
by Michael Carlson

In the beginning it was always the Blue Stars Drum & Bugle Corps. Whether it was the vision in Frank Van Voorhis' mind, the brainstorming discussions around Dave Dummer's kitchen table or the vanguard flag of their early color guard parade entries,



First Federal Blue Stars, 1966, at American Legion in Washington, D.C. (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).

there was never any question: there was going to be the Blue Stars.

From the beginning, the concept was not to create the organization to be a source of music education, but to stand as a symbol of excellence. Van Voorhis, Dummer and others set out to create a drum corps that gave its members experiences that would continue to make positive contributions to their lives long after they left the rank and file of the corps.

Dummer wrote years later, "We would use the precision needed for drum corps as a structural concept that would be projected to everything in a member's future quest to find out how he would contribute to society¹."

This philosophy is further captured in the Blue Stars' motto, *Finis Coronat Opus* -- The End Crowns the Work. The motto has been the organization's cornerstone for more than 37 years. There have been winning years, challenging years and years of change.

Through it all, however, Van Voorhis and Dummer's original philosophy remains and will ensure the Blue Stars Drum & Bugle Corps a future the alumni and fans will always be proud of.

1960s

Dummer was appointed the Blue Stars' first director and stayed with the corps through 1968. He had no drum corps experience prior to the Blue Stars. However, what he brought to the organization was just as important. The result of years working with youth sports programs, he gave the corps a keen sense of competition and a

winning attitude. Both of these qualities were instrumental in building a solid organization in an area of Wisconsin where drum corps struggled for survival.

Although throughout its history the corps has commonly been referred to as the Blue Stars, the original name was the First Federal Blue Stars, as a tribute to the organization's first corporate sponsor, First Federal Savings and Loan of La Crosse. The corps maintained the name until 1975 when, due to a shift in corporate policy, the savings and loan company dropped their sponsorship.

The color guard was the Blue Stars' first performance activity. Using routines put together by Van Voorhis, the group was constantly on the move to weekend color guard shows and parades. The long hours of practice and adherence to military-like discipline quickly made them favorites of fans and parade judges alike. Their winning performances gained attention for the new corps on the block and, more importantly, they brought to life the philosophy Van Voorhis envisioned.

Besides the discipline, Van Voorhis instilled in the color guard a strong work ethic and a creative passion that has remained a vital part of their history as much as the flags and rifles. From the beginning, the stage was set for a color guard that still dominates the visual category more than 30 years later.

It was from the tireless efforts of a handful of moms that the young girls stepped off in an early version of what would evolve into their trademark uniform for the next decade and a half. Shirts were adorned with buttoned shoulder flaps and a red sash and cummerbund. The uniform was rounded out with matching blue shorts; white, spit-shined boots; and white gloves. The Blue Stars' "hot pants" are still a much-remembered feature of the drum corps of the 1960s and 1970s.

From the old AutoLite building in north La Crosse came the first sounds of the Blue Stars. As the color guard brought home trophies from local performances, the horn and drum lines worked long hours in rehearsals for their debut performance.

Jim Sturgis taught the brass, Ron Moriarity worked with the drum line and Van Voorhis provided the marching instruction. In 1965, the Blue Stars made their first appearance as a drum and bugle corps at a parade in Pine Island, MN.

Although the season's activities were limited to parades, this time served to build the discipline and instill the confidence necessary for a successful competing drum corps. Interestingly, it was the late-summer visit to Chicago for the VFW Nationals that sparked its members with the passion for a championship corps.

In 1966, the First Federal Blue Stars took to the field with a corps of approximately 75 members. The first-year group was quick to draw

attention to itself by walking away with the Tri-State and Minnesota State American Legion Championship trophies. In addition, they traveled to Washington, D.C., for the American Legion Nationals, where they placed 20th with a score of 71.35.

Even before the first members were recruited, Van Voorhis' vision was a corps of national excellence. According to Dummer, "We could be competitive with the world, not just competitive to participate, but competitive to win²." As the corps quickly found out, it did not have far to look for national level competition.

Before the Blue Stars came along, established drum corps were rare in La Crosse and throughout the rest of western Wisconsin. On the other hand, from Madison east to the shores of Lake Michigan, the Badger State was home to some of the top corps in the Midwest. The Spectacle City Mariners, Racine Scouts, Madison Scouts and Racine Kilties provided the newcomer with early competition challenges.

By 1967, the La Crosse corps proved it was up to any challenge these corps could present. The highlight of the 1967 season came as the Blue Stars took the Wisconsin State VFW title away from the Kilties, then beat them again the next night in Racine.

The 1967 season also provided the corps with its first national finals performance. Traveling to New Orleans for the VFW Nationals, the corps placed 12th at the afternoon prelims performance. That evening the corps surprised everyone with a jump up to 10th place with a score of 74.40 -- more than three points ahead of the 11th-place Spectacle City Mariners.

In 1969, David Kampschroer, an elementary school principal, took over as the director of the corps for the next 12 years.

That same year the La Crosse corps reached a new level of maturity and sophistication that many saw as a sign of future success. Many of the fans and activity writers of the time believed the "Long Blue Line³" would finally break through its glass ceiling. Unfortunately, the 1960s came to a close with the golden ring still just out of range. Consequently, *Our Day Will Come* became the unofficial corps song as the staff and performers set their eyes on making the next 10 years the decade of the Blue Stars.

The American Legion Nationals in Atlanta, GA, provided the corps with a moment best forgotten. The finals in 1969 were to be



First Federal Blue Stars, 1968, at VFW Nationals in Detroit, MI (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).

Blue Stars

limited to only the top seven corps from the prelim competition. The Blue Stars only made it to ninth place and, as a result, started their long trip home after the scores were announced. In an unusual twist of fate, American Legion officials decided to include the Hutchinson Sky Ryders and the Blue Stars in the finals show. Unfortunately, the corps was already well on its way home when the decision was made.

Although the corps' first repertoire was comprised of popular music of the time, including *Downtown*, *That's All* and *My Lord and Master*, the Blue Stars quickly became known for productions that mixed the popular music of the 1960s with more powerful musical compositions, such as *El Comanchero* and *Stouthearted Men*.

Also of note for that period was the 1968 and 1969 concert production of Truman Crawford's arrangement of *Hall of the Mountain King*, which included the stunning soprano solo of Terry Blume.

1970s

The year 1970 came as the harbinger of change for the drum corps activity. Early in the season, the four-year-old Santa Clara Vanguard toppled the traditional West Coast powerhouses, the Anaheim Kingsmen and the Velvet Knights, in Sacramento, CA. At the same time, Blue Rock and the Garfield Cadets swept away shows up and down the East Coast. And a bigger surprise came with "the underdog Blue Stars dominating the Midwest⁴."

With the exception of the SCVanguard taking the American Legion title, the early season upsets were eventually overshadowed by the late season winnings of the traditional powerhouses -- the Troopers, Boston Crusaders, Cavaliers and Blessed Sacrament Golden Knights. What will best be remembered of 1970, however, is the glimmer of drum corps' future championship corps -- Santa Clara Vanguard, Garfield Cadets and the First Federal Blue Stars.

The highlight of 1970 came for the Blue Stars in Marion, OH, as the corps came close to achieving its first major title, the U.S. Open. The corps swept first place in preliminary competition over Wisconsin rivals Racine Kilties and Madison Scouts. Unfortunately, the following night in finals competition, the Blue Stars dropped down to third place behind first-place Madison and second-place Racine.

Another significant event took place late in the season. Although unknown at the time, the fateful meeting between Jim Jones and Don Warren would change the future of junior drum and bugle corps. From their series of conversations, the "Combine" evolved.

The concept was "for the group to market itself as a total entity⁵." In other words, a combination package of five corps would market themselves to show sponsors throughout the Midwest. However, the corps' alliance dictated that, should a sponsor want one of the corps, they must schedule the



First Federal Blue Stars, 1969, at VFW Nationals in Philadelphia, PA (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).

other four members of the Combine. Due to the Blue Stars' strong management and solid organization, Jones and Warren selected the La Crosse corps as one of five charter members of the new organization, in addition to the Casper Troopers, Chicago Cavaliers, Madison Scouts and Santa Clara Vanguard.

From the precedence and success set by the Combine and its East Coast counterpart, United Organization of Eastern Corps, Drum Corps International was established the

following year. The decision was made to have two co-directors to organize and run DCI's inaugural season. Blue Stars Director David Kampschroer was selected to work the issues and business of the western area.

At the close of DCI's successful opening season, Kampschroer was offered the first full-time DCI director's position. His previous year as co-director divided his time between the enormous challenge of creating a milestone in drum corps history and shaping the Blue Stars into a national contender. Consequently, "He declined, as he still wished to pursue his career in public school administration⁶."

Years later, Kampschroer was inducted into the DCI Hall of Fame for his performance as Blue Stars director and as the first DCI executive director of the western region.

The hard work and dreams of the past seven years began to pay off for the Blue Stars in 1972. The corps came into the season with a much more powerful sound, provided by their new arranger, Michael Duffy from the Anaheim Kingsmen. With a handful of early season wins, the corps headed toward the Pacific for their first West Coast tour.

The highlight of the tour was the Main Street Parade at Disneyland. This was also the season of the first finals competition for the new DCI. The Blue Stars fell a half a step behind the Anaheim Kingsmen into second place by less than a half-point at the end.

In 1975, Bobby Hoffman joined the Blue Stars as visual designer. Considered one of the innovative drill writers of the time, he came to La Crosse from successful seasons with the Anaheim Kingsmen and the Garfield

Cadets. In later years, he helped to add the distinctive visual style to the Velvet Knights. For his years of visual creativity, Hoffman was inducted into the DCI Hall of Fame in 1990.

After two successful years with the Bleu Raeders from New Orleans,

Emile "Moe" Latour joined the Blue Stars organization in 1974 as tour director. As a member of the staff, "he developed many of his insights into touring with a major DCI corps⁷." During this time, he advanced drum corps touring from the practice of *get on the bus and go* to a management science that synchronizes logistics, transportation, corps requirements and financial ability into a cost effective, well-planned operation.

The results of this experience still hold



First Federal Blue Stars, 1972 (photo by Art Luebke from the collection of Drum Corps World).

today as the guidance and standard for corps tour directors. Latour stayed with the corps until 1982 and in 2002 he became the third former member of the Blue Stars organization to be inducted into the DCI Hall of Fame.

The Blue Stars' popular "Jewish Trilogy" was first performed during the 1977 season. Combined with the creative visual presentation that included the Star of David formation and a Jewish folk dance by the horn line, this remains one of the corps' most memorable productions in the 1970s.

The 1978 season marked a change in visual presentations throughout the activity, especially for the color guard. Costuming and the use of assorted flag sizes brought a welcome change to visual productions. For the Blue Stars, however, 1978 will be remembered for the dreaded red turbans. Yards of red cloth went into each of the headdresses, which compounded with the Midwestern summer humidity to create the "Turban Hair" style.

Not only was this a time when the Blue Stars were recognized as one of the powerhouse drum corps of the decade, but also some of their music from the 1970s will be long remembered in drum corps history. DCI has included the Blue Stars in its "Echoes" series of CDs, which features classic drum corps music from throughout DCI history. Memorable moments from this era include 1973's *Malaga* (Volume II -- "Signatures") and *South Rampart Street Parade* (Volume III -- "Jazz Plus"); 1975's *Canzona* (Volume IV -- "Symphonic Celebrations"); and 1979's *Strike up the Band* (Volume V -- "Magnificent Marches").

1980s

The 1980s brought a decade of change and challenges to the Blue Stars organization. Lesser corps could not have survived the trials and disappointments they experienced at this time. This will be remembered as a decade where the corps reached its lowest point -- almost to the point of folding -- but it should best be remembered as one of comeback and growth.

This was a time of resilience for the Blue Stars. Furthermore, their tenacity would



Blue Stars, 1979, at DCI East in Allentown, PA (photo by Dale Eck from the collection of Drum Corps World).

finally bloom into an achievement that eluded them for 29 years -- a division championship.

By the spring of 1980, the corps was faced with fielding a much smaller corps than in previous years. In addition, the marching membership consisted of an unusually higher percentage of inexperienced musicians and rookies. At the DCI Finals in Birmingham, AL, the corps missed going on to open class finals by more than two points.

This marked the first time the Blue Stars did not make a DCI Finals appearance and left Santa Clara Vanguard as the remaining corps to perform at all DCI Finals. Furthermore, in a year already plagued with disappointments, the corps suffered the loss of their long-time director, David Kampschroer, who moved on with his career.

From 1981 through 1985, Bob Lendman, Denise Pagonis and Jon Bahr all took a turn at the helm to reverse the declining membership and financial hardship the corps was finding itself in. Finally, in 1986, Brian Whitty took over as director and the corps soon found itself on the road to recovery.

In 1982, in an effort to reverse the continuing decline, the corps brought in almost two-dozen members from the state of



Blue Stars, 1976 (photo by Dave Page from the collection of Drum Corps World).

Washington to fill its shrinking ranks. The corps also returned to the West for an early season tour that included stops throughout California and the Main Street Parade and standstill performance at Disneyland.

The disappointing season ended with the corps in 37th place at the DCI Open Class Prelims in Montreal, QUE. DCI Finals would not see another appearance by the Blue Stars until 1986.

This was also the first year for Drum Major Brad Furlano. Furlano stayed on the podium from 1982 into the early 1990s. After aging out in 1993, Furlano worked the next

nine years with the corps' visual staff and is now their staff and program coordinator.

In 1994, Brad's brother Bruce stepped up onto the podium for the next three seasons. And in 1997, little

brother Brandon continued the family tradition until his age-out year in 2001. In the 19 years the Furlano family has maintained the helm, the Blue Stars achieved three division titles and spent much of the time ranked in its division's top five.

By the end of the 1982 season, the corps had fallen into financial dire straits. When compounded with a steep decline in membership, most organizations would have opted for the easy way out and slipped off into the annals of drum corps history. But in La Crosse, the flame of *Finis Coronat Opus* continued to burn. Unsure of the road ahead, they reorganized under LBS Cadets, Inc. -- La Crosse Blue Star Cadets. The corps performed as the Blue Star Cadets until the 1987 season.

In 1975, DCI created the class A and all-girl divisions to provide classes for competitive corps that could not meet the larger membership requirements of the top 12 corps. Thus, these classes, and the addition of class A-60 in 1985, provided smaller corps "a sense of accomplishment competing with corps of similar size and competency⁸." And it was within these ranks that the Blue Stars began to rebuild and reclaim the competitive ladder.

In 1986, under the direction of Brian Whitty, the Blue Stars returned to national competition. Now in the A-60 division, there was a renewed spirit burning within the corps

after the previous year's success within Drum Corps Midwest.

Unfortunately, they missed making DCI Class A-60 Finals by less than a point and a half. The good news was that their passion for excellence continued to burn and this was the last time the Blue Stars would not make it to DCI division finals.

Finally, at DCI Finals in Kansas City, MO, in 1989, the Blue Stars took home their first division title. The corps also competed the following day in the open class prelims where they achieved 17th place.

The 1980s was also a time of musical transition. The bright sound of the 1970s still found its place in their productions, with popular selections such as *April in Paris*, *Alexander's Ragtime Band* and *Don't Rain on My Parade*. But there was also experimentation with more complex and darker voicings in the music of *I Dreamed a Dream* and *Carmina Burana*. And it was this new sound that would see the Blue Stars back to the top of the ladder throughout the 1990s.

1990s

The 1990s was a decade of continued comeback for the Blue Stars. They found a formula for a creative color guard, bold horn lines, machine-like percussion and breathtaking visuals, and they were sticking to it. In addition, the 1990 edition of the "Long Blue Line" enjoyed the pleasure of their second DCI division championship.

This was also a decade that saw the corps progress to productions featuring more complex compositions held together by much stronger themes than previous years.

Although suffering periods of declining membership, the corps never allowed their musical productions to come up short. Their arrangements were now much more complex than was heard in the corps' first two decades. And despite the corps' smaller line-up, the music was delivered with a bolder, brassier sound. The Blue Stars never feared tackling intricate arrangements such as *Candide* or *Divine Comedy* and delivered them at a championship caliber.

Drum Corps World writer David Walter once noted, "This corps has a knack for coming on strong at the end of the year⁹." The Blue Stars have always demonstrated an uncanny ability for pacing themselves throughout the summer season. Suffering low scores in the spring, the corps puts its main effort into the home stretch to DCI Finals. The ability to peak their performance during finals has upset many a corps in the



Blue Stars, 1993, in Jackson, MS, the DCI Division III Champion (photo by Orlin Wagner from the collection of Drum Corps World).

closing moments of the season.

The 1990s also saw the corps transform its visual style from just a field show to theatrical productions in motion. The use of props was only limited by the inspiration of the music. From the artist's studio for *Pictures at an Exhibition* to the use of flower bouquets and a wide variety of other props, all came together to unite the music with a story line. Notes DCW writer Brian Tolzmann, "Although *Candide* has been featured often on the competition field, the Blue Stars are the first with any sort of attempt at a theatrical adaptation¹⁰." This is a trend the corps continues today.

The century's final decade was musically rewarding for both the Blue Stars and fans alike. While this period served as a time of growth and maturity for the corps, the La Crosse group served its fans lavish helpings of entertainment in an era remembered for "audience dissatisfaction with esoteric drum corps programs¹¹."

While most corps in the early 1990s experimented with minimalist composers and other controversial styles, the Blue Stars began their musical transition with the full-bodied sound of composer John Rutter.

This was followed by their own version of Leonard Bernstein's music from *Candide* that brought the corps its second DCI division title in 1993. Other popular productions during this period include John W. Smith's *Divine Comedy* and Sergei Prokofiev's film score music for *Ivan the Terrible*.

2000s

As the world graduated into the new century, the Blue Stars found themselves challenged by the success of the past decade. The ability to create excellence year after year became quite attractive to the upper division corps that no longer depended on their local communities to draw high caliber performers.

Consequently, the Blue Stars, like many of the top division II/III corps, experienced high turnover rates as veteran members were

recruited to the bright lights and excitement of division I competition.

Despite the annual rebuilding efforts, the Blue Stars consistently fielded a championship caliber corps. A large part of this ability is the far-reaching philosophy of excellence the organization has upheld for the last 39 years. Throughout the evolution of changes, the Blue Stars' way of life is still alive and well.

According to former director Dave Svalesson, "I've always looked at a progressing corps as an ongoing thing . . . what we started out with was way different than what we ended up with. And I really attribute that to the early successes of this corps -- we had the ability to adapt and change along the way . . . and I've learned that these kids are up to that challenge¹²."

A Blue Stars alumnus from the 1971 and 1972 seasons, Svalesson stepped into the director's chair at the start of the 2001 season. The corps stepped off into the summer with an ambitious production of music by composer Jim Sochinski.

"The Legend of Alcobaca" was a fabled tragic Portuguese love story that allowed the design team to develop one of the theatrical masterpieces of the 2001 season, as well as capture the corps' third DCI division title.

In 2002, "3 Decades" provided a moment for the corps to not only celebrate the past 30 years of DCI history, but also celebrate and honor Blue Stars members, past and present. Sometimes referred to as the corps' "greatest hits," the music brought back to the field a

collection of their most memorable moments.

With updated arrangements, the corps took to the field with renewed energy for another division title. Unfortunately, DCI's 30th anniversary ended for the Blue Stars the same way the first DCI Finals did: second place with less than a point separating them from the division title.

The corps is currently under director Brad Furlano, former drum major. Whereas, the 2002 production was to honor the Blue Stars' past, their 2003 production, "Visions of Blue" will set their course for the future.

Thanks to a grant from the La Crosse Community Foundation, the new season will also mean new uniforms.

"This is a corps that has maintained its identity through the years and is ever careful to maintain its legacy as well. I'm proud to say this corps has a bright future ahead, if for no other reason than it hasn't forgotten its past¹³," wrote DCW writer Michael Carlson.

Today, Frank Van Voorhis usually spends his afternoons on the golf course and Dave Dummer is no longer with us. However, it's their vision from 1964 that still lives inside of everyone who wears or has worn the Blue Stars uniform and it has taken an unknown parade corps from the north end of La Crosse



Blue Stars, 2001, in College Park, MD, at the DCI Championships (photo by Dan Scafidi from the collection of Drum Corps World).

to the corps to beat in the 21st century.

The Blue Stars have survived more than 30 years of challenges and changes, and never has the vision of excellence, discipline and values for young people faltered.

"We were a group of people sincerely believing in each other, working and looking forward to the growth and success of those we worked with . . .¹⁴" Dummer said. *Finis Coronat Opus* -- The End Crowns the Work.

Footnotes

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