman (2-3 Freshman per Section Leader) for the purpose of reinforcing the marching fundamentals at a designated point in the learning process. It goes without saying that selecting students for this purpose demands trust on the part of the band director. All the more reason to develop good skills among the entire band so that potential leaders that could be used for this purpose can be more easily recognized.
3. When working with the entire band, it is very important to break down each fundamental slowly into the smallest parts. An example is how the actual glide step marching is best accomplished by using good footwork, including breaking every step into four 16th notes by using “HEAL MIDDLE BALL TOE” as the syllables because those are the four points of contact of the foot for each step. All fundamentals should be introduced at a very slow tempo. In fact, starting out with very slow tempos for unison downfield marching will demand that all aspects of body movement be done correctly because of the simple fact that marching at a slow tempo is very unforgiving if done poorly.
4. A consideration for working unison marching in the beginning stages is to have the students march without instruments so that they can focus on the footwork and upper body. However, since marching involves holding an instrument it would not be advantageous for the students to merely march with their hands and arms by their side, or even “swinging” their arms back and forth with every step. A better method is to insist that the students cup

their hands together with thumbs crossed and arms in a natural “V” shape and position the thumbs about inch from their mouth as if they were make-believe trumpet players. Regardless of whether they play a woodwind, percussion or any other instrument in the band this simple method will allow the director to see the band in some sort of uniform “look” as they are working on unison marching. This will also enable the director to recognize any flaws that would need to be corrected early in the process.

5. It is important that the students memorize enough of the designated “Warm-Up” that could be used on the marching field. There are two aspects the Warm-Up that are important in this process: (1) Utilizing a series of rhythm and articulation patterns that are introduced in stages, from easy, medium then advanced, to reinforce the student’s ability to maintain tempo and coordination without changing tempo with their feet as the rhythms and articulations become more advanced. (2) Utilizing long tone exercises while working on unison marching so that the students can recognize how important it is to maintain good upper body position, good footwork, with tucked “cheeks” (yes, THOSE cheeks), without allowing the front (or end) of the instruments to move at all!
6. As in concert band, the marching band needs to have a set routine to begin each rehearsal. Before working on the concepts of the Contest Drill it is very important to spend about 10-15 minutes at the beginning of each marching rehearsal by reviewing fundamentals that need reinforcement and to practice unison marching as in the methods suggested in point #5 above. If this a part of the daily routine the benefits and ultimate payoff will supersede any concerns that the director may have about rehearsal time lost.

THINGS TO CONSIDER DOING DURING MARCHING AND/OR PLAYING REHEARSALS

1. USE THE METRONOME BOTH INSIDE THE BAND HALL DURING PLAYING REHEARSALS AS WELL AS DURING MARCHING REHEARSALS. ADJUST TEMPOS ACCORDING TO MUSIC REQUIREMENTS.

2. Record the marching music of the week and take that recording to the practice field for the purpose of playing it over your PA system. This allows the students to hear themselves actually play the drill and enable them to better concentrate on each fundamental execution without having the responsibility of actually playing their instruments. This can be done with the instruments in playing position while marching, and do so early in the rehearsal week particularly when new drill is introduced.
3. If there is more than one director consider rehearsing the band in shifts by allowing one director to work on music either in the band hall, while the other director works on the marching drill concepts on the practice field and rotate the groups between the directors. This could be done in instrument families, or by drill design. At the end of the rehearsal the groups could then be combined for a couple of “run-throughs” to see what was accomplished that day.
4. It is not advantageous for the students to run the entire drill continuously for an entire rehearsal. A better approach is to work each portion of the drill either by sets, passages of music or drill sequences that are about one minute or less in length and do repetitions as needed. Continue working portions of the drill as time allows and only do run-throughs at the end of the rehearsal. This will enable the students to gain a much better grasp of sequences as well as the fundamentals required and perform each portion precisely.
5. A valuable consideration is to have each section of the band perform portions of the drill so that all students can see and hear their peers perform. This will allow the students to become aware of individuals or sections that have marching or playing deficiencies. Those watching can be allowed to offer input in what they witnessed. It might be interesting later in the season to have each grade level to perform their drill.
6. If space allows move the band to different points on the field. By doing this you eliminate students keying off of certain markings on the field

such as parking stripes, chug holes, drains, humps and bumps. The director should “change the field” by making the students march to the opposite side of the field or even moving the entire band over ten yards either direction just to make sure that they are not keying off of certain yard-lines rather than having a good grasp of the drill BY COUNTS. After all, those same things that they may have been keying off of on the practice field are NOT going to be on the stadium field at halftime, so “moving the field” will cause the students to wake up and begin to actually think what they need to be doing again.

7. In all playing rehearsals it is important to spend time working on the fundamentals. This could include some of the following things in the Warm-Up procedure: (1) Long tones “home-based” around concert F including Remington in unison, as well as in 4ths and 5ths, scale patterns, flexibility exercises, and articulation drills. (2) Arrange a brief chorale that is in two sections, the first section being in unison for the entire band with drum-line accompaniment followed by the same chorale scored in harmony without percussion. Use this in every rehearsal and performance.
8. Take the time to develop INDIVIDUAL DRILL SHEETS for every student’s marching position in the Contest Drill. Hard copies of these sheets need to be kept in a binder that could be taken to the practice field with a small printer so that Individual Drill Sheets could be pulled and copied when needed. This method is a lot more efficient and takes out the guess work allowing the students to learn drill without having to figure it out on their own.
9. Allow some time on game days to run through stand tunes and cheer songs that have not been worked on during the week. Have the order of music selections that need to be rehearsed written on the board so that students do not have to “dig” for music.

10. Allow time at the end of the marching rehearsals for announcements. Realize that at the end of the rehearsal the students will be mentally and physically tired, therefore say as little as possible in these announcements without elaboration.
11. Always, be positive! The students WILL NOT be motivated if the director is not positive. Also, before the students go home find something good to say about what they did in that rehearsal and continually remind them how much their efforts are appreciated. Be sincere in these comments so that there is no ambiguity in intent.
12. During the course of a rehearsal the director needs to distance himself from the band by either closing his eyes or turning his back on the band so that concentration may be given to the band sound. This will allow the director to have a more objective point of view when making corrections and improvements in the music.
13. Remember that a marching band is supposed to be a CONCERT BAND ON THE FIELD. Therefore insisting on good articulation, intonation, blend and balance needs to be a basic expectation.

OTHER THINGS TO PONDER

1. So much of the time students in band programs have played their School Song year after year, but because they are actually playing it rather than singing it they may only know portions of the lyrics, if any. To alleviate this problem I suggest that you include a copy of a unison "lead sheet" with music and lyrics of the School Song as a part of their marching folder that could actually be sung, rehearsed and MEMORIZED! You may even write it in two-part harmony with all the girls singing the melody and all the boys singing the harmony. A consideration is to have the band sing one of these two versions as a part of your pre-game routine in the band hall either before marching to the stadium for home games or loading the buses for out of town games or contests.

2. Have parents to start a lawn-chair crew and invite them to attend the marching rehearsals. This is a good way to encourage and develop needed support.
3. There are some things from the beginning of camp that directors can learn simply by sitting in their offices with the door open and listen to band students talk and act like normal kids. Many times their comments or conversations are no big deal. However there are those comments and conversations that are real gems, especially when the comments are simply hilarious. Those are the ones that you don't just laugh to yourself and merely go about your business. You immediately turn to your computer and open up a Word file that is entitled "Amusing things that kids say" and add it to the list. This could become excellent material for the Band Banquet booklet that could be provided to the students at the end of the school year. Once the older band kids are aware of the existence of such a list they will enjoy informing the band director of something that they heard so that it could be added to the list.
4. Inform and educate the band members of the purpose in life of BDO's (Band Drop Outs) and Hall Dwellers. Historically, these two sub-groups offer many opportunities for research and can become an additional subject and course of study for the current Band Kids that is so vital. (:
5. Finally, just have fun! Teaching band is rewarding and will bring so much validation and purpose to your life. Never take it so seriously that you forget to enjoy the light hearted moments and above all else make sure that your band kids know that you are capable of laughing.....even at yourself!!

GOOD LUCK TO ALL OF YOU THIS YEAR!!!

