

## Chapter 12: 1962 – The Steamroller

### The Junior International

It was early evening, June 2, 1962, and on Bloor Street, in the heart of Toronto, people were filing into Varsity Stadium. They were not pouring in because this was not football or hockey, national pastimes, but Drum Corps. The eventual total crowd would amount to between six and seven thousand, and what they lacked in numbers they would make up for with enthusiasm. Almost every individual in that crowd was a Drum Corps fan, and, as a breed, they rival those of any other activity in their interest.

What they were coming to see was the first “Junior International Parade of Champions”. This was the first show in Canada to feature three American and three Canadian Junior Drum Corps. Such a format had previously been confined to the senior division.



1962: Toronto Optimists wear “old” uniforms for last time (Junior International)

The US Corps were of good calibre, the top one being the Garfield Cadets. They were, by now, completely back in top-notch condition. Along with St. Joseph’s of Batavia and the St. Catherine’s Queensmen of St. Albans, New York, they would represent the United States. The Canadian entries were Preston Scout House, De La Salle, and the Optimists.

The original line-up had included the St. Kevin’s Emerald Knights from Dorchester, Massachusetts, a fine Corps that had come a long way during the late part of the fifties, becoming a match for anyone in the United States. They had succeeded in the toughest venue, New Jersey. Due to prior C.Y.O. commitments, they had to withdraw from this contest. It was unfortunate because they had never been in Canada and would have been a definite hit. Their replacement was the St. Catherine’s Queensmen from New York. We had met them before, several times, but only defeated them once. Always good, they would be an entertaining substitute for St. Kevin’s.

Predictions had been made earlier by those aware of the situation that the Optimists would give the top US Corps a run for their money this year. Along with this, it was said that De La Salle were neck and neck with us in the sweepstakes. Scout House and St. Joseph’s were unknown quantities to the local scene at the time, so this show would really serve to sort out a raft of rumours and conjecture. In order that this contest be truly international, in fact as well as in name, the judging panel was mixed. Of nine judges being used, four were Canadian and five American.

When the Optimist corps came out on the starting line, it was to a subdued applause, probably due to the previous year’s near debacle at the Nationals. Some of it, though, was genuine appreciation and interest. We still had some fans.

Jim McConkey addressed the Corps and put it in readiness to step off. Then, turning, he marched out to face the crowd. Just watching this guy strut was an experience, and his display alone roused audience interest. A few yells of encouragement preceded his signal for the first note, and we were off. That first note from the horn line hit the stands like a clap of thunder, as the most powerful ensemble the Optimist had ever fielded let rip. The fanfare ended and the Corps stepped off the starting line and into their best season yet. Even before the first number was over, it was apparent to those in the Corps itself that everything was working as it should. You can tell these things. By the time that the first number was completed, it was also apparent to the crowd. It started to come alive, realizing that this was the “old” Optimists but with a new face. Gone was the striving, but barely surviving outfit of last year, replaced by a robust, confident, powerful unit bent on regaining its stature. It was also, considering the early date, fairly accurate. Proof of this was the sight of judges walking around holding their clipboards and pencils, but not using them that often.

When the first half of the show ended, we had the crowd with us, on their feet, and their applause only served to fuel the fires of ambition. If we could do it, the second half would be better. Barry Bell had been observed doing a little jig on the sidelines as he saw all his planning, and that of the other instructors, unfold before his eyes. At the end of the standstill concert, the audience was in an uproar. The melodious rendition of “I’m In The Mood For Love”, followed by a rocking version of “Down By The Riverside” turned the place upside down. This, no doubt, was partially due to the change from “The Serenade From The Student Prince” and “In The Mood”. These two numbers had been very successful for us, but their time had passed. The now “fired-up” Corps literally “chewed-up” the field during the second portion of the show, and outdid themselves. Before the final note echoed through the stadium, the crowd was on its feet, remaining that way until the last man passed in review and disappeared under the stands. Never had there been such an ovation for this Corps. We were back!



1962: Toronto Optimists (Grey Cup Parade)

However, there still remained the small matter of the score sheets to contend with. Often, no matter how good that a Corps feels it has performed, or how high the optimism bred by positive crowd reaction, judges’ opinions can draw a different conclusion. We were up against other good units and were ourselves still rough around the edges. The rest of the show featured good performances by all the units competing, and the final scores would reveal some surprises.

The Garfield Cadets were, as expected, the most smoothly professional Corps of the evening, not only in their execution but also in their arrangements, both music and drill. The complexity of their material, combined with the depth of talent that enabled them to execute well, was to prove a potent mixture. They easily upheld their status of a top US Corps, and it was not necessary to be an expert on the subject to detect this.

The other Corps involved, though, did not appear amateurish in comparison, and the crowd was treated to a good selection of various styles and degrees of competence. In giving the end result of this contest, let's run through the Corps and scores as they ended up, giving a short report on each one.



1962: Toronto Optimists

In sixth position was Preston Scout House. Still a definite crowd favourite, they were hindered by an inability, or unwillingness, to accept change. Not only in style, but material, some of which was still of 1958 and before vintage. Although still a fine exhibition band, they lacked something for modern competition, scoring 69.76.

Placing fifth was St. Joseph's of Batavia. They were new to Canada and still a young Corps.

This was a Corps that was much improved over the previous year and would improve in leaps and bounds. Their performance on this night showed their potential. A good show, and the future would see them up with the best, scoring 73.95.

Now was De La Salle, who were held back by the problem all Corps face sooner or later, a lot of new people who needed to pick up experience. They had many fans that hoped to see them carry on where they had left off the year before. Eventually that would come about but not tonight. Although their show was effective with some good new material they garnered fourth place, with a score of 79.5.

Everybody loved St. Catherine's Queensmen's, music. Stan Kenton's "Eager Beaver" was a crowd favourite, as well as an Optimist favourite. Music, content, and execution were the strong point, but a lacklustre drill presentation was to be a negative force. Always good, tonight's show was for third place, barely edging out De La Salle with a score of 79.9.

By now we were really wondering what was going to happen. We had topped Del, and even the Queensmen, for a second time. We soon found out at the announcer droned, in second place, the Optimists, score 85.33. The Corps was jubilant. Almost six points over our closest Canadian rivals and a good US Corps. How well we had really done was revealed when Garfield, in first place, was announced with a score of 85.69. Less than half a point from a top American Corps was, for us, a definite success and more than we dared hope for. To some, who were involved in the business, but not at this show, this result was regarded as a fluke. No Canadian Corps had ever been this close to a top American Corps. However, all the Canadian Corps were getting better, and this was just the first time it had happened. It would happen again, more than once, in the future, and involving other Corps than the Optimists. As for us, this year, there was a whole season ahead that included chances to disprove the theory that this result had been a fluke.

## The Port Credit Pear Pickers

Things were now quiet for a while, contest-wise, until July 2nd. That was a whole month, but rehearsals were kept up at the same pace, not only to maintain but to improve our performance. During this slow period there were a couple of exhibitions and a parade that had an unusual aspect. We had already done one unusual parade at Christmas. It was unusual because of the fact that instead of uniforms we wore ordinary clothes but allowed the style to be any manner



1961: Toronto Optimists as the Port Credit Pear Pickers



1961: Toronto Optimists as the Port Credit Pear Pickers

that each individual could devise. The result was a garish collection of costumes that caused great curiosity among spectators. Even that early, the quality of the Corps was evident and people were wondering who we were, as there were no emblems or distinguishing characteristics. We spread it around that we were the “Port Credit Pear Pickers”, and it was a great job and fun for all.

## The “Hatari” Parade

Now, the parade this month, on June 25th, was unusual for different reasons. One, we were the only Drum Corps in it, albeit this time in uniform. Two, this parade was for a rare occasion, especially in Toronto, as we paraded for the premiere of the new John Wayne film “Hatari”. The great man himself was there, along with other Hollywood celebrities, and followed us along Yonge Street to the location of the theatre. Mr. Wayne, larger than life, took the trouble to come over and see us, being made an honorary member of the Corps. With the true grace of the great, he accepted this, to add to his numerous lifetime achievements. He truly was big.



1962: Optimists DM, Jim McConkey makes John Wayne an honorary corps member

## On the Road

We were back on the road with more exhibitions, June 30th at the Tournament of Drums in Rochester, and July 1st in St. Catharines. These affairs were good for exposure, but what was needed to keep and hone the fine edge was competition, and the last day of this weekend saw just that. The two exhibitions served as rehearsals for July 2nd, in Port Hope, Ontario. De La Salle were about the only Canadian Corps that had any chance of surpassing us. They were still a good Corps and a whole month had elapsed since our last meeting. Not having been idle ourselves, at the end of the night, we were still six points ahead of anyone else. This was a great year to be in the Optimists and everyone who was knew it.

What was shaping up to be a banner year received a dent in its armour on July 7th. In Brantford, Ontario, De La Salle, who were never to be discounted, pulled themselves to within three points of us. Whether they outdid themselves, or we, overconfident, let things slide, is a matter of conjecture. It was, however, the first time that we got hauled over the coals for winning a contest.

All this activity was leading to something else. That “special occasion” mentioned earlier in relation to the new uniforms. On July 14th, off we went, again, to Rome, New York. This was the show for which we had saved the uniforms. It was more psychological than anything else, designed to give a boost in morale. Rehearsals were held every night for two weeks prior to this show, and every ounce of energy and know-how we had was poured into this effort. Being in New York State, the score sheets allowed forty-five points for general effect, more than anywhere else, or than had ever been allowed in the past.

What was the reason for all this preparation and calculation? There could only be one reason, Blessed Sacrament would be there. With the potential that existed in the Corps this year, we were



1962: Blessed Sacrament at The Dream

really anxious to see what we could do against the best. Such sentiments would not have existed on their side, regardless of our good showing earlier in the year. They had never had to worry about us before, especially the previous year. We were as primed as could possibly be, at this time, and were out for blood. The “fluke” theory against Garfield earlier in the year, we hoped, would be laid to rest. So, aware of all the nuances involved and the fact that another such opportunity might never arise, off we went.

There were a total of six Corps in the show, four of which were American. We will limit discussion to two, only because not all of the others are known at this time.

When we rolled into the stadium, on the bus, Blessed Sacrament, or “Sac” as they were known, were on the field partway through their show. It was never a good idea to watch “Sac” when you had to go against them. You just felt like packing your stuff and going home. However, it could not be avoided, as we had to get ready for our turn.

At last, as the final, smooth strains of “In The Still Of The Night” floated over the stands to prolonged applause, we knew our time had come. Our new uniforms drew some comments from “Sac” people, who now stood around singly or in groups. Other than that they were unconcerned with us.

Standing on the line, we knew that tonight was now or never. As Jim McConkey marched out to face the crowd, some patriotic soul yelled “do it for your county, boys”. Well, if we could, we would.

This event was an emotional one for Jimmy McConkey because he had spent many years with Blessed Sacrament. Now, here he was trying to beat them. It did not deter him from giving his best, and, when he signalled for the first note, the Corps responded likewise. For what was probably the first time ever, “Sac” people looked up and then came over to watch. Everybody in the corps noticed this, and it was a real morale raiser. Although we had played Rome before, the locals had never seen this version of the Optimist Corps, and they ate it up.

“Let Me Entertain You”, the opening number went off well, but, in the second number “Asia Minor”, a disaster struck. There was a general breakdown on drums and horns when coming out of a standstill French horn solo. The Drum Major and the Corps got their signals crossed and half the Corps was out of time with the other. Here, training and experience took over, as the playing stopped, the drum line picked up the show, and the horns came back in on cue. The whole thing only lasted seconds and the show continued as if nothing had happened.

That was fortunate, because the performance was knocking the crowd and the judges over. The lapse that occurred, and after, even prompted one judge to comment “nice recovery” on the score sheet, though of course it still cost us points.

Well, after that nothing else catastrophic occurred and the show picked up steam.

After the standstill concert, part of the show, Jim McConkey said audibly, “you better bleed on that finish line!”<sup>4</sup> It was picked up by tape recorders and subsequently reproduced on records. It has since become a piece of Drum Corps folklore.

Continuing, the horns played powerfully and well and the drums out executed themselves.

Accuracy was one key to success and appeal was another. Would we have enough of both to make any inroads against the masters. If the crowd reaction was any indication, there was no doubt. The Corps marched off the field to a rousing standing ovation, but it remained to be seen what the verdict of the judges would be.



1962: Toronto Optimists Drum Line (Rome, NY)

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<sup>4</sup> *Editor's note: the comment was actually recorded at the 1962 Nationals*

On the retreat ceremony, tension was evident in our ranks, aggravated by 98° F heat and the ever-present mosquitoes. All the Corps were lined up on the field, but at the judges table tabulations were still being done. This sort of thing is nerve-wracking. Finally the announcing of results began, and as they were reeled off excitement grew. Third place was given and we had still not yet been named. Nobody really dared hope for the unlikely, and at the official spoke into the microphone:

“In second place, with a score of 84.45, the Blessed Sacrament Golden Knights”.

Nobody moved a muscle.

It had happened, and it was a shock to everyone.

“In first place, with a score of 86.20, the Toronto Optimists”. The crowd roared its approval and, relaxing, the Corps members indulged in some well-earned self-congratulations. “Sac”, many times US National and New Jersey State Champions, had gone down to an outsider. Actually, it was the first time that a Canadian Junior Corps had ever defeated a past or present US National Champion. Now we had to find out how it had happened.



1962: Retreat in Rome , announcing second place

Being the winning Corps, we were last off the field and stood patiently as the other units marched off in front of us, even “Sac” who were at the far end of the field. Everyone was now still and silent, but inwardly elated at being part of what was, up to now, the high point of the career of the Optimists Drum and Bugle Corps. Finally, our turn came and we trooped off the field behind the stands, where we boarded our bus. Pandemonium reigned, while Barry Bell

pulled out the score sheets and began to analyse the whole affair. Eventually chaos changed, slowly, to relative serenity and he was able to give us a breakdown of the sheets. Not surprisingly, the general effect captions had done the trick for us. Wins by 3/10 on bugles, 2/10 on drums, and a whopping 2.3 on marching and maneuvering. This last was a tribute to the creative genius of Doug McPhail. Self-taught and brilliant, he was mostly responsible for the devising and teaching of a drill that had out-marched the best in the business. Of course, without good execution, general effect suffers, and we had held our end up there, although not topping any captions. "Sac" took execution drums by 2/10, bugles by 7/10, and M&M by 0.15. These scores were the closest, in every category, that we had ever come to "Sac" execution-wise, and the margin of 2.8 in overall G.E. tipped the scales in our favour, to the tune of 1.75.



1962: Toronto Optimists Colour Presentation (Varsity Stadium)

Well, there it was, and it was savoured all the way home. Would we have beaten them the next day, or in New Jersey? Only the gods knew that. Of course, back at work, in school, or even at home, when relating what we had done, often the reaction was "who?", accompanied by blank expressions of incomprehension. We were happy, and in the Drum Corps world, it was an upset of major proportion that would reverberate for a long time to come.

Although the outcome of this affair had exceeded our expectations, everything afterwards was now anti-climatic.

There was still much activity to contend with before the season ended. Most of this involved local competition, where our competitors could never be ignored no matter how successful we had been this far. This outlook on things was always to the fore in our calculations. If not always totally shared by the general membership, it was officially promoted from the top in order to forestall the onset of overconfidence or arrogance.

## Post-Rome

Closer to home now, it was to Falconer, New York again for an exhibition at a senior contest. Then, on July 25th, at East York Stadium in Toronto, it was time for the first defence of our Ontario Championship title. We maintained our six point advantage over all other entrants, reinforcing the almost total dominance achieved this year.

In reporting this contest, it is noteworthy to recall remarks made, in a Drum Corps World column by the prolific writer, Bob Mannhardt. He penned more than one monthly column and was recognized by all as a knowledgeable source of news. Although he was an Optimist fan and an honorary member of the Corps, his articles were unbiased and critical of anyone, if such was deserved.



Regarding this show, he observed that De La Salle were as good as they were last year, which was decidedly good. Therein lay the problem. It was not good enough anymore to be “as good as last year”. Del’s horn line was as fine as ever and on par with ours; however, as Mr. Mannhardt pointed out, the Optimists had acquired a whole new show, moving ahead in material and competence. By regaining the initiative, the situation of last year had been reversed, forcing our rivals to contemplate inconvenient and difficult mid-season changes if they wished to remain competitive.



1962: Toronto Optimists on retreat (Varsity Stadium, October)

Early August saw us in Rochester, N.Y., again for the New York / Canadian Championship. Rochester was a good place to compete because interest in Drum Corps was widespread, and the stadium was always filled. This one went down well as we topped a field containing St. Joseph’s of Batavia and De La Salle by six and seven points, respectively. An exhibition in Sarnia led, two weeks later, to a mixed junior/senior contest in Titusville, Pennsylvania. This town was noted for being the site of the first oil well drilled in the United States. Well, we drilled hard for this one, coming up against the Pittsburg Rockets Senior Drum and Bugle Corps. They were a good Senior Corps, but we managed to cap the field by a margin of 1.65. We had been in Titusville in 1961, but, as elsewhere this year, it was not the same Corps. To win this one was a definite feather in our caps.

It was no getting late in the season and increasingly unlikely that anyone in Canada would defeat us this year. Since July, we had maintained a minimum six point lead over all others and had not lost a contest anywhere since June 2nd.

### **Pittsburgh: The rematch that never happened**

But there was one more contest in the US before the Canadian Championships were held, and it was a big one. We focussed on it intently, and the list of Corps involved shows why.

There were six:

- ▶ Chicago Cavaliers
- ▶ Garfield Cadets
- ▶ Madison Scouts
- ▶ St. Catherines’ Queensmen
- ▶ Blessed Sacrament
- ▶ Toronto Optimists

What a line-up! The location was Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and the show was an adjunct to the Allegheny County fair, on September 2nd. Prior to this, on August 25th, we won back the CNE title we had lost to De La Salle the year before. This time it was by a huge eight points.

One reason was that we had been rehearsing overtime in order to prepare for the Pittsburgh contest. It had been on our minds since it was announced eight months earlier. The added practice time made us more than ready for the CNE.

At the time that the schedule was aired, we had not known how the Corps would turn out this year. Now, we knew. This contest was seen as an opportunity to go at the best, while realizing it would be far from easy to accomplish anything. There would be no huge general margin in the score sheets, nor any advantages of surprise. This was Pennsylvania, not New York, and everybody now knew that we were capable of an upset and would act accordingly. We, of course, were itching to get on with it. It was to be a three day trip, allowing much time for rehearsal.



1962: Ivor & Jim with the Drum Major of Audubon and others (Quebec City)

Away we went, full of beans, determined to again make our mark. Nothing could dampen our spirits, not even being accommodated in dark cabins reminiscent of Davy Crockett days. The rain that began to fall, also, could not suppress the spirit of the Corps. The trouble was that the rain began and did not stop. It rained, and rained, and rained. We still rehearsed hoping for a break in the weather, which did finally happen. What else had happened, of course, was that the contest field had turned into a sticky quagmire of wet, gooey mud. It was impossible to march on it, let alone compete. The contest was cancelled, and all the Corps were reduced to playing their shows in semi-circle, on a wooden platform. There was no other word for it but disappointment.



1962: Toronto Optimists (Grey Cup Parade)

Drum Corps were nearly always subject to the whims of Mother Nature. Resignedly, we played our show to a small gathering of spectators, who probably had no idea of the lost drama confronting them. It was just a band show, a side show of the country fair.

Packing up our equipment, we boarded the bus for the long trip back to Toronto. There was always next year, but would we ever again have a Corps like this one.

## The Nationals

Never long subdued, the spirit was back by the time we got home and began to prepare for our own backyard contest, the 1962 Canadian Championship. It was less than a week later, and in the junior division it was not really much of a contest at all. Based on our record this year, we would have had to make several major blunders to lose this one. Still, it was the Canadian Championship, and, taking it seriously, as ever, rehearsals were not allowed to lapse. As a result, the six point margin established earlier was maintained. We became Canadian Champions for the fifth consecutive year. De La Salle, of course, were second, not having managed to close the gap since the beginning of the season; however, where other corps had disappeared, they were still there and would be for a long time to come.



1962: Toronto Optimists (Varsity Stadium, October)

Al Baggs, still our Corps Director, was also still the Chief Judge and presided at this show. This time there were no protests or political uproar. The scores were too far apart for that. Other interesting things happened at this affair. The Optimist Bantams, our feeder Corps, placed second in the junior standstill division, a good omen for us, as they were one of our major sources of new talent.

Ivor Bramley's proteges, the Oakville Trafalgar Patrolmen, won the title in their division for the first time ever. His influence on this Corps had been considerable, and his participation in their affairs had a lot to do with this result.

Back in the Junior "A" Division, Grantham, who had always been a dark horse and a viable contender, had suffered misfortune. Many of their members had, early in the year, left to form a Senior Corps. Consequently, they had not fielded a competitive Corps all year until the championships. Then they reverted to the Junior "B" Division, and, even then, only just made it to the finals. They seemed finished as a challenge to anyone.

The biggest surprise at this year's Nationals was the first local appearance of a Senior Corps from Quebec. Les Diplomates de Quebec, unheard of and unheralded in these parts, came on and astounded all that saw them. A horn line of unequalled power, a crisp drum line, and a show crammed with general effect put Quebec Corps on the map. They were tremendous, throwing a real scare into the local establishment.



1962: Blessed Sacrament and Optimists on Retreat (Rome, NY)

Before the season ended, there was one more function to attend, the Annual St. Catharines Grape Festival. Again, nature intervened and this was also rained out. So much for that!

The year was now officially over. What had started out seeing the Corps almost fold had become the most successful year in its brief history. A "Five Year Championship" dinner was held for all at the King Edward Hotel in downtown Toronto, the first of its kind.

The savouring of the year just finished overshadowed speculation about the future. Plans and changes were announced, and it was revealed that from May to October about 1,800 Corps buttons had been sold. A lot of people had jumped on the bandwagon, so to speak.

There could be a lot more said about this year, but it would serve little purpose, let's just say that the Corps, rather than being merely good, had teetered on the brink of greatness. It was a heady experience, and one not easily discarded. Some Corps take much longer to reach such a plateau. Some never do. However, there were changes coming up, the foremost being the loss of at least twelve members. This, due to age, was unavoidable but not catastrophic. One of these was the spirited Ivor Bramley, who this year had been the guard commander and drill instructor. Staying around as an instructor, he would eventually become good enough to be sought after and used by top Senior Corps.



1962: Toronto Optimists (Grey Cup Parade)

Oh yes, this was also the end for the author of this story. The time had come to go out into the real world and find out what was there. Six years in Corps, sometimes feted, applauded, always in good company. Now, I was to leave all this – for who knew what.

As far as this tale is concerned, it shall no longer be “we” or “us” when speaking of the Corps. Nor will there be any eyewitness reports for a long period, all information being culled from magazines, letters, and interviews. If the narrative suffers because of this, I offer no apologies. It cannot be helped.



1962: Colin Hedworth, right end of drum line, at his last contest (Varsity Stadium)

# Version