

Chapter 9: Hangin' In There

Looking back over the past three years, there was much in which to take pride, including three consecutive National Championships and a host of other assorted titles. Also, flags won and civic receptions given. This all added up to a fine record. We no longer had any problems thinking of ourselves as champions. After our first National title, this had been the case, but now it was almost second nature. We were, though, encouraged not to appear arrogant or superior.

Our hungry rivals were not that far behind us. We were the Corps to beat in Canada. Our presence at a contest added spice. There was always the chance that we could be beaten, breaking a chain of victories that was beginning to border on local invincibility. No doubt some of our people thought along these lines. There had been setbacks, of course, as we were still learning this business. Experience proved to be a great teacher. If, along the way, there had been one step backwards, it was usually followed by three steps forward.

Thus had been laid the foundations of a tradition. If you joined the Optimists now, it was expected that you would maintain existing standards and adhere to them as they improved. This could be a tall order for someone new, and it was now harder for somebody totally inexperienced to come in and make it. It did happen, but it was harder now, and the Corps, as it got better, was getting further away from its original purpose.

There were no immediate signs that the coming year would be any different from the others. When practices began again in the late fall, things were upbeat and optimistic. The only negative aspect of the situation was the thirteen gaps left by the group that had departed at the end of last season. Out of a total of about fifty members, this is a fairly large number. However, there were more than enough replacements available, so no one was too worried. Worried? Yes. Because we had won so consistently, it was now serious business if anything seemed to threaten this streak. This is one price of success, and it has parallels in other fields of endeavour, such as business, sports, and even National interests.



1960: Toronto Optimists and Bantam Optimists (Union Station)

Of the new recruits, many had come from the Bantam Corps, which was now proving its worth beyond estimate. Often called the “Peanut Squad”, those who came from it were familiar with the basics of a Drum Corps. All could march and play with some degree of skill, and they were fitted into appropriate places in the line. The drum line, out of a total of nine, needed four new members. Other deficiencies were mostly in the horn line, with a few in the guard. Our two

drum majors of the previous year were now replaced by one, Al Morrison who was previously a soprano soloist. During the early winter months, and later, other people left, for various reasons, not many, but enough to bring the total number of departures to about twenty. This was close to fifty percent of the Corps. More perceptive people began to realize that the coming year might prove more difficult than previously imagined.

When the various sections had been roughly arranged, and the music taught, it quickly became apparent that the new people would not find it easy to reach the standards of the others. It became incumbent upon the older members to help the new ones in every capacity. They did, and the novices responded with good spirit and utmost cooperation. This attitude was to bear fruit and resound greatly to the credit of the new members.



1960: Bill Thorne, Joe Gianna and Dave Shaw

The three lines were set up so that a rookie was always between two pros in a squad, or a pro was in the middle of two new members. By this method, it was hoped to stabilize things, with the older members bolstering and assisting the younger. As it turned out, it worked quite well, producing the best possible results that could be expected under the circumstances. Progress was slower than usual, reflecting the numerous new, less experienced members.

As a Corps, every department was still in the process of learning this intricate business of Drum Corps. Errors and miscalculations were real possibilities.

The first evidence of this was the choice of a new off-the-line number, to replace the excellent “Meadowlands” of the previous year. It had been suggested that we should play the tune “Cockeyed Optimist”, mainly, I suppose, because the title contained the word “Optimist”. It



1961: Toronto Optimists in promo shot for Gray Coach Lines

was one of the lesser-known songs from the musical “South Pacific” and, oddly enough, a throwback to the original policy, now discarded, of “happy” type music. For all its spirited lilt, it was not really the knock ‘em dead kind of song that an introductory number should be. “Meadowlands” was re-inserted as the second number in the repertoire.

Along with this was the introduction of a dual melody number, “I Hear Music/Just in Love”, that would have challenged an experienced Corps. With our many new people, this proved to be an unfortunate choice that did not become apparent until much later. By that time, it was too late to change, and we never did master its complexities when it was combined with drill formations.

To cap these not bad, but less than perfect selections, the concert was retained in its entirety for another year. This would be the fourth year for “In the Mood”, and the third for “Serenade from the Student Prince”. New arrangements and added gimmicks could only do so much to make these trademark numbers appear fresh.

So, the musical show as a mixture of old and new, a not uncommon situation in Corps affairs. Of course, it was all new to the rookies, who had to learn it all. Most of these people were very young and, although they had some skill with their instruments, none of them had ever done marching and maneuvering before. Also, the music they were expected to play turned out to be over their heads. It was a long time before this was recognized, and by then it was too late to make curative changes. The measures taken, later on, in an attempt to remedy these miscalculations read like a litany of desperation.

Strangely enough, but not acted upon, was the fact that although we tried to convince ourselves that we had a world beater, no one really believed it. Corps policy had always brought success in the past, so on we pushed determined to do the best we could.

As usual, rumours were flying, the most ominous to us being the reports that De La Salle’s drum line this year would be a match for anyone. We had always been aware that if they could improve this caption, we would have problems. With growing awareness of our potential weakness in other departments this year, this was a most disconcerting rumour.

Also, as usual, although the Corps itself was the centerpiece of activity, there were a lot of related things occurring around it, affecting its operation and future.

Changes in the Canadian Judges Association

One of the most relevant of these was the resignation of one Alf Smith from the position of Chief Judge of the Canadian Judges Association. This was due to business pressures and normally would have been no more pertinent to us than to any other Corps. What made it different this time was that the new Chief Judge was none other than Al Baggs, who, of course, was our Corps Director.

Mr. Baggs had been a qualified Canadian General Effect M&M Judge for some time. Marching and maneuvering was an important aspect of Drum Corps performances



1960: Bernie Beer & Mr Baggs (Falconer, NY)

in those days and he was experienced in both facets of it, general effect and execution. This, though, was not the prime reason for his election to this important post. To get the job, it was necessary to be elected by the other judges, and Al Baggs had been popularly elected on the strength of his abilities as an administrator. Because of this added responsibility, he resigned his position on the Board of Directors of the New York/Canadian Association. He was now Chief Judge as well as Director of the Optimists, a situation that was fraught with pitfalls. One of his judges, Mr. Vince Macciocchi, was later a chief judge himself. When asked if Al Baggs was a competent, able, chief judge, four words sufficed. “No doubt about it!” Later, we shall see many repercussions that resulted from this.

All this upheaval took place in January of 1961, and in February the Canadian Bugle and Trumpet Band Association became the Canadian Drum Corps Association. It was about time! It had been voted on January 15, but did not become official until put into the charter in February.

The responsibilities of Don Daber now increased as his influence began to expand. He was already the Public Relations Manager for the Optimists, and now assumed the same duties for the Canadian Drum Corps Association. On top of this he was the editor of his creation “Green Capsule Comments”, which was shortly to increase in size to nine pages. This periodical was rapidly becoming well known, both inside and outside the Corps. Contributions were solicited from inside and outside, along with those that, by now, were regular columns. One of the contributions, written by Mr. Baggs, was an explanation of each one of the flags now carried by the Corps. This is worth looking at, as they had all been acquired during the first three years of its existence. There were ten altogether.



1961: Toronto Optimists Flags

Flags carried by the Optimists

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| The Canadian Ensign | Used as National Colours before the adoption, in 1965, of the current Maple Leaf flag. |
| The Union Jack | Used in parades, not contests, to represent the traditions of the British Commonwealth. |
| The American Flag | Carried in the US and Canada as a mark of courtesy to the United States. It also indicated the international aspect of the Optimist Club. |
| The Optimist International Flag | The flag of the Optimist Club, our sponsor. |
| The Ontario Flag | It carried the emblem of the Province of Ontario. |

The Corps Flag

Designed by Barry Bell, it carried the Corps crest.

The Canadian Junior
Championship Flag

An original, designed by an anonymous Optimists Corps member, it had been presented to the Corps by the Opti-Mrs organization. The Canadian Drum Corps Association officially adopted the flag, and winners in all three classes would be presented with this flag in the future.

The New York/Canadian
Association Championship Flag

Presented annually to the title winners.

The City of Toronto Flag

Presented by Mayor Nathan Phillips as a civic reception for winning the 1958 Nationals.

The St. Lawrence Seaway Flag

Given to the Corps, to carry the emblem of the Port of Toronto to cities in Canada and the US.

Quite an impressive list, made more so by the fact that each and every one of them had a meaning and purpose.

For the Corps itself, activity began quite early. Again, we performed at the Ice Follies, on January 30, at Maple Leaf Gardens, and on February 28 participated in a standstill contest. This was in Rochester, New York, and was a senior versus junior affair, with us being the only Junior Corps involved. The Optimists were not very good that night, placing third, although the Senior Corps were of a good calibre. There was more reason for our mediocre performance than the early date. It was a sign of the Corps being down this year and an indication of some rough times ahead; however, we were not miserable about it, never being too serious. We were, though, full of admiration for the Garfield Cadets who put on superb exhibition. They were right back up to their old form, maybe even better.



1960: Our author (L) is thinking about meeting local corps fans (Rochester)

There was a prolific writer for Drum Corps World named Bob Mannhardt who had liked our corps from the beginning. His columns reflected this, though he would not hesitate to criticize if he thought events warranted it. He had done this when we pulled out of the 1959 Grape Festival. Regardless, the admiration was mutual, and at this show he was pulled into the dressing room and made an honorary member of the Corps. On this occasion, we also had the “Drum Head Draw”. The old bass drum heads were raffled off and the money raised used to buy new ones. The old ones were well decorated and showed our three national titles.

That standstill contest, by the way, was probably one of the last of its kind. By this, I mean that the format of Senior Corps going against Junior Corps was on its way out. We had not been invited back to Falconer, New York, this year, because Senior Corps would not compete against us. Whether this was because they did not like the idea of possibly losing to juniors, or just did not think it a good concept, is not known. Probably a bit of both; whatever, it would occur again but increasingly rarely as time went by.

In the previous chapter, the intensity of involvement between the Optimists and Jesters was remarked upon. It had reached such a pitch that this year it was necessary to make an official announcement that, "There was no official connection between the Jesters and the Optimists". Hopefully, that put paid to any detrimental rumours that had been floating around.

Other, more positive developments saw the Optimists Alumni Association now operating. Formed the previous year, they began to exert an influence in and around the Corps. One of them, Ed Nanni, had been writing "The Optimists" column in Drum Corps World for some time, having taken it over from Harry Clark. Harry was (as was Ed Nanni) from the original Optimist Trumpet Band.



1960: Ed Nanni (no uniform) with Harry Clark on his right

We were still practising at the Jarvis Street school on weekday evenings, in the aromatic school gym. One night, before practice, when sitting in the Atlanta Restaurant across the road, Don Daber walked in bursting with enthusiasm. He was a fountain of ideas, which maybe explained unofficial nickname of "Crazy Daber". This night, when he sat down, he unfolded a scheme for raising money by selling Planters Peanuts. Going into detail, with facts and figures, it seemed a very plausible idea. He had made a mistake in his financial calculations, which I was foolish enough to point out. This qualified me to be treasurer, and I was appointed on the spot. Right then and there the "Nut Committee" was formed, consisting of:

- Ivor Bramley. Chairman
- Colin Hedworth. . . Treasurer
- Al LaVigne. Transportation

As our sales motto we adopted the phrase: "The best nuts in the world come from the Toronto Optimists Drum and Bugle Corps". The double meanings in this slogan were more than imaginary, but, thus armed and fortified, we set out to try our hands at door to door salesmanship.

1961: Nut Committee Report & Cartoons

The method adopted was for those willing to participate, and there were more than a few, to meet at a certain, different, location on sales nights. This would usually be one night a week. Having met at an agreed spot, each would load up with peanuts, the tinned variety, and then spread out to blitz the area. It worked quite well and sales moved along briskly. It was still very cold, and, except for one time, only inclement weather deterred us from our mission. The one time exception was the evening that we visited the Borough of Leaside, near Leaside High School. The “Jungle Kings” had for years used this school as a practice spot. People who lived in the vicinity were well acquainted with Drum Corps, having had to endure many occasions when one was rehearsing in their backyard. As soon as “Drum Corps” was mentioned, doors were slammed, cutting into a string of uncomplimentary epithets. After a few incidents like this, it was decided to abandon that night’s work. We understood, and a few nights later were out again, somewhere else. The whole campaign produced quite good results, a total of over \$800 being raised. Not much by today’s inflated standards, but a considerable help to the small Corps budget of those days. The only negative aspect of the whole thing was the prodding necessary to get people to bring in their money. One dollar here, two there, five somewhere else. It all added up, until finally the treasurer, fed up with the pleading and cajoling, paid the last \$100 owing for nuts sold. The account was closed. Altogether it was a successful and satisfying affair.

This year, the Prudhommes Convention was again held, and Mr. Baggs officially represented us. He conducted a clinic for managers and sponsors, as well as, in his new position of Chief Judge, chaired a question and answer session involving himself and seven other judges. As with everything he undertook, he did nothing by halves, which helps explain the positions he held.

Trafalgar

And now begins a story within a story. Around this time, one Sunday afternoon, Ronn Prokop mentioned that he was instructing a Corps in Oakville, Ontario. He had been going out there for some time teaching drums, along with his friend Mel Dey, one of our better horn players. Well, all of us were interested in any Corps happenings in those days, so a bunch of us climbed into cars and headed out to see just what was going on. Among this curious crew was the often mentioned Ivor Bramley. Ivor was one of the most energetic Corps members around, sometimes almost a bit of a loose canon. He had, unlike this year, been in the colour guard, and his nature had seen him become very involved in instructing it, under the tutelage of Eric Burton. This year, he had been instructing the Optimists guard but gave this up to become a bass drummer.



Ivor Bramley with Trafalgar’s guard (CDCA Convention)



1960: Ivor Bramley

However, that day, when we arrived in Oakville, he found the ideal outlet for his energies. A colour guard and a Corps were practising, seemingly with no direction or leadership. This was the Trafalgar Police Band mentioned in the previous chapter. They were a Junior “B” Corps and had never risen above second place.

Never one to miss an opportunity, Ivor summed up the situation at a glance, and, after a few preliminary disputes, virtually took over this fledgling unit. They needed someone like him as much as he needed an outlet for his ambitions.

Within weeks, this Corps was transformed from a somewhat lethargic band into an ambitious, purposeful Drum Corps that was going places. It was a marriage made in heaven that would eventually involve many Optimists members.

More trivia concerning the Corps, and Drum Corps in general, was the fact that Brother Eugene, the moderator of De La Salle, was relieved of his post. This did not really concern us, being the internal affair of De La Salle. What they did on the field was what concerned us. Brother Xavier, who was to become very familiar to us, staying with Del for many years, replaced the good brother.

During the early months of 1961, we put on an inside concert at St. Andrews church on Bloor St. East, in Toronto. This affair was well attended by parents, other relatives, and, of course, by rivals. Word was around that we were not up to par this year, and the wolves were hanging around, smelling blood. However, that night they were disappointed as we put on a commendable performance. We were not ready for the greased banister yet. It was plain that anyone who wished to usurp our position would have to really fight for it. This year would bear this out and make it quite plain that the spirit of this Corps, so often mentioned in this story, was more than sawdust.



1960: Toronto Optimists rehearsing (Rochester, NY)

Let the battle begin.