

For the love of the game: the alumni corps movement

by Allison Close and Chris Atkinson

Drum corps competitiveness is fine for what it is worth. In junior corps and increasingly in their senior counterparts, it is competition that drives both design teams to create wild field productions and members to push themselves beyond all previous limits to attract the elusive nod of the judge.

It has been said, though, that “winning isn’t everything.” People get a great deal out of marching drum corps -- they get some benefit from learning how to win with grace and lose with dignity, through the competitive aspect.

In junior corps, creating a product that would never be possible from anything but sweat and unity is a profound motivator. Competition forces us to take what we have and run with it. Its lessons are immeasurable. But drum corps is much more than “who wins.”

There is also the thrill of performing for a gracious audience. There is the quiet reserve of putting on the respected uniform of one’s brotherhood or sisterhood; the roar of a crowd at the first hints of a time-worn corps signature

tune, mixed with a good dose of honor, dignity and respect; about maintaining the connection to something larger than oneself.

Competition is fine and, for many, the lessons of competition have already been learned. Alumni corps allow them the opportunity to partake of all the rest that makes drum corps special to us.

Alumni corps are not, however, simply scaled-back versions of junior or senior corps. They have become entities unto their own, with their own vivid exuberance. They are a surprising bunch -- their members constantly fly in the face of stereotypes.

If one wants to find drum corps’ biggest fans, one need look no further than alumni corps. They attend junior and senior corps shows, buy merchandise and compact discs and back competing corps financially and through their volunteer work.

In their own corps involvement, they are musicians with a wealth of experience, who are remarkably efficient in preparation for parade

and field performances. They have ideas about what drum corps is and what it should be. They participate for love of the game. If drum corps is a faith, alumni corps members are its prime defenders.

The alumni corps mission

To understand the mission of the alumni corps movement, it is enlightening to take a look at a well-honed mission from a well-organized alumni group. The Buccaneer Alumni corps from Reading, PA, for example, lists the following among its reasons for being:

1. To reunite and organize all past members of the Reading Buccaneer Senior Drum and Bugle Corps in camaraderie and fellowship.
2. To encourage the growth of the Reading Buccaneers Senior Drum and Bugle Corps.
3. To engage in our own drum and bugle parade corps activity.
4. To perpetuate drum and bugle corps as an art form and an entertainment medium (Solinger, 1998).

While other alumni groups might differ



BOSTON CRUSADERS SENIOR, Boston, MA (2001).
Photo by Dan Scafidi from the collection of Drum Corps World.



SYRACUSE BRIGADIERS ALUMNI, Syracuse, NY (2000).
Photo by Harry Heidelberg from the collection of Drum Corps World.



HAWTHORNE CABALLEROS ALUMNI, Hawthorne, NJ (2001).
Photo by David Rice from the collection of Drum Corps World.

slightly from this model, the general thinking remains the same with few exceptions. The first point is paramount, because it stresses the importance of reuniting former members and allowing them to continue on in a social capacity as a sort of extended family.

At the very least, this emphasis on bringing old friends back to the table is refreshing; "let no one who ever wore the uniform not feel welcome."

The second point shows the centrality of supporting the organization's competing corps, in this case the Reading Buccaneers Senior Corps. If an alumni corps exists in tandem with a competing junior or senior corps, the alumni corps is quite likely to only take for itself what will not adversely affect performance outcomes for the competing group.

Donald Solinger of the Buccaneers Alumni notes that he sometimes has to do a fair amount of convincing on this point (Solinger, 2002). Sometimes it is necessary to tell senior corps members that associated alumni corps members are, in fact, part of the family -- not intent on taking away from senior corps and present only in support of the missions of the competing group.

In instances where an alumni corps is associated with a junior corps, as in the case of the Boston Crusaders alumni, excess funds from alumni activities are frequently funneled directly to the operating budget of the junior corps (Gobbi, 2002).

The third point, the opportunity for performance, is the principal means of gaining and maintaining membership for alumni groups. It almost goes without saying that many former corps members find themselves away from the activity for many years and realize that they miss participating in some capacity.

The alumni corps, in all instances, exists to provide this opportunity to return to the performance field or to the parade block and to all the glory inherent in doing so. For some, it is like a prodigal son returning to an organization after being away for too long; for others, an opportunity to see old friends, and still others, a chance to reclaim the joy of playing to the crowd.

If one were to believe stereotypes, the fourth point would be an extremely divisive issue. Stereotypes would have many of us believe that there is an old-style drum corps that exists in a

sort of vacuum and which is opposite and opposed to the activities of the modern drum and bugle corps activity.

But the Buccaneers Alumni group's fourth principle does not make this cumbersome distinction -- if anything, its absence could be taken as a balanced, sage view that speaks to the unity of drum corps in general and far less to the relative goodness of old- or new-style drum corps.

The fourth point also mentions the art and entertainment focus of drum and bugle corps as they see it. Aesthetics do enter into the equation for alumni corps programming as far as creating a positive artistic product for the viewer, but the entertainment of the audience is central enough to be mentioned explicitly. Again, the line between competing groups and alumni corps is clearly drawn.

In this chapter, we will examine the alumni corps movement through a look at a sampling of the great names and traditions of this unique facet of the drum and bugle corps experience.

Archer-Epler Musketeers

Considered by many to be the first alumni drum and bugle corps, by virtue of its founding in 1932, the Archer-Epler Musketeers have a long history and a grand tradition of excellence.

The corps was first formed as a junior corps, then as a senior corps, with success performance-wise and competitively in each case. However, the late 1960s were tough for many drum and bugle corps organizations and the Musketeers were not spared, briefly joining with their arch-rivals, the Reilly Raiders, before folding in 1968.

The corps we know now was formed through the guts and determination of alumni who missed the corps terribly and would not rest until it was back on its feet. While they performed sporadically in those first few years, the corps took the difficult path of forming a firm financial and organizational structure for its activities prior to bringing the organization back to full capacity.

More than anything, the possibility of the Musketeers folding again was a spectre that forced responsible, clear-headed thinking and, in this regard, the corps derived immense benefit from such wisdom. They came back full-throttle in 1981 and 1982 and, from there, the drum corps world has been assured the pleasure of hearing the Musketeers every year.

The alumni corps experience is truly better

for their presence and performances.

Boston Crusaders Alumni

Rich Gobbi started out in drum corps in 1959, marching with the Boston Crusaders until 1965. He and others founded the Boston Crusaders Senior Corps in 1990.

"It started out as sort of a casual thing -- you get together with your friends and do parades. Now we do 16 parades a year and five or six shows. We have the option to do a lot more, but we can't take them -- jobs and [other responsibilities]."

"We do the DCA show, the Boston Crusaders' junior show and some other local events. We have a pretty busy schedule!"

Like many other alumni corps, the Crusaders alumni do not hold their membership to former members of their affiliated corps (the Boston Crusaders). "No, we wouldn't be able to survive that way. Although we'd have the best option, because the Crusaders have been in existence since 1940 and they're still going."

"But that's the hardest thing, to recruit these kids. We don't have any young kids [in the alumni group]. We've been fortunate enough where we have recruited guys from the 1970s."

Like the Crusaders junior corps, membership in the alumni corps has left its local/regional orientation and now draws membership from places as far-flung as Tampa, FL, as well as from all over New England. "It's turned out good. We're a whole lot better than we ever thought we would be," Gobbi added.

Recruitment is a real concern for many alumni corps and the Crusaders alumni corps is no exception. "We actually tried everything." In addition to networking and phone calls, the group placed newspaper advertisements in an effort to bolster membership for their inaugural group.

"We started out with 100 horns, then things kind of dwindled to the point now where most of the people in our drum corps have been with us for eight to 10 years. It has gotten to be too much of a grind for some people."

"You get out of it what you put into it. We really work at it . . . we have rehearsals every week, with a mandatory rehearsal once a month."

As with any drum corps organization, the Boston Crusaders alumni have financial issues to contend with, but Gobbi notes that, thanks



to a full schedule of parades and performances, the corps is doing quite well. "For some reason, the parade situation in the Massachusetts area is incredible. Parade organizers are begging for drum corps; they call me all the time because there are none around.

"And, as far as junior corps, you have the Crusaders, but come June, they are gone. Some other alumni corps do not want to play a lot of gigs because they don't want to make it [alumni corps] that big of a commitment."

In addition to funding the group's travel expenses, performance fees also fund uniform and instrument purchases. "We have a couple of old-time Crusaders who drive our buses."

As far as the future of the alumni corps activity, he sides with many in noting the limitations of alumni corps to recruit younger members, given the present dynamic of the activity. "I see it actually fading over time.

"A lot of it has to do with the closeness of people who marched in the activity in the [earlier, pre-DCI days]. We were kids from the neighborhood. We all went to school together, we played together. In this Crusaders corps I'm in now, there are about 20 of us that have all been together since the 1960s."

With the membership of most current DCI corps being fairly scattered regionally, nationally or even internationally, members only see each other at camps and over the summer. As a result, the scheduling of a modern drum corps on a national tour now has a much smaller reliance on socialization to achieve mission-oriented aims.

It would seem that it is decades-long kinship and constant contact that binds and holds alumni corps together. At least in the case of division I corps, this important piece of the alumni recruitment puzzle seems to be missing.

Blessed Sacrament Golden Knights

Blessed Sacrament has a self-proclaimed mission to promote friendship and camaraderie through "good old-fashioned drum and bugle corps." While the Golden Knights do draw some membership from former members of their junior and senior corps ranks, they have no strict alumni requirement.

The Newark, NJ, corps has a much greater emphasis on family in its mission than some other corps, going as far as saying "there are no age limits and we have several couples, parent-daughter/son and entire family groups

as members" in its literature.

Blessed Sacrament had a storied history as a junior corps, winning numerous competitions and garnering widespread acclaim during the 1950s and 1960s. The organization was inducted into the Drum Corps Hall of Fame in 1965 and, perhaps ironically, became a founding member of Drum Corps International in its final season (1972).

There was a one-year attempt at fielding a competitive senior corps under the Blessed Sacrament name in 1975. Now the alumni corps carries forward the tradition, recalling the success of the junior and senior groups in a fun atmosphere.

Hawthorne Caballeros Alumni

The Hawthorne Caballeros Alumni Drum and Bugle Corps was founded in 1994 and had its first performance in 1995. The group does significantly fewer parades than the Boston Crusaders Alumni (around five per year), but does an average of four stage shows and four to five field shows per year. The corps now has around 110 members and this number is growing.

Pete Bishop of the Caballeros Alumni notes that membership in the group was "originally restricted to former Caballeros. We initially sent out a mailing to the former members we had addresses for [about 500 names].

"We didn't know if we hit 300 or 30 or what. So we actually started out with a very small corps, about 18 horns. It grew to about 40 and then kept going.

"About a year ago we realized, there's a certain attrition that goes along with any corps and we started to lose some members after six or seven years. At that point, we opened the corps up to a limited group of what we call "outsiders," people with drum corps experience who wanted to play with the corps.

"We picked up another 20% between the horn and the drum lines. We now have 55 active horn players and a drum line of around 20 for the upcoming 2002 season."

The corps always has a good showing at the DCA "Alumni Classic" every year and Bishop notes that the corps' performances at this and other events are a source of great pride for the organization. "We've also taken part in the Bristol, RI, Fourth of July parade, which is the oldest Fourth of July parade in the country."

As with the Crusaders, recruitment is a concern and age is similarly an issue. Bishop

notes, "Our minimum age for membership is 25, but we don't have anyone anywhere near that -- I think the youngest is 35."

Motivation is a factor for membership recruiting. In addition to people who just miss the activity and want to play again, Hawthorne's legendary status among drum and bugle corps is a prime motivator for potential members outside the organization.

"These are people that always wanted to play with the Hawthorne Caballeros, but never got to it. Now they are in a position where they can wear that exact same uniform and play that same music."

The Hawthorne Caballeros Alumni have also benefited greatly from excellence in its musical staff. Mike Longdo joined the instructional team and does double-duty in instructing both the Caballeros senior and alumni corps.

Bishop notes that, while Hawthorne Caballeros Alumni members join the group and perform for the love of performance, they also have great pride in the name, in the corps and in the general organization. "We want to maintain the tradition of excellence and the level of quality the corps is known for. We would have liked to have kept the alumni group with only former Caballero members, but we had to make the change.

"Still, we want to keep outside membership to around 20%. It turns out, though, that some of these outside members are some of the best Caballeros we have -- the most reliable and dedicated. They come from 10 states; some fly in from Texas and Florida whenever we have a practice."

Erie Thunderbirds

The Thunderbirds may provide an exception to the rule on the lack of competition among alumni corps. The original junior group was formed in 1956 as a parade corps and gradually becoming a force in DCA competition through the 1970s.

Harkening back to their days as champions in American Legion and Red Carpet Association competitions, the present-day Erie Thunderbirds were formed from the ashes of the old organization, which was forced to disband in 1984. The reformed group came out of a meeting between members of several disbanded corps throughout the region.

The competitive focus rests with the Thunderbirds' intent on winning DCA Mini-corps Championship titles each year. The



BUCCANEERS ALUMNI, Reading, PA (1998).
Photo by Harry Heidelberg from the collection of Drum Corps World.



BON BONS CHORUS, Audubon, NJ (2000).
Photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World.

Thunderbirds are also involved in DCA in other ways, most notably in providing members for several of the DCA open class groups.

The Erie corps has a strong emphasis on performing regionally, everything from local parades to performances at regional DCI shows. Even with this focus, the Thunderbirds have been honored with performances in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, the Daytona Beach (Florida) Christmas Parade and the Houston, TX, Mardi Gras parade.

Buccaneers Alumni

Depending on how one defines "first," the storied Buccaneers Alumni Drum and Bugle Corps may be the first alumni group. Archer-Epler dates its founding to 1932, but the Upper Darby, PA, corps has always been a unit unto itself -- whether as a junior corps or its present-day form as an alumni corps.

The Buccaneers Alumni are proud of their formation of the earliest group separate and apart from the competing group (the Reading Buccaneers Senior corps) within the same organization in 1986.

As far as scheduling is concerned, the Buccaneers Alumni put a great deal into preparation for the spring "Serenade in Brass" show every year in Harrisburg, PA.

Spring begins the alumni corps parade season, but scheduling is limited due to the fact that many involved in the alumni group are also involved with the senior corps. The Buccaneers Alumni perform in eight to 10 parades every fall after the DCA Championships.

The Buccaneers Alumni corps, like other alumni groups, have a core group of about 20 members who have "been there since day one," notes corps historian Donald Solinger. "The corps sort of revolves around them. We have people come down from the senior corps to participate for a year or two, then most of them move on.

Some participate with the alumni corps after the senior season for the whole Fall parade schedule. We have a lot of interaction with the senior corps," Solinger noted. One of the highlights every year is when the senior and alumni corps play together for the "Serenade in Brass" show. Members from each group meet each other and, as a result, many in the senior group decide to continue their season after DCA Championships with the alumni group.

The Buccaneers Alumni Corps, like other corps, started out by requiring that members be

former marching members of the Reading Buccaneers. When this model did not work out well, they began accepting members who were not alumni of the senior corps.

Solinger recalls something of a rift that developed when the Buccaneers senior corps failed to make finals in 1994. There was a great deal of concern among alumni members that the organization remain strong and come back strong competitively the next season.

There was some feeling among senior corps members that perhaps the alumni corps had its own interests and were not entirely devoted to supporting the activities of the senior corps. Solinger is particularly instructive on this point, as far as illuminating the mission of the alumni corps.

Not only is it written that the alumni corps was formed with the intent of supporting the senior corps, but the alumni corps puts the statement into action consistently. When the senior corps had deficiencies in certain sections, it was alumni members that stepped up to take part.

The devotion of the alumni membership to both the senior corps and the health and welfare of the organization in general is greatly affecting. "We went over to the senior corps and said 'What can we do?'" Eight of us [alumni corps members] found ourselves in the senior corps hornline."

For the members of the Buccaneers Alumni Corps, as it is with so many alumni corps, the tradition of the competing group is of prime importance to the alumni group. The alumni group is at once the senior corps' greatest fans, supporters, organizers, volunteers and, in a pinch, source of members.

Certainly, the Buccaneers Alumni are an important reason why the senior corps is still around today -- the alumni corps exemplifies the steadfast support of the corps' tradition and are a singular force in perpetuating that tradition. Perhaps this supporter model of the alumni corps is one with the greatest possibility of remaining strong through uncertain times.

St. Joseph's of Batavia

Some alumni corps are formed long after the original corps has disbanded. In the case of Mighty St. Joe's, the alumni corps was formed in 1991 after 20 years of inactivity. They have seen phenomenal growth over the years, from the first rehearsal with 32 members, to its present involvement of more than 200 people.

Again, the emphasis is on love of the game -- the goals of the organization are to furnish members with opportunities to perform in a non-competitive basis and to try to put the 'good times' back in drum corps.

St. Joseph's proudly carries the banner of drum corps' golden era, through a show based largely on music performed by the original corps back in the 1960s, as well as music performed by other corps long since gone.

Like other alumni corps, St. Joe's does not limit its membership to former members of the original junior corps, instead accepting members over the age of 21 at all levels of talent. Perhaps alumni corps like St. Joseph's also bring a strong educational component or at least the potential for one to better oneself through music, to the alumni corps experience.

New York Skyliners Alumni

Sponsored by the Garbarina-Mazarakos Post 1523 American Legion of New York City and American Legion Post 255, Garfield, NJ, the New York Skyliners Alumni Drum and Bugle Corps is perhaps one of the most legendary of all alumni groups.

Playing only the classic arrangements of Skyliner tunes, this group is made up primarily of former members of the New York Skyliners senior corps. This perhaps only serves to make the corps even more legendary. By exacting limits on what it will play and who can be a member, the Skyliners place a premium on the organization's unique essence, making its performances all the more intriguing.

The corps sports around 70 brass and 25 percussion on its roster for the 2002 season and performs indoor standstills, concert exhibitions and parades.

Wind Gap Blue Eagles Alumni

First organized in 1948, the Blue Eagles Alumni Drum and Bugle Corps from Wind Gap, PA, has made a grand resurgence over the years. Despite its humble beginnings, the group nonetheless continued on as a parade corps, expanding their program to include a field show in the early 1960s.

Because of extenuating circumstances, the Vietnam War among them, the corps fell on troubled times and folded temporarily. It reclaimed its glory by reforming in 1973 and taking the Pennsylvania American Legion parade championship title in 1975.

The corps moved on to perform on the DCA circuit, with the corps roster swelling to 110



LT. NORMAN PRINCE CHORUS, Melrose, MA (approx. 1982).
Photo by Edward F. Forte from the collection of Drum Corps World.



YANKEE REBELS, Baltimore, MD (1998).
Photo by Harry Heidelberg from the collection of Drum Corps World.



MIGHTY ST JOE'S ALUMNI, LeRoy, NY (2001).
Photo by Dan Scafilid from the collection of Drum Corps World.

members in a particularly strong season.

Unfortunately, because of financial considerations not unlike those that plague so many drum and bugle corps, the organization folded again in the early 1980s.

The Borough of Wind Gap planned a celebration in honor of its centennial in 1993. In conjunction with this event, the Blue Eagles began organizing and practicing in 1992. After performing in the event, the corps stayed its new course and formed permanently, performing in parades and exhibiting its talents in standstill concerts.

As of 1998, the corps had acquired a new set of three-valve bugles and a new equipment trailer. The Blue Eagles seem poised to build upon their recent successes.

Yankee Rebels

The Yankee Rebels started out as the Hamilton American Legion Post 20 Senior Drum and Bugle Corps and were formed in late 1945/early 1946 by Joe Sedlack. With a membership formed predominately of servicemen returning from World War II, the corps originally participated in parades in the service uniforms.

Later, the corps acquired white and gold uniforms and achieved some impressive success early-on. According to the corps website, "the Boys in White finished third by a mere 0.95 in their first American Legion National contest (Randall's Island Stadium, 1947). They scored a 29.5 out of a possible 30.0 in the marching and maneuvering category."

The Hamilton senior corps took the name Yankee Rebels in 1949 and have performed since then under that name. In addition to a tremendous appearance at the 2000 DCI Championships in College Park, MD, the Yankee Rebels Alumni Corps has performed at numerous concerts, parades and competitions in recent years.

Concluding thoughts

The alumni corps activity itself could be submitted as proof of the dedication people have to the drum and bugle corps activity throughout the course of their entire lives. When one considers that the intent of many alumni organizations is not only performance for its own sake, but the support and caretaking of an organization's tradition -- and often an associated competing corps -- these groups are all the more remarkable.

The activity and its performances are



matched in interest only by the wit and personality of its membership.

While the future of the alumni corps as a whole is subject to debate, one can surely find little to debate in these organizations' reasons for being and in their organizational missions.

To support the activity, to support one's own, whether they be fellow members or members of a junior or senior corps bearing the

same name, and to support traditions that are bigger than all of us -- these are the principals upon which alumni corps rest their names.

Coupled with the weight of their performers' experience and talent, they are collectively a sight sure to make any drum and bugle corps fan think fondly of the activity's proud heritage.



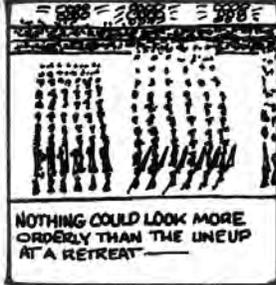
HANOVER LANCERS ALUMNI, Hanover, PA (2000).
Photo by David Rice from the collection of Drum Corps World.



ST. KEVIN'S EMERALD KNIGHTS ALUMNI, Dorchester, MA (2001).
Photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World.

SURVIVAL *in* DRUM CORPS

**FOLLOWING
COMMANDS**



NOTHING COULD LOOK MORE ORDERLY THAN THE LINEUP AT A RETREAT.



UNTIL IT'S TIME TO LEAVE THE FIELD, AND NOBODY QUITE KNOWS WHICH DIRECTION.



CRUNCH



UNDOUBTEDLY, YOU'LL BE BLAMED FOR NOT LISTENING TO INSTRUCTIONS!

SURVIVAL *in* DRUM CORPS

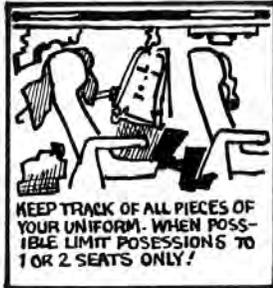
**GETTING
INTO
UNIFORM
ON
A MOVING BUS!**



ENTER BUS WITH A GOOD ATTITUDE. YOU'LL NEED IT LATER.



LOOK MEAN AND FLING ARMS ABOUT WILDLY. THIS WILL CLEAR YOUR AREA RAPIDLY!



KEEP TRACK OF ALL PIECES OF YOUR UNIFORM. WHEN POSSIBLE LIMIT POSSESSIONS TO 1 OR 2 SEATS ONLY!



SEE HOW EASY IT CAN BE? IT'S ALL A MATTER OF EXPERIENCE...

SURE... BUT WILL IT GET ME A JOB?



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TOWNSMEN, Wood-ridge, NJ (approx. 1975).
Photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World.