


Corps founder and director Vince Bruni, with Bob Scott, 2001 (photo by Richard Wersinger from the collection of Drum Corps World).

by Kevin Gamin

When Vince Bruni started the Empire Statesmen in 1983, he wanted to take the senior drum and bugle corps activity to new levels of entertainment and excitement and make it more popular. "Mr. B," as he is more affectionately known, had the background and experience to fulfill his goal, having directed and instructed various junior and senior corps throughout his life.

The Statesmen have always done things differently from the rest of the drum corps world as a result of this philosophy. Some examples are no hats on the marching members; extensive use of props, back drops and smoke effects; shows that tell stories; and even the use of a bass guitar one year in lieu of a contra line.

The Statesmen didn't waste any time making their mark in the world of senior corps, placing 11th in their first year of competition and earning an exhibition performance at DCA Finals in Allentown. For the first time, the strains of *Moonlight Serenade* -- done "Statesmen Style," were heard.

The Statesmen didn't improve in placement in 1984, but the corps brought the house down with its rendition of *The Curley Shuffle*, complete with "yuk yuk yuk"s and "look at the crowd"s from the corps. The crowd responded without reservation at DCA Finals with an almost one-minute-long ovation just for that song alone.

In 1985, the Statesmen reached an important milestone: their first DCA finalist placement with a 10th in prelims. In 1986, the corps traveled to New Orleans for Mardi Gras and to participate in the holiday's parades. That season the corps also won the International Corps Associates championship, their first major title. On top of these accomplishments, the Statesmen moved up to eighth place in the DCA rankings.

Empire Statesmen

The 1987 season saw the Statesmen leave the United States for the first time with a tour of the Caribbean islands and Mexico, starting a trend of world travel that continues today. The Rochester corps also took their second and final ICA title, as the circuit ended. The corps repeated its eighth-place finish at DCA Prelims, but was not given the chance to improve upon the placement, as finals were rained out that year.

More accomplishments for the Statesmen came in 1988. The corps placed fourth, the lowest place between that year and the time of this writing. They also broke 90 for the first time ever.

Not only are the Statesmen entertainers, they are also competitors and contenders. Fourth place belonged to the Statesmen again in 1989. It was the last time the corps would place out of the top three for more than a decade.

With the beginning of the 1990s, the Statesmen made their first run for the title. They also performed *Moonlight Serenade* for the last time, retiring the opener

away from the top spot than they had been for awhile. Shortly after the end of the season, the Statesmen performed for the opening of the Ryder Cup golf competition, held in Rochester, adding another credit to their resumé of performances outside of the



Empire Statesmen, 1993 (photo by Richard Wersinger from the collection of Drum Corps World).

after eight seasons. The corps fought tooth and nail with both the Hawthorne Caballeros and the Harrison Bushwackers, but came up short by one-tenth of a point and had



Empire Statesmen (top to bottom) 1988 (photo by Dale Eck from the collection of Drum Corps World); 1990, 1992 (photos by Sid Unser from the collection of Drum Corps World).

to settle for second place.

"Don't ever allow the Empire Statesmen to be beaten by a tenth of a point again. They come back mean!" said a member of a competing senior corps at the first show of the 1991 season. The corps won the show by more than five points and would finish the season with their first DCA title.

After touring England, Sweden and Denmark, the corps slipped to second for the 1992 season, but there was no doubt the decade of the Empire Statesmen had begun.

For the fourth straight year, the Empire Statesmen went for the gold in 1993, but had to settle for second place, again to the Bushwackers. The corps returned to the top spot in 1994, earning their second DCA title in four years.

The summer of 1995 found the Statesmen dropping all the way to third place, farther

normal drum corps arena.

With the opening of Frontier Field in Rochester, home to the Rochester Red Wings minor league baseball team and the Rochester Rhinos soccer team, the Statesmen enjoyed home field advantage at DCA Finals for the first time. With all the comforts of home, the corps performed a show about everywhere *but* home, complete with the Eiffel Tower and other props of world landmarks. The show was popular with fans, but it could not push the corps out of its third-place position from the season before.

The DCA title came in 1997, along with a complete change in programming. Leaving behind the big band roots, the corps moved into the realm of Broadway musicals, telling the story of "Miss Saigon" with raw emotion and power.

The corps also had to share the top spot

with the Syracuse Brigadiers as the two groups tied for first at finals and no tie-breaking rules were in place.

The Statesmen went back to England in 1998, where they participated in the World Association of Marching Show Bands. They spent a week in England, performing for members of the Royal Family and setting a record high score for WAMSB competition.

Returning home, the Statesmen set another record high score, this time for DCA. The corps' production of "West Side Story" blew the crowd and the competition away.

In 1999, the Statesmen's decade of dominance was coming to a close. The corps performed selections from "A Chorus Line," but couldn't capture the magic of the previous two years. Starting out with victories early in the season, the corps eventually dropped to third place behind the Brigadiers and Buccaneers.



Empire Statesmen, 1996 (photo by Alan Winslow from the collection of Drum Corps World).

such as a giant throne from which the Phantom magically disappeared.

Although the Brigadiers dominated first place, the Statesmen seemed a good bet to take second and tied for that spot

the summer, performing at the World Music Contest in Kerkraade. At that event, the corps earned the honor of "Best in Class."

If 2001 was a rebuilding year, 2002 showed the fruits of their labor. New uniforms designed by Michael Cesario, a performance at the St. Joe's "Classic" for the first time and a strongly designed program featuring the music of Cole Porter, Leonard Bernstein and George Gershwin were all showcased by a corps that had more than 70 percent returning membership from the previous season and a desire to return the



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

Statesmen to their winning ways. The corps did indeed compete for the title, but came up short, placing second to the Brigadiers.

Throughout the 20-year history of the Empire Statesmen, members of this unique corps can claim to have set new standards for senior corps, both in competition and entertainment. There are few, if any, fans that can



Empire Statesmen, 2001 (photo by Alan Winslow from the collection of Drum Corps World).



Empire Statesmen, September 2, 1995, at DCA Finals (photo by Harry Heidelmark from the collection of Drum Corps World).

The string of 10 straight top-three finishes and four DCA world titles in the 1990s earned the corps the added distinction of "Corps of the Decade," chosen by members of the World Drum Corps Hall of Fame.

The new millennium brought new opportunities to the Statesmen. The corps agreed to co-sponsor the Rochester International Marine Tattoo for the first time, giving the organization yet another new venue at which to perform, this time along with other military musical units from all over the world.

The Statesmen also performed their last Broadway musical-themed show, "Phantom of the Opera." The show featured members performing as the Phantom and Christine from the Phantom story line and using props

Empire Statesmen, 1999, at DCA Finals (photo by Richard Wersinger from the collection of Drum Corps World).

in prelims with the Cabs. In finals, however, the corps dropped behind not only Hawthorne, but the Buccaneers as well, placing fourth for the first time since 1989.

The 2001 season started early for the Statesmen, with a trip to Washington, D.C., to represent the state of New York in the Presidential Inaugural Parade. There was also a special competition in Buffalo, NY, early in the summer, pitting the two top junior corps and two of the top senior corps from the previous season. The Statesmen finished nine points behind the Brigadiers.

Despite the results, the unusually young and inexperienced corps worked hard and managed to retain its fourth place spot at DCA Finals. Bruni had a special part in the corps that year, portraying O! Blue Eyes in the tribute to The Rat Pack.

The Statesmen also traveled to Holland during



Empire Statesmen, 1997, during the "Miss Saigon" production (photo by Alan Winslow from the collection of Drum Corps World).



Empire Statesmen, 2002 (photo by Alan Winslow from the collection of Drum Corps World).

say that they have not been entertained by the Statesmen.

Bruni's vision has been realized more than anyone anticipated and, as the Statesmen enter their next 20 years of performance, the vision is not over.

For a photo and bio of Kevin Gamin, turn to page 259.

