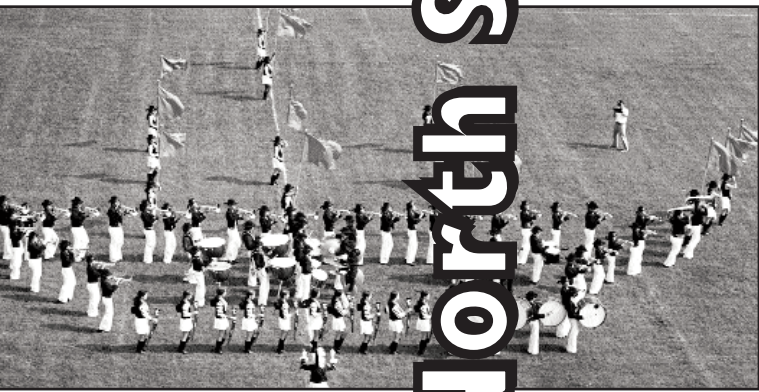



North Star



by Dr. Richard Lamb

The history of junior drum corps has been full of corps created by mergers. Most of these corps have been successes in the short-term, but were unable to succeed in the long-term. The exceptions that managed to survive the first few years,

however, have generally been notable successes. Such a corps was the North Star from North Shore, MA.

During the seven years of its existence (1976-1982), North Star was arguably the second most successful corps in terms of both competitive placement and longevity as a result of a merger, behind only the Crossmen.

Unlike most corps formed by mergers, North Star was not formed by the merger of just two corps. Instead, five corps -- the St. Mary's/Beverly Cardinals, the Immaculate Conception Reveries,

Danvers Blue Angels, Wilmington Crusaders and the Melrose Legion Vanguard -- all contributed to the pedigree of North Star through a series of mergers during the mid-1970s. Each of these corps had its own history that became part of the history of North Star.

The Cardinals were originally formed as the St. Mary's Cardinals of Beverly, MA, in 1947. They first appeared on the national drum corps scene in 1955, when they competed at the VFW National Championship, coming in second in prelims and third in finals. The Cardinals became VFW finalists again in 1962, 1964 and 1965.

They made finals at the World Open in 1966, 1967, 1968 and 1974, American Legion Nationals in 1967, the U.S. Open in 1971 and the American

International Open in 1974.

The corps also participated in the CYO Nationals in 1964, 1965, 1966 and 1968, and the National Dream in 1968. They became an associate member of DCI in 1974 at Ithaca, NY.

Through the I.C. Reveries, North Star shared a portion of its history with the 27th Lancers, the main rival at the corps' competitive peak. Immaculate Conception Church of Revere, MA, sponsored two corps, a "senior" or junior A corps and a "junior" corps which was really a feeder corps, both called the Reveries.

The senior Reveries participated in the 1964, 1965, 1966 and 1967 CYO Nationals and made finals at the 1966 and 1967 World Open. VFW finalist status barely eluded them twice, as the corps came in 11th in 1960 at Detroit, MI, a year when only 10 corps made finals, and 14th in 1966 at Jersey City, NJ.

Their 1966 appearance at VFW provided the most memorable event in the Reveries' history, a sit-in protest. At prelims, the Madison Scouts had come in 14th because of an undertime penalty. The Scouts successfully protested the penalty and were awarded 10th after prelims. This moved the Racine Scouts from 12th to 13th and the Reveries from 13th to 14th.

The VFW allowed the Racine Scouts to compete in finals. The Reveries felt they deserved to be in finals, too, and staged a "sit-down strike" on the starting line for 15 minutes. (See photo on page 132 of "A History of Drum & Bugle Corps, Volume 1.") As a result, the VFW allowed them to perform in judged exhibition.

This action so upset the parish priest that he severed the church's sponsorship of the senior and junior Reveries. The senior Reveries reformed in 1967 as the 27th Lancers.

The junior Reveries reformed as an independent unit in 1968. They made class B finals at the World Open in 1969 and 1970 and then entered class A competition, steadily improving their placement at World Open from 31st in 1971 to 17th in 1974. This 1974 World Open was the high point of the independent Reveries' history, when they beat the 27th Lancers in all execution captions, but lost to them soundly in general effect.

After the Cardinals and Reveries, the Blue Angels of Danvers, founded in 1961, had the

(Top to bottom) North Star rifles (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World); I.C. Reveries at DCI East, 1975 (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World); Beverly Cardinals, June 13, 1970 (photo by Ron Da Silva from the collection of Drum Corps World); North Star during Sir Duke, 1978 (photo by Jan Byer from the collection of Drum Corps World).



most widespread reputation. The corps was named after the Navy's aerobatic team and had a feeder corps called the Chuting Stars, after the Navy's precision parachute team. The Chuting Stars later became the feeder unit for North Star.

While the Blue Angels mostly participated in the local Mayflower Circuit, they became visible on the national scene by competing at the World Open in 1966, 1967, 1969, 1970, 1971 and 1972, placing 16th in 1970. The corps also participated at the 1969 VFW Nationals in Philadelphia and the U.S. Open in 1973.

The Wilmington Crusaders and Melrose Legion Vanguard were primarily local corps, although the Wilmington Crusaders appeared at World Open prelims in 1970 and 1971. In 1974, the Legion Vanguard competed in class A at American International and came in 54th out of 57 corps at DCI in Ithaca. The Legion Vanguard included instructors from the legendary Lt. Norman Prince senior corps.

The first of the mergers that eventually led to North Star was between the Cardinals and the Wilmington Crusaders in 1973. The infusion of members into the Cardinals helped lead to the corps' reappearance in World Open Finals in 1974 after an absence of six years, as well as their first appearance in American International Finals and their DCI associate membership that same year.

A subsequent merger in 1975 also involved the Cardinals, but this time with the Legion Vanguard. This resulted in the Cardinals moving from Beverly to Melrose. This merger was not as successful as that with the Wilmington Cardinals, as the corps missed finals at both World Open and American International and lost its DCI associate membership, coming in 29th at DCI in Philadelphia.

The 1975 season also saw the merger of the Reveries and Blue Angels. At the conclusion of the 1974 season, half of the Reveries left for the 27th Lancers. The remaining half merged with the now stronger Blue Angels to form the Blue Angel/Reveries, sometimes referred to as the "Blueveries." They met with moderate success, coming in 21st at the World Open.



North Star rifles, 1980, at DCI Prelims in Birmingham, AL (photo by Ed Ferguson from the collection of Drum Corps World).

On New Years Day 1976, the Cardinals of Melrose and the Blue Angels/Reveries merged to form North Star. For the first time in most of the members' memories, every section of the corps was full in January.

The corps was listed as being from the North Shore of Massachusetts, but the hometowns of the three largest corps -- Danvers, Melrose and Revere -- were on the corps' letterhead. Management was shared by a team made up of Jim and Linda O'Brien from the Cardinals, Bill Dunne of the Blue Angels and Al Solombrino of the Reveries.

Although the corps wore the red satin and black of the Cardinals, it decided on a new musical identity based on contemporary music that had crowd appeal. The corps stuck to this musical identity throughout its history, resulting in shows that were likened to riding on a roller coaster in terms of pacing and excitement.

The corps not only kept some of its instructors from the Cardinals and Blue Angels/Reveries, such as arrangers Rick Connors and Paul Harris, but also hired talented but relatively unknown local instructors such as percussion caption head Dave Vose and drillwriter Neal Smith.

After debuting at a spring parade in Holy, MA, the corps experienced early success. In its first field competition in Danvers during late May, the corps generated excitement in the stands and came in second behind the Boston Crusaders. When they first traveled out of state to Bridgeport, CT, they beat the Hawthorne Muchachos in drums. Then they went on tour in August.

Tour started off auspiciously enough. The corps traveled to its first appearance in an open prelims/finals show, the American International in Butler, PA. They came in sixth in prelims and tied the host General Butler Vagabonds for fifth in finals.

Next was Key to the Sea in Toledo, OH. The corps made finals by defeating the defending American Legion National Champion Marquis, coming in 10th in both prelims and finals.

The members and staff were elated as they left Toledo for the World Open and CYO Nationals.

Disaster struck on the New York Thruway the night before World Open. Aerosol cans in the equipment truck experienced spontaneous combustion and exploded, igniting the vehicle and completely destroying all of the instruments, guard equipment and uniforms. The members passed by the burning hulk of the truck in shock, horror and disbelief.

The next day, the corps performed at World Open prelims wearing blue jeans and white T-shirts and playing on instruments and equipment borrowed from at least 12 different corps. Amazingly, they came in 10th and made finals. At finals, they performed again on borrowed instruments, this time wearing blue jeans and red T-shirts.

During retreat, the Connecticut Classics collected \$2,500 from the audience while the announcer described the events of the

preceding 24 hours and the members sobbed at parade rest.

The corps came in 10th the next night at CYO Nationals, defeating the Kilties, and more money was collected for them. The outpouring of sympathy continued, as several corps offered to compete in a show to benefit North Star and judges were willing to donate their services.

The fire had lasting effects on the corps. First, it cemented the corps' identity as a unit. The rivalries from all the members of all the original corps ceased and everyone became a North Star member first.

Second, the corps did not have an equipment truck for at least three more years. Instead, they modified the fourth bus to carry equipment.

Third, it allowed the corps to purchase all new uniforms and instruments the next year. One of the side effects of the new uniforms was that the guard no longer wore skirts; they now wore long pants like the rest of the corps. This decision would have an interesting consequence several years down the road.

The corps continued the tour, coming in 12th at VFW Nationals in New York City, making finals, and then competing at DCI in Philadelphia. Although the corps came in 30th, one place behind that of the Cardinals the year before, the members counted it a



North Star at the end of *Sir Duke*, 1977 (photo from the collection of Drum Corps World).

success, as they made finals of every prelims/finals show except DCI and were eager to return the following year.

After its first full winter as a corps, North Star came out roaring in the early summer of 1977, establishing a pattern of early season dominance that would last for the next three years. During the first week, they defeated both the Garfield Cadets and 27th Lancers.

That was also the week when North Star's closer, *Sir Duke* by Stevie Wonder, was number one on the *Billboard* charts. When the corps played it, the response from the crowd was deafening.

During this time, a percussion judge was so overwhelmed by the size of the drum line that he said it was "like a chrome wall coming at him." Thus, the nickname of the most famous section of the corps, The Chrome Wall, was born.

North Star continued its hot streak in early July by appearing at DCI East, which made its first visit to Allentown, where the corps made finals and again defeated the Garfield Cadets. The next night, they returned to Boston for CYO Nationals, where North Star placed eighth, defeating the Anaheim Kingsmen and Oakland Crusaders.

At the end of July was the contest most fondly remembered by the 1977 members, the World Open. The corps came in seventh at prelims and then turned in an outstanding performance at finals. As a result, North Star passed by Watkins Glen Squires, Boston Crusaders, Crossmen and Garfield Cadets to place third.

The corps left on tour in August. On its way to DCI in Denver, the corps competed again at American International. North Star won, sweeping all captions and taking home all the trophies except color guard, which stayed with the host General Butler Vagabonds. This was North Star's first major national championship title.

The western most contest North Star ever participated in was in Glenwood Springs, CO, the week before DCI in 1977. On the way east from this show to the last stop before finals, in Pueblo at the housing site, the corps had to cross the Continental Divide.

The grade was so steep that one of the buses was too underpowered to make the climb fully loaded. As a result, the bus discharged the members and they walked up the grade to the tunnel at the top, where the bus picked them up. The members all rejoined the bus safely and the corps continued on to Pueblo.

During tour, North Star was judged by Shirley Whitcomb, who made a comment during *Sir Duke* that the guard needed to "Smile! Smile! I want to see your teeth!" In response, the night before DCI Prelims, members of the rifle line spent hours making big paper smiles that they put in their mouths during the final push. The judges could see the "teeth" from the pressbox!

North Star came in second on the first day of prelims and 17th overall, earning a DCI associate membership. The members thought they deserved better, as they had beaten six of the corps that had placed ahead of them at DCI during the course of the season.



The "Chrome Wall" of North Star, 1978 (photo by Jane Boulen from the collection of Drum Corps World).

They were ready to come back the next year to make DCI Finals.

For the third year in a row, North Star came out smoking at the beginning of the season in 1978. They came in second at a show in New Jersey in mid-June, only a point and a half behind the Bridgemen and 15 points ahead of the Garfield Cadets.

In July, they placed seventh at DCI East, ahead of 27th Lancers and Blue Stars and sixth at CYO Nationals, again ahead of Blue Stars. They participated in the National Dream, placing third. At World Open at the end of the month, they came in second, again defeating the 27th Lancers.

The corps left on tour for DCI in August. One of the first stops was DCI North in Ypsilanti, MI. At prelims, North Star came in second, only three-tenths behind Phantom Regiment. They were ready to overtake the second-place finisher at the 1977 DCI Finals.

North Star lined up to start the show and then had to leave the field because of a downpour. When they re-entered the field, they had lost their edge and lost by four points. They had a second chance at the U.S. Open, where they came in second by a point and a half to Phantom Regiment at prelims. Again, they had a flat performance at finals and ended up in third, behind 27th Lancers by a tenth, where they would stay for the rest of the season.

The corps again pulled out more showmanship tricks at DCI. They easily cruised into finals at 10th place on the basis of the corps' drumming, showmanship and the strength of soprano player Gerry Noonan's solo during *Olé*.

At finals, they had a surprise for the audience and judges. To begin Joey "Moose"



A North Star rifle smiles for the judges during *Sir Duke*, 1977 (photo by Art Luebke from the collection of Drum Corps World).

Interbartolo's contra solo that started *Sir Duke*, drum major Kenny Kehoe threw a shaving cream pie in his face, to great laughter from the fans.

The corps delighted the spectators and remained in 10th. After DCI, North Star earned the highest score in its history, an 89.2, beating the Bridgemen for the first time in its history. North Star had arrived!

During 1979, the membership base of the corps, which had been completely local (almost all from

Eastern Massachusetts with a few from New Hampshire) for the first three years, began to expand. Members came from all over New England, including Rhode Island and Connecticut, and even from outside the region, including two "imports" -- Joe "Gizmo" Geswaldo, who had marched in the Squires, and Richard "Vince" Lamb, who marched in the Anaheim Kingsmen and flew out from California in June and filled the last horn spot. They were the first of many imports to come.

Expectations were high for North Star in 1979 and the corps did not disappoint either itself or the fans, right up to the first week of August. The corps won its first contest outside of Massachusetts, the "Aqua Spectacular" in Secaucus, NJ, where the corps was drenched in a downpour during concert.

Later, North Star embarked on two national tours, the first to the Midwest, Southwest and Great Plains during late June and July, and a second down the East Coast to Birmingham during August for DCI.

During the first tour, the corps participated in Drums Along the Rockies and DCI Midwest, where they earned fifth on the basis of an electrifying performance, ahead of Crossmen, 27th Lancers and Bridgemen. North Star had become "The Beast of the East."

Between tours, the corps briefly lost its status as top Eastern corps by placing third at prelims of the first Drum Corps East Championship and then fourth at finals, with the top four corps all within a point of each other.

The corps performed in exhibition at "The Wet Dream," one of the last in Roosevelt Stadium. North Star worked on regaining its status as "Beast of the East" at the World Open, where it came in second, more than a point ahead of the Bridgemen.

A few days later, North Star won the CYO Nationals with arguably its best performance of the year, defeating the Madison Scouts as well as both Bridgemen and 27th Lancers.

North Star suffered from a flat performance in the drizzle at DCI East, sinking to sixth behind four corps it had beaten over the course of the season -- Madison Scouts, 27th Lancers, Bridgemen and Blue Stars -- and barely stayed ahead of the Crossmen. The corps never again beat 27th Lancers or Bridgemen.

At DCI Prelims, North Star added one more notch to its belt by defeating Guardsmen for the first time that year. As a result, North Star had beaten every corps except Blue Devils, Phantom Regiment, Santa Clara Vanguard and Spirit of Atlanta during 1979.

At finals, the corps came in ninth, ahead of Blue Stars and Cavaliers, putting it in first place among the corps that played *Children of Sanchez* that year.

During DCI Finals, North Star in general and Gerry Noonan in particular, wowed Steve Rondinaro and Maynard Ferguson, who formed two of the three members of the TV broadcast team. Noonan blew his solo during *Olé* right at Maynard, who called him a "very brave performer and very courageous one."

In response to Rondinaro's wisecrack that Noonan was auditioning for Ferguson, Maynard said, "I think he made it." Rondinaro said he "really enjoyed the performance" and commented on how surprisingly good the rifle line was.

The drum line also did some impressing, as they tied the Santa Clara Vanguard in percussion execution and came in second in drums overall. As a result, The Chrome Wall



North Star soloist Gerry Noonan (photo by Dick Deihl from the collection of Drum Corps World).

behind the Bridgemen and fifth at CYO Nationals.

On the way down to Birmingham, the corps traded wins with the Blue Stars. This bore on the minds of North Star's members at DCI Prelims, where they turned in a flat performance and waited, heartbroken, in the parking lot, for the Blue Stars, one of the two corps that had always made DCI Finals, to go on last.

They were certain that Blue Stars would make finals and that they would be in 13th. Miraculously, North Star stayed in 12th and actually improved their placing to 11th at finals. The corps had survived the season, but things would never be the same.

At the end of the 1980 season, drum caption head Dave Vose quit instructing the corps and soloist Gerry Noonan aged out. North Star would be hard-pressed to replace them.

The corps returned to a more "fan-friendly" repertoire in 1981, with *Thoroughbred*; the return of *This Masquerade* from 1978; *Spain*; and *Celebration*, an exit reminiscent of *Sir Duke*. The corps also had a much more talented and sophisticated brass line

than ever before.

The drill was being modernized, with Pete Emmons assisting Neal Smith in the drillwriting duties. The corps' marching technique was being refined with Bob Stewart working on the basics all winter.

For the fifth year running, the corps was full. Things looked as if they would be able to overcome the losses of those elements that had contributed so much to their success over the past three years. It almost did.

North Star snares (photo by Dick Deihl from the collection of Drum Corps World).



After a first tour where the corps never even got close to breaking 70, the members began to lose a little confidence. They finally broke 70 at DCI East, giving a little encouragement. Frustration set in at DCE Championships, where the corps placed fifth and missed 70 by 0.05.

For the first time in its history, North Star failed to make a finals show other than DCI Championships by coming in 13th at DCI Midwest, losing to both the Troopers and Sky Ryders.

The only bright spot was that North Star had beaten Freelancers. This infuriated the corps, as they took out their anger by beating Sky Ryders nearly every

time they saw them afterwards and Troopers at both World Open and CYO Nationals. In fact, CYO Nationals was the corps' best performance and high score that year, 81.30.

At DCI Prelims, they put on a flat performance and, although tying Freelancers in raw score, they had two-tenths in penalties, which put them 13th, out of finals.

Despite the disappointing finish, the majority of members stayed with the corps and imports continued to join. The 1982 corps included members from all over the United States and Canada and an even more improved brass line.

However, the imports arrived late and North Star had a rocky start, scoring a 40 in its first show on the DCI tour. By DCI East, the score had improved to the low 70s and earned the title of "Most Improved Corps" for the year.

The corps came in fifth at World Open and ninth at CYO Nationals, where they again earned a high score for the season, at 75.95. In Montreal, the corps' last performance put it in 16th place. The corps folded a week later. A bingo game ran until 1985, paying off all debts in the process.

There was much to celebrate about North Star and much about it that represents a bygone era in the drum corps activity. During its history, North Star beat every junior corps active between 1976 and 1979 except Blue Devils, Phantom Regiment and Santa Clara Vanguard.

It made DCI finals three times. It had a strong sense of "do-it-yourself" from the members and a warm relationship with the fans. It went from a local circuit corps to a national drum corps -- and did all of this on a budget that never exceeded \$125,000 a year in an era when many corps at the national level were spending almost twice as much.

The corps may be long gone, but North Star alumni still hold reunions every five years and the Cardinal alumni still sponsor the Beanpot Invitational in Beverly.

North Star alumni are still instructing, most notably T. J. Doucette, who has been teaching the Blue Devils' guard for 20 years. John Stark is judging DCA shows along with former North Star drillwriter Neal Smith. The corps' legacy lives on.

The author did not submit a photograph or a biography.



The muddy National Dream in Jersey City, NJ, August 24, 1979 (photo by Ron Da Silva from the collection of Drum Corps World).

was voted second in a poll conducted by *Drum Corps News* for best drum line of the decade.

The decision to have the guard wear pants bore interesting fruit in 1980. North Star had an all-female guard until the end of 1979. During the winter of 1979-1980, a young man wrote North Star wondering if he could march in the guard. Since the guard wore pants, the corps' management thought, "Why not?" and let him join. As a result, the guard had both males and females for the last three years of the corps' existence.

The summer of 1980 was a tough one. The original opener, Gino Vanelli's *Prelude to War*, was an atypical selection for North Star and the corps had difficulty selling it. The corps came in seventh at DCI Midwest, barely breaking 70 in the process.

When they arrived home, *Prelude to War* was scrapped and replaced by *Hot Consuelo*, the very opening of the corps' arrangement of *Children of Sanchez* from the year before, and *El Gato Triste*. The corps' scores, placements and performances improved, as North Star came in second at World Open