
by David Lepore

A recent image of the Syracuse Brigadiers could be forever etched in fans' minds as a corps of pure dominance; after all, they went undefeated from the second week of the 1999 season through the time of this article just before the start of the 2003 season.

Their neat uniforms, fast and furious drum lines, unparalleled talent with their horns and an artistry with their color guard have all but terrified competitors.

They are considered by some to be a driving force behind the wheel of a drum corps revolution in the Drum Corps Associates circuit.

A success story like this can sometimes be overlooked. It wasn't always this way. Like all things in life, something as sweet



Syracuse Brigadiers, 1964, at Jersey City, NJ (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).

as success had to be worked for. The Brigadiers did just that from their beginning in 1954.

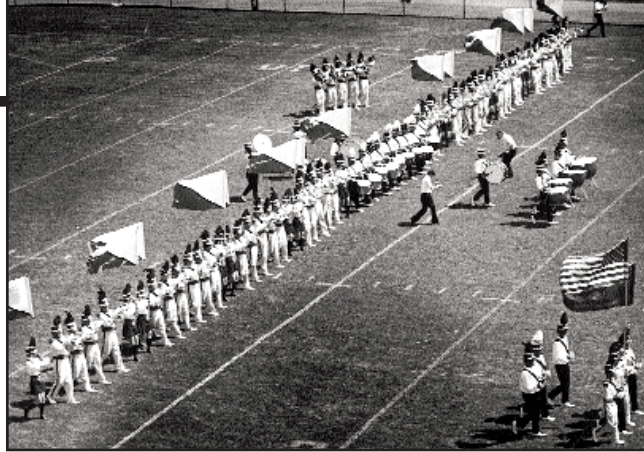
Within the city walls of Syracuse used to be a junior drum and bugle corps, founded in 1938 by the Polish Legion of American Veterans. With World War II to soon follow, the junior corps was disbanded and reformed into a senior corps in 1947.

Despite winning the then-coveted PLAV National Championship whenever it was held, there was still something lacking.

"A bunch of guys from the Cortland Moose, the Boys from Syracuse and a junior corps called the Sons of American Legion Post 41 all got together for a meeting in 1954," recalled Guy Marnell, one of the original members of the Brigadiers. "We wanted to form a corps with more clout and so we had meetings and then combined."

According to Marnell, who marched in the Brigadier baritone line from 1954-1973, one of the meetings included putting together

Syracuse Brigadiers



Syracuse Brigadiers, 1971, at the World Open (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).

some names for the new corps and voting. The Syracuse Brigadiers came from one such meeting.

Sponsored at the time by the American Legion Post No. 1677 and PLAV Post 14, the Brigadiers began to make a name for themselves almost immediately, winning the New York State American Legion Championship in 1955. With such a boom of success, more members were attracted and

the Brigs were able to reclaim that title through 1960 and again in 1964 and 1967. The corps entered shows sponsored by the American Legion and International Championships, becoming international champions in 1957 and 1958.

It is no secret to any drum corps enthusiast that the quality of musicianship between then and now is drastically different. Marnell said the Brigadiers had a lot of things going in their favor to attribute for the quick success.

"We had decent talent at the time and we had good instructors," he said. "Arnold Gabriel did some work with us musically. Later, he went on to be director of the United States Air Force Band and has since retired from the Air Force as a colonel.

"Vinny Ratford did a lot of our drill work and did some things with the drill that were revolutionary at the time. Instead of just old formations, he had ideas like the 'merry-go-round' and the 'Indian dance.' He brought a new face for drill to senior corps."

In 1968, the Brigadiers suffered a tragic loss that was possibly weakening enough to lead to their demise in the 1970s. While driving home from a rehearsal during the 1968 season, two valuable members of the corps were killed in a tragic car accident.

"One boy was an 18-year-old snare drummer and only a freshman in college, and the other kid was a member of our color guard," Marnell recalled.

Throughout the remaining years of the 1960s and in the beginning years of the 1970s, the early powerhouse had been taken down a few pegs. In fact, 1973 began with

intentions of possibly not fielding a corps.

According to the history section of the Syracuse Brigadiers' Web site, "Where other corps had the luxury of 11 months of preparation for the DCA World Championship, the Brigadiers endured an intense rehearsal schedule for a mere five weeks.

"This group of Brigadiers embarked on an endeavor unheard of within the drum corps activity. They carried the pride and the tradition of the Syracuse Brigadiers with them into the 1973 championship."

However, the Brigs suffered a near-permanent blow when they failed to make finals by five-hundredths of a point due to a penalty for under-sized flags. The effort within those five weeks to field a competitive package was too little, too late -- literally.

No more crowd-pleasing jazzy horn licks, no more drum rolls and no more spins. The drum corps community had lost one of its youngest and most beloved corps. The Brigs were no more than a name and a memory for those who strived to make it the best they possibly could.

Marnell can recall the pain he felt when the Brigadiers had been put to rest.

"It was a great part of my life for almost 20 years. That's what I did," he said.

On August 11, 1990, it had been some 17 years since the Brigadiers sadly left the activity. On that fateful August night during the heart of the drum corps season, a lonely spark rekindled a fire that still burns to this day.

It happened at the "Pageant of Drums" show hosted by the Rochester Crusaders, a neighboring drum and bugle corps in the DCA circuit. Perhaps it was luck, perhaps it was a sign for things to come, but the show was held at Syracuse's own MacArthur Park, with a heavy Brigadier base in the crowd.

According to information extracted from the Brigadiers' Web site, "At the awards ceremony following the competition, the stadium announcer asked if there were any Brigadier Alumni in the audience who wished to join the other drum corps on the field for the awards ceremony.

"About 50 former Brigadiers came down from the grandstand and formed as a parade unit on the field. They then proudly marched around the stadium to the strains of familiar Brigadier music of the past. The crowd rose to their feet and cheered."

That one moment on a warm August night was only the beginning.

Rather than just a small reunion of previous members getting together for a brief moment, that night generated a lot of interest from the alumni and Brigs fans. In October, the newly formed Brigadiers had begun to develop a program that would bring the Syracuse corps back to the field.

Some viewed it as a long shot, others as



Syracuse Brigadiers, September 1, 2001, at DCA Prelims in Scranton, PA (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).

an opportunity.

As if they were starting from scratch, members scrambled to recruit and try to find the necessary equipment needed to form a drum corps again. In doing so, they were able to find enough people and enough money to get horns, flags, drums and the rest of the equipment. The first step toward success came in 1991, when the Brigadiers were able to put a parade corps on the street.

With money generated from the parade season and feverish attempts to get enough money to get the project going again, the Brigadiers entered the DCA field of competition in 1992, after some 19 years of absence from the activity.

Failing to make the top 10 cut in their first season back, their 11th-place finish was enough to earn associate membership in DCA. It wasn't until 1993, in only their second season back, that the Brigadiers were able to relish a ninth-place finish and were granted full membership in DCA.

The Brigadiers then were able to achieve success one step at a time with a steady progression of placements at DCA World Championships before finally cracking into the top five in 1996. With a fifth-place finish, the Brigs were granted the opportunity to take the field in the last half of the shows due to the DCA rule at the time.

As a result, the Brigadiers entered the 1997 season with a higher seed that they had previously attained and were able to come out of the season with a first-place tie. This was the first taste of the DCA World Championship and it would certainly not be the last.

Slipping into a second-place finish in 1998, the Brigadiers have since been able to put together a winning organization that exceeds that of its competition. In 1999, the corps claimed its second world champion crown and has since done so with authority.

The 2000 season was the first in the corps' dominant streak. They went undefeated and won the DCA title by more than two points to a second-place Hawthorne Caballeros. In 2001, it wasn't that much different. They again were able to go undefeated and edged the Reading Buccaneers at the DCA Championships on their home turf in Syracuse.



Syracuse Brigadiers, September 5, 1993, at DCA Finals (photo by Dale Eck from the collection of Drum Corps World).

The 2002 season's show, "Pop Art," was one that brought a fourth consecutive DCA World Championship, a feat that had never been accomplished before. Once again going undefeated with furious sounding horn and drum lines and the beauty of their color guard, the Brigadiers captured their fifth DCA crown in only 10 years since the rebirth.

Their fifth overall title has placed them third overall on the DCA Championship list. Only the Hawthorne Caballeros with eight and the Bushwackers and Sunrisers with six each are ahead of them. Since they brought such a relentless drum corps back to the field, the Syracuse Brigadiers have truly become a picture of success.

Watching the corps while sitting in the crowd during senior corps competitions, Marnell sees a picture of success that is so familiar to him.

"Drum corps is a lot different now. We were just a bunch of drum corps guys and now the quality that the Brigadiers bring to the field is that of trained professional musicians," Marnell said. "The musicianship is unparalleled and visually they have moments that they do a lot more than we used to do."

Marnell was impressed with the product the Syracuse Brigadiers were able to bring to the field.

"Unlike junior corps, where they play every day, they only had weekends to put this type of show together, and they brought the whole package back to the field," Marnell said. "For the Brigadiers to play with great sound and execution in the time they have in the format of a senior corps is astonishing."

Today, the Brigadiers are always striving toward continuing success. With a talented group of musicians and some of the top staff members in the circuit, it's clear the Brigadiers are heading toward even greater things.

According to Kevin Hassan, director of the 2003 Brigadiers, the desire for greatness is mirrored over the years.

"All of the goals the corps had are still in place: to be as successful and dedicated as they can possibly be and leave the summer having a good experience," Hassan said.

For Trevor Stoyer, the current drum major, the goals of the drum corps have not changed.

"We strive to entertain the audience and put on the field the best possible product we can achieve, while enjoying ourselves in the process," Stoyer said. "Naturally, if we can attain these goals, any season would be deemed a success."

"In order to accomplish this, we always look to maximize rehearsals by efficiently using the little time we have as a group."

The achievements the Brigadiers can boast over the last 10 years have attracted strong interest in potential members.

"Turnouts at our camps have been stupendous, with over 140 people in attendance (brass, battery and front ensemble). Our doors are always open to potential interested members," Stoyer said. "We always seem to have a great nucleus of veteran members and continuously have fantastic groups of new members that have blended well into the corps."

Regardless of what the future brings for the Syracuse Brigadiers, an organization that started a quest as a bunch of guys deciding on the proper name, one thing is certain: they were able to achieve something spectacular that perhaps will never be matched. From greatness in the beginning days, to going on hiatus for 19 years and coming back with five championships in 10

years, it is a story that will forever go down as true success in drum corps annals.

For people like Marnell, the feeling of seeing the new corps succeed is unmatched when they come to the field, led by the honor guard that still sports the original white and red uniforms.

It is a piece of the

past that reflects that this group of musicians, no matter how much more they achieve, will always remember where they came from.



Syracuse Brigadiers, 2002 (photo by David Rice from the collection of Drum Corps World).



David Lepore has been a drum corps fan for many years. His one true taste of the activity came in 2002 when he marched in competition for the first time with the Bushwackers from Harrison, NJ. He also spends

time playing soprano with the Westchester Brassmen, a parade unit from Harrison, NY.

He holds a bachelor's degree in journalism and is a contributor to Drum Corps World.

Lepore would like to thank Guy Marnell, Kevin Hassan and Trevor Stoyer, along with the Syracuse Brigadiers' Web site, for the assistance with information on the corps.