
by Chris Kilian

bush-wack 'bush-"wak, -"
v. **bush-wacked, bush-wack-ing, bush-wackers**

v. tr. To attack suddenly from a place of concealment; ambush.

The beginning

In the fall of 1980, drum corps in the Eastern United States was in a decline. A mere five years before, there were a number of junior and senior corps in New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Connecticut and Massachusetts. By 1980, there were fewer and even fewer would be active by 1985.

Regardless, and against all odds, an organizational meeting was held in November 8, 1980, at the Keyport American Legion. Approximately 15 people attended, plus staff and administration. The Bushwackers were born.

Although the organization had hopes of fielding a competitive corps as early as 1981, finances and membership changed the focus to performing in parades.

Recruitment was difficult in Keyport and a decision was made to relocate to the corps' present home of Harrison, NJ, where it could tap into the

membership and staff of the recently disbanded Royal Brigade junior corps. Along with the move came horn instructor Al DiCroce and the beginning of a new DCA era.

The early years

Building a new corps from scratch comes with a good deal of growing pains and the Bushwackers experienced their share. Recruitment was hard, management deteriorated and the corps had to work to get out of the shadow of the junior corps whose members filled the ranks.

Despite it all, the Bushwackers entered the field for competition at the Drum Corps Associates Championships for the first time in 1982. After an incredible finals weekend, the new corps with the funny name had made a statement. In their first season, the Bushwackers placed eighth at DCA Finals.

Early success came at the expense of many seasoned competitors. The Bushwackers were a viable threat and a hunted corps by the rest of the pack.

For most of the 1983 season, it was Bush, Buccaneers and Hurricanes making things interesting in the middle of the pack as Labor Day weekend approached. In both prelims and finals, the Bushwackers pulled out amazing performances, earning a

Bushwackers

fifth-place finish and a reputation as a corps not to be overlooked.

In 1984, Bush first wore one of the most distinctive uniforms in drum corps. The jacket was mostly light blue with a magenta sleeve. A keyboard serape, flat brimmed Aussie and black pants rounded out the look.

A strong corps and staff additions such as George Zingali as drill designer propelled the corps into the upper echelon of DCA. The corps chased the Bucs and Cabs for the majority of the season and, in the end, that's just how it ended up. Bush placed third in their third season.

Building a champion

The entire early history of the Bushwackers had been full of one success after another. Through adversity, the "little corps that could" had shocked the drum corps world. One could only assume that the 1985 Bushwackers would come out ready for war and compete for the DCA championship.

Instead, 1985 was a rebuilding year. In true Bushwacker fashion, the corps fought its way into the top five again by placing

fourth at championships. It was going to be a long off-season.

The winter of 1986 was disheartening. Membership was small and the administration had the daunting task of rebuilding the instructional staff. The corps waited until

July 5 to compete for the first time, but all the waiting and hard work was worthwhile.

Before long it was August and the Bushwackers were in the hunt. After placing third at prelims, the Bushwackers entered the field and blew the crowd away. In only five years of competition, the Bushwackers secured their first victory -- and picked the DCA Championships to do it.

Bush learned what all champions learn: it is harder to remain a champion than to become one. In 1987, the corps was now the hunted, and they got caught. The summer of 1987 was the year of the "big rain." After placing third in prelims, the corps learned finals had been canceled. The placements and scores from prelims would stand and the only finality to the season would be an exhibition standstill on the track in the rain.

Staying a champion

A new administration was in place by

1988, as several board members left and Jay Morlot transitioned into the directorship, which he holds to this day. More staff shuffling occurred, including the promotion of Jim Dugan and Roy Chambers to program coordinators.

Bush came out of the starting gate in 1988 revitalized and ready for battle. The corps chased the Sunrisers most of the season. A tie for first at DCA was the result.

In 1989, the two corps picked up where they left off. Bush was in front for the majority of the season, with Sun nipping at their heels. Bush was never in a position of dominance and always had to watch their backs for the looming Sunrisers.

DCA prelims and finals were close, but Bush's color guard gained the edge and the corps once again took home the hardware, winning its second championship in a row.

The 1990 season began a new decade and a new era for the Bushwackers. The addition of Steve Melillo as brass arranger helped to usher in a thematic shift. In 1990 and 1991, Bush performed original works written specifically for them. They won both prelims and finals in 1990, scoring their highest total ever. The rare three-peat was complete.

Four championships in a row would prove to be a difficult task for the 1991 corps. The show was strong, the group was strong, the administration was no longer new and the staff was as solid and cohesive as ever. The year was just not meant to be, however.

Even a nearly four-point jump from prelims to finals could not secure the championship. Staying true to the Bushwacker tradition of never being second best, the corps fell to third place and ended an amazing run of success for a corps barely 10 years old.

Much like the success of 1988 after the third-place finish in 1987, the Bushwackers came back with a vengeance in 1992. This time the corps turned to a darker side, performing music from "Sweeney Todd." All sections of the corps were exceptional and the design and instruction were again top notch. The hard work and stability in the structure paid off with Bush capturing its fifth DCA World Championship.

In 1993, the Bushwackers never lost a single show. The strength of this amazing corps, coupled with impeccable design and instruction, helped to create what truly was the perfect season. Bush almost seemed invincible. In the end, there was simply no corps that could stand up to the excellence and quality of the 1993 Bushwackers.

The corps had won six championships in eight years, including an undefeated season, a three-peat, six percussion titles and many other accolades. The 1993 season was the perfect end to an incredible run.

Searching for an identity

The 1994 Bushwackers continued with the thematic Broadway musical style of the previous two seasons, but could not recapture the glory. Despite a talented corps and superb design, other corps had rebuilt and found ways to beat the Bushwackers.



Bushwackers, 1984 (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).

Bushwackers, 1987 (photo by Dale Eck from the collection of Drum Corps World).



The corps found itself in the less familiar role of chasing other corps, and in the end, Bush fell to third place. It seemed the time had come to find a new style and perhaps a new identity.

In 1995, the Bushwackers experimented with a symphonic style that was a serious departure from anything DCA had ever been exposed to. The show was difficult and did not exactly reach out to Bushwacker fans. It took an entire season of pushing and working, but the corps forged ahead and willed itself to a fourth-place finish at DCA. This show was way ahead of its time and, although many disliked it or didn't understand it, they had to respect a corps that tried something different.

A major staff turnover in the off-season brought a new sound and direction for the corps in 1996. With a new program coordinator, drill designer, brass arranger and percussion staff, this was a much different Bushwacker corps than people had been used to. The corps returned to the Broadway style that had worked in the past, but a shortage of members and other setbacks held the corps back all season.

It seemed if there were another two weeks, the corps would have been able to seriously contend. The DCA season is long enough, however, and the Bushwackers earned another fourth-place finish at finals.

In 1997, the Bushwackers boasted the largest horn line in their history. The corps tried its hand again at Latin jazz and it would have worked fine, but getting all the members in the same place at the same time proved to be a difficult task. The corps was officially all present the weekend of finals. At this point, drill and music had been taught and re-taught, but never cleaned. The corps could only muster a fifth-place finish, and many members would never wear the



Bushwackers, 2002 (photo by Richard Wersinger from the collection of Drum Corps World).

magenta and blue again.

Identity found

The winter of 1997-1998 was the most difficult in the corps' history. At many rehearsals a grand total of five horns were present. The administration was faced with the difficult decision whether or not to disband. The staff believed it would work out and, by the first show in June, a small but gutsy corps took the field.

The 1998 Bushwackers placed eighth at finals, but that seemed inconsequential in a season that almost wasn't. The corps song was officially born and a new sense of family engulfed the corps. With a new crop of members, the future looked bright for the Bushwackers.

Unfortunately, "family" isn't as potent a recruiting tool as success on the field. The 1999 season was frustrating for a corps trying hard to re-establish itself as a contender. Dennis Argul, program coordinator since 1998, continued to reinforce the "family" ideal with a corps that became increasingly impatient with lack of success. What the members didn't realize at the time was they had to rebuild, and only after laying a solid foundation could a successful structure be built. A seventh-place finish put the period on a very tense season.

When times are tough, you will always have your friends and family. In 2000, all the Bushwackers had was each other. Performing perhaps its darkest show ever, the corps worked harder, marched faster and played more notes than just about anyone else that season. With the apparent end to the corps in sight, this group was not about to go down without a fight.

With a corps full of die-hard regulars, the Bushwackers marched onto the field at finals knowing they were going to come in last. Tenth place was the final placement and afterward the corps returned to the hotel to pack, not knowing whether there would be a corps to return to the following season.

A new era

Against all odds, the Bushwackers returned to the field in 2001 reborn. A major reworking of the staff and a hard-working membership yielded huge results for the rebuilding drum corps. Turning to a repertoire of wind ensemble and symphonic music, the Bushwackers found early success, scoring a win in Waterbury and passing the Skyliners and Hurricanes.

As the season forged ahead, the members began to believe in themselves and the program. The three prior years of building a "family" foundation were beginning to pay

off. This talented and relentless drum corps shocked the world by jumping five places and more than 10 points in just one year, finishing in fifth with the smallest open class corps in DCA.

In 2002, the corps had one of its most talented horn lines and a developing percussion program headed by J.R. Bechtel that was positioning itself to reclaim its

rightful place among the elite in DCA.

Unfortunately, color guard and visual problems put the brakes on the forward progress. At finals, the corps put all it had into a great performance for a receptive crowd. In the end, the Achilles heel was visual and the corps fell to seventh, although only out of fifth by tenths of a point.

The summer of 2003 shows great promise. The corps has reached back to its roots, rehiring program coordinator Jim Dugan in 2002 and unveiling an updated magenta and blue uniform in 2003. The establishment of an alumni association has brought many Bushwackers back into the fold.

Although the future of the Bushwackers is unknown, it is certain this resilient corps will continue to innovate, educate and entertain for years to come. The corps' commitment is to add new dimensions to the meaning of "quality" and to be the rule by which others are measured.



Bushwackers, 2000, at DCA Prelims (photo by Alan Winslow from the collection of Drum Corps World).



The 2003 season marks Chris Kilian's eighth season with the Bushwackers and sixth as drum major. He is also the chairperson of the recruitment committee, a visual staff member and serves on the

administration as the corps manager.

He began instructing high school marching bands in 1996. Since then, he has instructed and arranged for many bands, indoor percussion ensembles, jazz bands and other ensembles at all levels across the U.S.

Kilian joined the Bushwackers in 1996 as an assistant drum major. After marching baritone and soprano in 1997 and 1998, respectively, he returned to the podium in 1999, where he remains to this day.

As the self-proclaimed "No. 1 Bushwacker fan with the best seat in the house," Kilian conducts the corps with unbridled passion while bringing a sense of structure to the day-to-day operations of the drum corps.



Bushwackers, July 18, 1992, at Allentown, PA (photo by Dale Eck from the collection of Drum Corps World).