
by Victor Colaianni

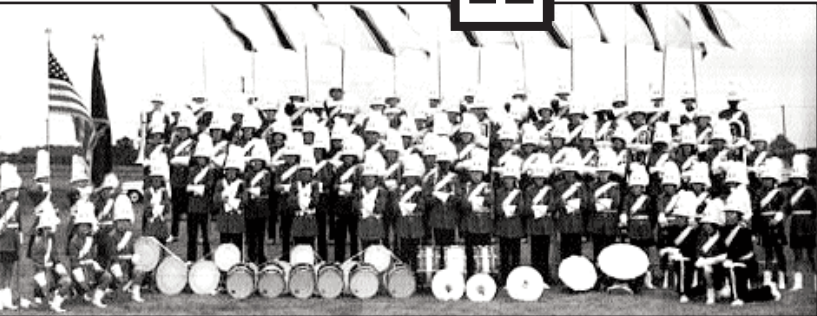
In 1972, Canton, OH, police officers J. Babe Stearn and Ralph McCauley, the director and assistant director of the Canton Police Boys Club, met with Canton businessman Art Drukenbrod to discuss an idea they had for a music program at the Boys Club.

Besides being a businessman, Drukenbrod was a musician who had played drums with many of the Canton area's big bands over the years. He was also a member of the Canton American Legion and VFW national champion senior drum and bugle corps.

Drukenbrod provided the drum corps knowledge and instruction, with some help from his old drum corps buddies, while Stearn and McCauley provided the future musicians.

The young musicians chose the name "Bluecoats" in tribute to the police department's retired police officers and as a program of the Canton Police Boys Club. The corps made its debut in competition in 1974, hosting its first "Innovations in Brass"

Bluecoats



Bluecoats, 1974 (photo from the collection of Victor Colaianni).

competition (still held annually today).

Although the practice facilities at the Boys Club weren't the greatest (the drum line rehearsed in the club's bowling alley), the corps steadily improved. Over the next several years, the Bluecoats organization transformed into a community entity and became known as "Canton's Musical Ambassadors."

As community support grew, so did the size and stature of the corps. The corps purchased some old surplus Army buses in the late 1970s and painted them blue (one with trademark whitewall tires was commonly referred to as the "suburban" bus).

By 1976, the Bluecoats were recognized nationally as an up-and-coming organization as they competed around the country and in Canada, making the U.S. Open Finals that year. The corps continued to improve in 1977 and 1978.

In 1977, the Bluecoats finished third at the American Legion Nationals, less than three points behind the champion Crossmen, who finished 10th at DCI Finals. In 1978, the



Bluecoats, 1982 (photo by Paul Lambert from the collection of Drum Corps World).

Bluecoats garnered top class A honors at the American International Open and placed 28th at DCI Finals in Denver, CO. It was the highest DCI placement since the corps' inception.

At that time, to make the top 25 at DCI Finals was a challenging feat. The number of open class corps (now known as division I) was almost triple what it is today.

In the 1970s, the members were fed three meals a day from an old U-Haul trailer pulled by



Bluecoats, 1986 (photo by Roger C. Ellis from the collection of Drum Corps World).

parents' cars. The corps sometimes got fresh eggs purchased a few pennies cheaper due to volunteers agreeing to collect and clean the eggs themselves.

Following the 1978 season, a tough decision had to be made. The cost of competing continued to rise and, other

than the local VFW and American Legion, the corps had little corporate support.



Bluecoats, 1990 (photo by Dale Eck from the collection of Drum Corps World).

In late winter 1978, it was decided the Bluecoats would not field a competing corps for the 1979 season. The corps did hold its competition and the most riveting evidence of the Bluecoats' absence from

competition was in the competition program. A photograph of an empty football field

was above the Bluecoats' name and history, with an explanation as to why the corps wasn't competing that season.

The late fall of 1979 saw the return of the Bluecoats to their Police Boys Club rehearsal hall and the corps did return to the field for the 1980 competitive season. They quickly established themselves as a fierce competitor by winning their fourth VFW State Championship and they made consistent improvements that season.

In 1981, the Bluecoats saw a jump in their membership and had more than 110 for the first time since 1977. The most notable

increase in size was in the percussion section. The size leaped from 18 members in 1980 to 30 in 1981 and the corps won the U.S. Open class A title.

The 1981 season was also a banner year for the corps' Boys Club support.

A new Canton Police Boys Club was constructed in Southwest Canton. This facility, later renamed for J. Babe Stearn, a corps founder, continues to be used by the corps today. The J. Babe Stearn Community Center has been a constant in the Bluecoats' history, with the exception of 1982.

In 1982, the membership numbers decreased slightly. That year also saw some changes in the structure and rehearsal facilities. Galen Oakes, a prominent developer in the Canton area, donated an old elementary school building in Massillon, OH, for the corps' use. This facility had great potential, but it never came to fruition, as the building needed many renovations and improvements. In a way, although not a proven fact, it seemed as though "Canton's Musical Ambassadors" weren't meant to have a rehearsal hall in Massillon, OH.

Competitively, the corps was average in 1982 at the national level, but did well locally, winning its sixth VFW State Championship.

The winter of 1982-1983 was another difficult period in the history of the Bluecoats. Financially, the corps was struggling, and a lack of membership forced management to decide against competing for the 1983 season. This decision came somewhat late in the winter and many of the members from prior years went on to march with other corps. The decision would lead to some challenging recruitment in future years. Following the 1983 season, a major turning point in the history of the Bluecoats took place.

The evolution of the organization was greatly encouraged and promoted when, in 1984, another Canton businessman, Ted

Swaldo, took the reins. Swaldo's management abilities and enthusiasm became the catalyst that not only propelled the Bluecoats into national recognition as a competitive unit, but also as a role model for other youth organizations throughout the country.

The summer of 1984 saw steady improvements in the competitive stature and, in 1985, the Bluecoats improved even more. The instructional staff continued to be made up of corps veterans, as had been the case since 1982.

In the winter of 1985, Swaldo, along with the board of directors, realized the future potential of the corps for the 1986 season and brought in Larry Hershman as the program coordinator. Hershman had been a prominent figure in the senior corps arena and was also instrumental in the success of the U.S. Naval Academy Drum and Bugle



Bluecoats, August 5, 1988, at Montclair, NJ (photo by Ron Da Silva from the collection of Drum Corps World).

County's musical ambassadors, instilling excellence in youth through the challenge, excitement, creativity and self-discipline of drum and bugle corps.

Throughout the 1990s, the corps continued to be a fixture in DCI Finals and as the 2003 season

the Bluecoats that season and it gave the corps a great head of steam going into the summer of 1987.

The first corps from Ohio to make DCI Finals in 1987, the Bluecoats have continually found themselves in high acclaim around the country since then for their crowd-pleasing jazz. Always a crowd favorite, applause for the Bluecoats soon

grew into roaring chants of "Bluuuuue" as the corps has continued its rise to international prominence.

The corps still plays a signature tune from that first finals year, *Autumn Leaves*, during retreat ceremonies or as a post competition

piece by the brass line.

The Bluecoats' drum line made the tune even more famous in 1988 when it used 20 snares in the final portion of the solo.

Founded in and supported by the people of the "Hall of Fame City," Canton, OH, the Bluecoats and their world-renowned big band jazz style have now become Stark

approaches, the corps looks to make great improvements. The annual "Innovations in Brass" competition



Bluecoats, 2001 (photo by Alan Winslow from the collection of Drum Corps World).



Bluecoats, 1996 (photo by David Rice from the collection of Drum Corps World).

has grown into a popular part of the Pro Football Hall of Fame Festival each year. This major fund-raiser averages 7,000 to 10,000 fans annually.

The corps has also added another title to its organizational name. Founder Art Drukenbrod passed away in 2002 and the Bluecoats took steps to add "Art's Corps" to its notoriety. They wore a patch signifying this for the 2002 season and will more than likely make it a permanent synonym for the Bluecoats name.

Vic Colaianni marched with the Bluecoats from 1978-1986 and served on the percussion staff in 1987. He lives in Canal Fulton, OH, with his wife, Sara. He is a division manager in the commercial finance department for MATCO Tools Corporation in Stow, OH. Colaianni has been a writer for Drum Corps World since 1987. He also is an active judge for the Ohio Music Education Association and has written and arranged for various high school percussion programs in Ohio, most notably the Lexington High School Band of Gold, where he spent 16 years as assistant marching band director/percussion caption head.



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Bluecoats, 1995, at the DCI Championships in Buffalo, NY (photo by Ron Walloch from the collection of Drum Corps World).

Corps. He quickly moved to hire seasoned staff and consultants. Bob Dubinsky, a key member of the Bayonne Bridgemen's drum staff, as well as a leader behind the early success of Star of Indiana, joined to write and arrange the percussion book. He also consulted with the corps at several rehearsals.

Dave Rohrer was brought in to head the

brass program. He was a leader within the senior corps scene, as well as with the U.S. Naval Academy corps. Hershman's prowess paid off and the corps leaped to 15th place at DCI Finals in 1986.

Many took note of



Bluecoats, 1996 (photo by Karen Sunmark from the collection of Drum Corps World).

Bluecoats, 2002 (photo by Dan Scafidl from the collection of Drum Corps World).

