

# More Than Just Marching Band

## Musical athletes redefine ‘sport’

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PHOTOS BY LAUREN PAPE

Every summer, hundreds, ages 15–21, join to compete in a unique activity that combines musical, mental, and physical skill, in an activity that usually isn't considered a sport—drum corps.

For those who have marched in a corps or are veteran fans of the activity, trying to explain exactly what drum corps is isn't an easy task. For those who are unfamiliar with the competition, it's best described as professional marching band.

From May to August each year, band and color guard members from across the country come together to form bands, or corps. Each corps then learns a unique show and travels from coast to coast performing it at competitions for judges and crowded stadiums full of Drum Corps International fans.

With a schedule full of 12-hour rehearsal days, thousands of miles on the road, sleeping on gym floors, and physically demanding performances several nights a week, these musical athletes must maintain peak physical health to avoid injury and ensure they make the most of the grueling summer schedule.

### Ready, Set, Run

While the drum corps season officially starts in May, each corps holds auditions and camps throughout the winter and spring for hundreds of musicians to compete for 150 spots between the brass, color guard, drum line, and front ensemble. These camps combine music rehearsals with physical training exercises like running, push-ups, jumping jacks, and sprints to gauge each performer's skill and fitness level.

Rachel Osborn, color guard member in The Cadets Drum and Bugle Corps, said these camps are designed to be much like real rehearsal days, and the corps staff watches closely to see who can take the heat and who's already panting on the sideline. While no one is expected to be in perfect shape already, it's clear who will be able to prepare in time for the summer. "It definitely takes time for your body to adjust to the type of physicality that we do," she said. "There's a reason that we're on tour for three months. It's because you can't just jump into something like this. Your body has to train for it."

After being accepted into a corps, each member is encouraged to work out several times a week to build strength and stamina. The Cadets even offered a prize to the section with the most miles run in the off-season. As a member of the color guard, Osborn said she also prepares with bicep curls and push-ups to prepare her arms and back to spin her color guard rifles, sabers, and flags for hours at a time during long rehearsal days.

Tessa Harmony, a physical trainer for The Cadets, said that even after months of preparation, it's a tough transition for most corps members at the beginning of the summer. "They come from school, where they sit seven hours a day, and they come here, and their bodies are just in shock because they're going non-stop," Harmony said. "Some of them have lost 20 pounds, and they're just all muscle now." With a cardio intensive schedule that leaves little time for anything but rehearsal, it's no wonder they lose a few pounds.

### Day by Day

Rehearsal days start at 8 a.m. After a quick breakfast loaded with protein and carbohydrates to maintain energy throughout the day, it's off to the football field, where they waste no time getting down to business with an hour of stretching and cardio-based activity. Stamina is key in pushing through long show performances, and one of the best ways to prepare for this is with running.

Following a couple of miles around the track, it's time for visual rehearsal. When learning drill, a show is split up into sets. Drum corps shows usually contain some 150–200 sets, with a different number of steps in each set.

Each set also requires different step sizes. For example, an eight-to-five step size means that there are eight steps between every five yards on the field (22.5 inches per step). Drill becomes more difficult when step sizes increase to six-to-five or four-to-five (3.75 feet per step), forcing marchers to take larger steps or run from set to set, sometimes backwards or diagonally across the field, all while staying in the constantly changing form around them.

Marchers are often required to move at paces of 180 beats-per-minute while taking four–five steps.

This means that for extended periods of time, performers are moving at up to 12 feet per second or 8.18 miles per hour while simultaneously pushing air through their instruments.



After visual rehearsal comes lunch, sectionals to work on music, dinner or a short snack, and finally, ensemble rehearsal. At the end of the day, the entire corps meets to combine all of the visual and musical changes made throughout the day.

By the end of this rehearsal, corps members have spent approximately 12 hours rehearsing in the sun, holding instruments at attention, running from set to set, and applying new information and changes during every rep.

Despite plenty of water breaks, Harmony said she can sometimes see the pain in members' faces by the end of the day, particularly at the beginning of the season. "They're blowing out so much air and trying to suck in so much air, but they're running across the field so their bodies are trying to compensate for all of that," she said. "It definitely puts their bodies through a very high-stress state." She said the amount of oxygen performers' bodies can consume increases throughout the season as they adjust to the routine exercise, making it a little easier every day to push through long rehearsals and decreasing chances of injury.

Common injuries include tendonitis, shin splints, stress fractures, strained muscles, and even broken fingers among color guard members; in summary, anything related to overuse. Color guard member Osborn, who is studying to become a nurse, said many injuries could be prevented by using simple practices she's learned in class, such as stretching and drinking water at night to avoid injuries related to dehydration and strains, but over the course of the season, every performer learns what works best for the individual to maintain a healthy body.

While most injuries only require a couple days of rest on the sideline, corps staff makes sure that more serious issues are treated by a doctor. Sometimes, it is determined that a performer should not continue the season. For this reason, every corps makes sure to have a few kids on call to fill any spots that open up.

Despite the risk of injury and the weeks of work put into learning a show, Osborn said it's all worth it when the tour begins and it's time to perform at competition for the first time each season.

### **The Texas Heat**

Similar to a professional athlete's busy travel schedule during game season, a drum corps athlete spends nearly every minute of the day rehearsing or traveling; just replace the private planes and five-star hotels with smelly charter busses and sleeping bags on hard gym floors.

While some corps mostly travel up and down the East Coast and others prefer to spend some time in California, they all make the trip to Texas for a series of competitions across the state, ending at the DCI Southwestern Championship in San Antonio each year. Because Texas is known for its strong high school marching bands, many kids who march in a drum corps are from Texas and see the trip down to the Lone Star State as coming home. For everyone else, Texas is only one thing: hot.

Fortunately for those who usually dread the scorching temperatures in Texas, rain brought cooler weather to Austin this year.



Unfortunately, this also caused the DCI Austin show at the Kelly Reeves Athletic Complex in Round Rock on July 17 to not quite go as planned. Guardians, Genesis, Troopers, Colts, and Crossmen were able to perform, but before Madison Scouts, Boston Crusaders or The Cadets could take the field, lightening cut the competition short. Disappointed fans left the stadium, but the change of plans didn't faze corps members. With dozens of performances under the belt, it's understood that bad weather is always a possibility with outdoor shows, and they began to refocus on next day of rehearsal.

### **So, is drum corps a sport?**

While some say a sport must involve passing a ball down a field and scoring points, others argue that it's more about the athleticism and teamwork involved. The definition of the word may be up for interpretation, but any audience able to witness the sweat rolling down those drum corps performers' face during a rehearsal and the passion in their eyes at the end of a show will be able to make that call for themselves.