
by Daniel Buteau

"Have you seen those French girls?" Such was the buzzword on a 1976 tour of all-girl contests. At the American International Open in Butler, PA, an obscure corps from Laval, QUE, turned all heads with a sharp marching technique, fancy Russian classical repertoire and catchy burgundy skirts worn over black high boots.

Les Chatelaines had made their entry on drum corps' global consciousness. The Fire-ettes, Ventures and St. Ignatius might have remained untouched by the end of that season, but they could never, from then on, claim an international all-girl title without first defeating the best all-girl group fielded in Quebec's drum corps history.

In a way, one could say that it all started one afternoon in Ithaca, NY, in 1974. After two months of intensive rehearsals, a new all-girl corps established by the Optimist Club of Laval, an affluent suburb of Montreal, competed at the 1974 DCI Open Prelims.

Even though they finished 55th out of 57 corps, they were still light years ahead of where they had been a month earlier. At a contest in Montmagny, QUE, July 20, the corps' instructors reached a state of anxious frenzy trying to explain how a parade happened.

Four years after that initial DCI participation, Les Chatelaines became Canada's first DCI Champion by claiming the 1978 DCI All-Girl Championships in Denver.

The name Chatelaines had been, in fact, well-known in Canadian drum corps circles since the early 1960s. The corps was first founded in 1961 as Les Majorettes of Pont-Viau, a twirling corps run by the family of Alcide Crête. Many of the Quebec groups that became drum and bugle corps by the 1970s had been majorette corps in the 1960s.

The Laval group became a drum and bugle corps in the fall of 1962 and went on to become Canadian National All-Girl champions from 1968 to 1970. The Crête family, still at the corps' helm after the 1972 season, folded the group that fall.

In the fall of 1973, the parent of a former Chatelaines member attempted to start a new

group to provide the girls of Laval with a drum and bugle corps. Securing a \$15,000 loan from Pietro Rizzuto, a prominent businessman who later was appointed by Prime Minister Pierre-Elliott Trudeau to the Senate of Canada, he was able to establish a new organization that revived the name Les Chatelaines de Laval.

Giovanni Rizzuto, Pietro's younger

Chatelaines



Les Chatelaines, 1969, at the World Open (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).



Les Chatelaines, 1977 (photo from the collection of Drum Corps World).

brother, recruited Michel Chevalier, Guy Robitaille and Yves Giguère to become, respectively, percussion, brass and visual caption heads. Whether or not the loan was ever repaid became another drum corps urban legend.

Things happened quickly. Members of the

former Les Chatelaines organization formed a strong nucleus for the new corps. A parent committee was established, running fund-raisers that also elevated the group's local profile. The corps' local prestige was further enhanced when the Optimist Club of Laval, in which the Rizzuto brothers were highly influential, made Les Chatelaines its prime youth affiliate.

The corps' board of directors, from then on, was composed of a majority of young, aggressive, professional movers and shakers from the club's elite.

Even though the well-connected corps had established a strong financial basis and parent-booster organization, key individuals were needed to manage the drum corps side of things. Les Chatelaines were again blessed in being able to recruit André Thériault and Maurice Corey. Through Corey's involvement, Les Chatelaines gained their second nationally prominent name, as his brother, Ronald, later became the CEO of the Montreal Canadiens of National Hockey League fame.

Thériault and Corey became the soul of the organization, taking full advantage of their resources and connections to form a group that would leave a permanent mark on the international drum corps scene.

Les Chatelaines were also able to keep most of the corps' membership from 1974 to 1978, continuously increasing talent levels.

After their first major foray into the



Les Chatelaines, 1967 (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).

American drum corps scene in 1976, the board of directors, parent booster club and members' committee met for a planning weekend, where they redefined each group's role in an already well-oiled machine. It was also at that 1976 meeting that the corps defined its goals for the next few

years, which would culminate in taking the 1978 DCI title.

Les Chatelaines achieved their major step up the competitive ladder in 1977. The corps also kept most of its 1977 program in 1978, turning a crowd-pleasing performance of classical drum corps staples, such as *March Slav*, *Meadowlands*, *Farandole* and *Swan Lake*, into a giant killer.

The corps was also instrumental in the formation of Girls Corps International, with

Éclipses of Verdun, Joanelles, Arbella, CapitolaAires, Jeanettes and Bandettes.

By the first Girl Corps International Championships in Green Bay, WI, in 1977, Les Chatelaines had emerged as one of the main contenders, finishing a mere three points from the renowned St. Ignatius Girls.

Further to the Green Bay contest, Les Chatelaines were invited to

compete in Rhinelander, WI, where they accomplished one of their stated 1976 objectives by defeating the Fire-ettes for the very first time.

It was also in 1977 that Les Chatelaines achieved other significant victories over prominent Canadian corps such as St. John's and

Ventures, giving the girls the necessary boost that would fuel a drive to the summit.

By 1978, Les Chatelaines had become unstoppable. They were a force to reckon with at all major all-girl contests and ended St. Ignatius' monopoly over the first three DCI All-Girl titles. What remains significant about that first DCI victory was that it happened in what probably was the most competitive all-girl season in drum corps history. St. Ignatius had won the World Open, the Ventures were the top all-girl contender at the U.S. Open and American International Open, but it was Les Chatelaines, able to peak at the exact right time, who claimed the big one at DCI.

Les Chatelaines' organization was not only able to achieve smashing success in meeting their competitive objectives, but they also became one of the key driving forces in boosting the state of the drum corps activity in the province of Quebec.

The corps hosted the 1977

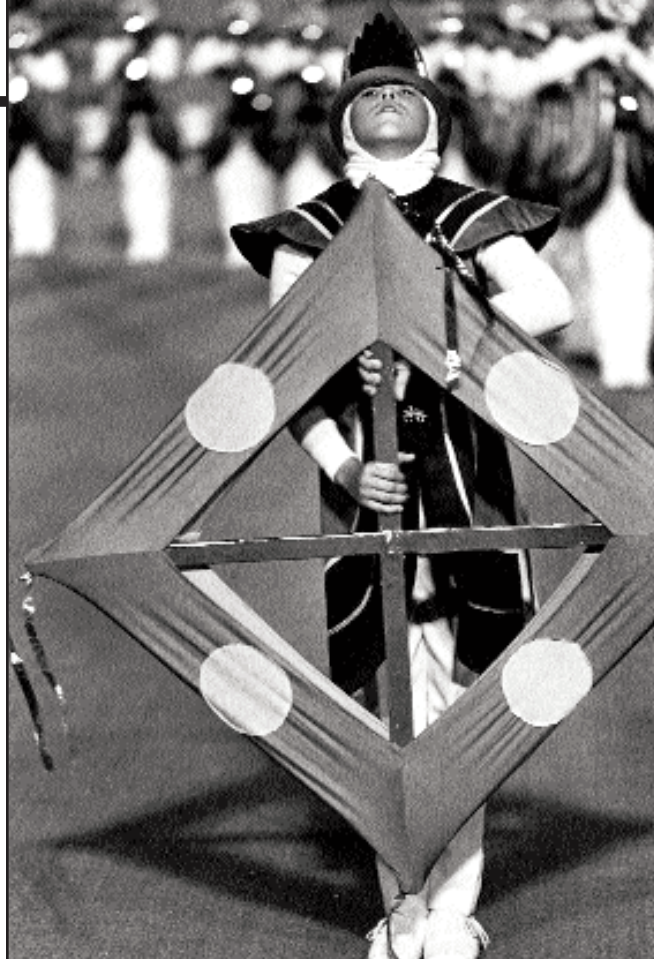


Les Chatelaines, 1975 (photo from the collection of Drum Corps World).

Corey joining Pepe Notaro of the Fire-ettes from Norwich, CT, in establishing the organization that regrouped corps like St. Ignatius, Ventures, St. John's, Marionnettes,



Les Chatelaines, 1982 (photo from the collection of Drum Corps World).



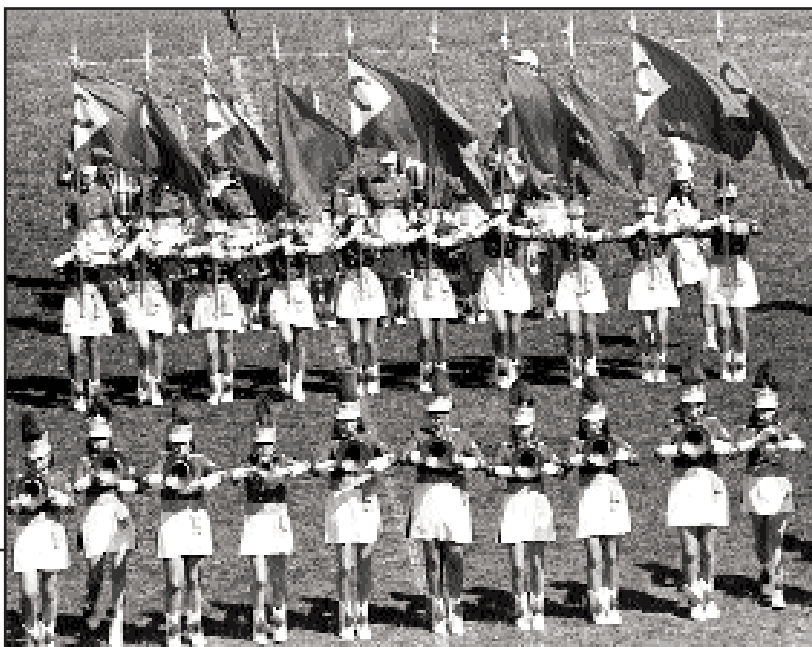
Les Chatelaines, 1981 (photo by Dick Deihl from the collection of Drum Corps World).

Quebec Provincial Championships, which arguably was the highest peak reached by the drum corps activity in the province. Laval did not even have a decent drum corps stadium.

Les Chatelaines' organization just built one of the most impressive makeshift stadiums ever seen, using scaffolding and wooden planks to create a structure that was home to 10,000 people who attended the three-day event.

It did not take long for such an impressive drum corps organization to be noticed at the highest levels. At the 1979 DCI Championships in Birmingham, AL, then-DCI

Les Chatelaines, 1968 (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World).



Executive Director Don Pesceone requested a meeting with Corey to discuss the possibility of Les Chatelaines hosting the 1981 and 1982 Championships in Montreal.

Corey wasted no time and again made use of the corps' outstanding connections and resources to make a successful bid for the privilege of hosting the events.

The corps found willing and dedicated partners in the Optimist Club of Laval; the City of Laval; the Laval school board; the City of Montreal; the RIO, which was the provincial agency in charge of managing Montreal's Olympic sites; the Quebec Provincial Department of Tourism; and O'Keefe Brewery, one of the province's most prominent corporations.

The corps also made arrangements with Hospitalité Tours, a Montreal tour operator, to arrange for special discount rates at major hotels for spectators attending the championships. The organizing committee was even able to make arrangements with the Canadian government to make the border-crossing process easier for American corps traveling to the championships.

The 1981 and 1982 DCI Championships attracted the two longest line-ups in the organization's history, with 50 corps competing in open class and 50 more in the A and all-girl categories. The crowd of 36,000 at the 1981 DCI Finals also remains second only to the 38,000 attendants at the 1985 event in Madison as the largest crowds to be assembled for DCI Finals.

The City of Laval also sponsored a

Saturday morning parade that was broadcast all over the province through the TVA network. What remains amazing is that such success was attained through the efforts of a community drum corps organization.

Also rather impressive was that the corps attained such organizational results while, at the same time, managing to take the corps from a disappointing competitive downturn in 1979 and 1980 back to DCI All-Girl Championship status in 1981 and 1982.

Les Chatelaines, despite remaining highly competitive throughout the season, were unable to make DCI All-Girl Finals in 1979. They elected not to travel to Birmingham in 1980 so they could focus the corps' attention on the necessary rebuilding process that would put them back on track when the world came to visit their hometown.



Les Chatelaines, 1981, at the DCI Championships in Montreal, QUE (photo by Art Luebke from the collection of Drum Corps World).

It should nevertheless be kept in mind that only two all-girl corps were allowed to move on to finals at the 1979 DCI Championships. The 1980 Les Chatelaines also scored a mere five points behind the first-place Ventures at the U.S. Open.

Given that the 1980 Ventures went on to become the only corps in DCI history to win two DCI titles at the very same time, their competitive downturn in 1980 may have been

a 10-point margin over second-place Arbella and taking the 1982 trophy by a six-point margin over runner-up Ventures.

The 1982 DCI title marked the swansong of Les Chatelaines as an all-girl competitor. Attempting to compensate with the coming of age of the good chunk of the corps' 1978 membership that had been around since 1974, Les Chatelaines had established a feeder named Les Demoiselles du Québec.



Les Chatelaines, 1984 (photo by Art Luebke from the collection of Drum Corps World).

the least consequential in drum corps history.

The 1981 and 1982 Les Chatelaines boasted a futuristic, space-style uniform, played exciting jazz shows built around *Fire Dance* and *Mack the Knife* and took the crowd off-guard with imaginative use of chairs to create both visual and sound effects.

They also completely dominated all other all-girl contenders, claiming the 1981 title by

Never an organization to target simple measures, the corps opened a second feeder in 1980, Les Baladins de Laval, and felt compelled by parent pressure to make it a co-ed group. The corps achieved very respectable competitive results in the FAMQ "C" circuit.

In fact, the corps had become so successful, making finals at a hotly contested

class C provincial championship in 1982, that members of the corps' board of directors attempted to keep the most experienced boys around, something that was sort of contradictory for the feeder of a world-renowned all-girl contender.

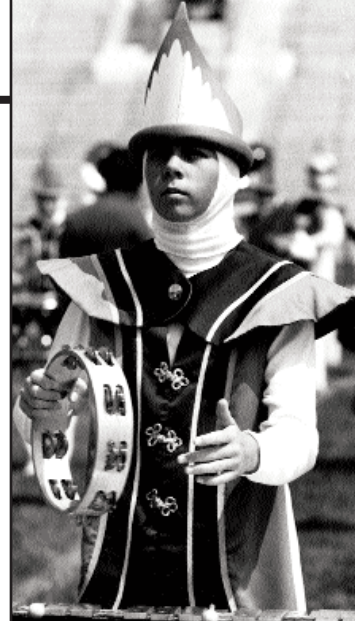
As the only available next step for the male members of Les Baladins was to join other groups, such



Demoiselle du Quebec (photo from the collection of Drum Corps World).

had the privilege of witnessing the sharp, classy style of the late-1970s Les Chatelaines or the highly innovative shows offered by the 1981-1982 editions of the corps, will forever remember the power that can be unleashed by dedicated community organizations.

I could not have written this article without André Thériault's openness and willingness to contribute. Thanks to him, I have been able to relate extremely interesting bits and pieces of information about Les Chatelaine de Laval over their interesting and successful history.



Les Chatelaine, 1981 (photo by Paul Lambert from the collection of Drum Corps World).

article published in the fall of 1984.

Despite steady growth that led the corps to place in the DCI top-25 in both 1985 and 1986, its status as a co-ed open class competitor led it to enter a destructively competitive market for the most experienced Quebec marchers that depleted the membership rosters of many Montreal area contenders.

It was not until the most prominent Quebec competitor of the early-1980s, Les Éclipses of Longueuil, folded after the 1986 season that Connexion-Québec was able to achieve a significant rise in open class ranks. Despite finishing 21st at the 1987 DCI

Championships, the corps faced major financial hurdles.

By becoming co-ed, the corps had begun to attract a significant portion of its membership from out of town. This decline in support the organization received from the Laval Optimist Club and other local financial sources.

The initial young movers and shakers that had operated the corps since 1974 were also becoming older and the organization had lost enough of its local focus to make the recruiting of new volunteers difficult.

As the prospect of possible bankruptcy became too close for comfort following the 1987 season, the board folded the corps.

One of the most well-oiled and prominent community drum corps organizations ever assembled joined the growing list of sorely missed drum and bugle corps. Those who



Les Chatelaines, 1981 (photo from the collection of Drum Corps World).

as the neighboring Étoiles d'Or de Laval, Les Chatelaines became co-ed after the 1982 season.

Given the steady decline that affected the all-girl side of the drum corps activity throughout the early 1980s, such a decision appeared to be logical. Les Chatelaines/Chatelains, as the corps was initially named, achieved instant success by claiming the 1983 DCI Class A title.

In 1984, the corps changed names, becoming Connexion-Québec, and vowed to become a DCI open class finalist in the near future. The mass-market Canadian woman's magazine, *Chatelaine* (no relationship to the corps), even featured their future plans in an



Les Chatelaine, 1982, at DCI East in Allentown, PA (photo by Art Luebke from the collection of Drum Corps World).



Daniel Buteau has been an avid drum corps fan since joining the Abénakis of Saint-Proper, QUE, in the fall of 1976. He has been a writer and columnist for Drum Corps World since 1985 and has covered drum corps and winter guard contests at the FAMQ and DCI levels.

After marching, he became a member of the Abénakis board until the corps merged with La Constellation de Beauce from 1984 until 1986.

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