

Setting the Tone

Welcome to the first session of the West Chester University Vivace Marching Band Camp for Directors . My name is Dr. Greg Martin and I am the interim Associate Director of Bands here at West Chester. So each of you have a little background information regarding my credentials, I previously taught public school in Florida and Virginia for 16 years; obtained my Master's of Music in Instrumental Conducting from James Madison University in Harrisonburg, VA; taught at The University of Texas at Austin for 4 years then stayed on to make my Doctorate of Music in Conducting; and finally, was the Associate Director of Bands, Director of Athletic Bands at Florida International University in Miami, FL. Now I have the good fortune to be here at West Chester University.

The focus of today's discussion is about how we approach our groups from the very beginning each year to hopefully set the tone to achieve the goals we as educators have outlined for them. The good news is that even though we have many of the same students each year, we essentially get to start fresh each and every time so any baggage or mistakes from previous years can be wiped clean with the proper approach. I certainly do not claim to be an expert regarding anything to be discussed today and probably will not say anything new or earth shattering. Instead, it is my goal to hopefully provoke some thoughts, raise some questions or provide a different perspective to this activity that we all do year after year called marching band. Sometimes, just hearing that what one is doing is similar in all situations can be the justification one needs to forge ahead.

One of my favorite cartoons when I was teaching public school was the Doonesbury “Dinkle” cartoon. One in particular showed Mr. Dinkle observing his marching band in performance alongside his principal. They were both looking with approval and the principal leaned over and said “Their formations are so perfect. How do you do that?” The next frame showed Mr. Dinkle with his standard band director’s “all knowing face” followed by his statement “Land mines!”

While none of us would ever think of employing such tactics, there are times that we probably wish we could when encountering certain situations during the late summer and fall. Yet, we still are able to accomplish essentially the same level of perfection out of students who rarely are expected to do anything in their lives with the same level of expertise (outside of video games to achieve the next “level”). I personally think this accomplishment is nothing short of amazing and an educational standard that is quickly disappearing in the world of education in this country

At this point it is important to realize that any suggestion I may have, any topic discussed, any technique mentioned, must be tailored to your specific situation / talent level, rehearsal schedule, situation. No one knows your program or students better. Likewise, each of you have your own teaching personality, as do I, so some of these suggestions may not work for you. But all can be tailored to fit your needs and that is the challenge here this week.

Many of you are at the starting line for the season or already involved in early stages of work. So think about what you are doing as well as what you have already done thus far and how it would affect the answer the

following questions:

- 1) What qualities / elements are part of a “successful” year?
- 2) Why would one director feel a year is successful and another who experiences an equivalent situation not feel the same?
- 3) How should one evaluate to determine a “successful” year?
- 4) When should one evaluate? Should there be certain benchmarks throughout or evaluate at the end?
- 5) Can portions of a year be determined to be successful and other not? How will that affect the director’s overall perception.

In my experience, the following are factors that are proven to contribute to a successful year (note I did not say result in a successful year):

1. Planning / Organization

- a. Stay ahead of the game by about 6 months. Try to always know what your marching show is going to be by February / March and what your concert repertoire will be by July / August. This will force you to do the necessary thought that should take place to provide your students with the optimal experience in both venues.
- b. Pick group appropriate music, shows, and performance venues. This seems logical but many directors make the fatal and often frustrating mistake of choosing music or utilizing drill that is too difficult for the students. Likewise, those who have smaller bands should try to

avoid festivals / marching band contests where the performance venue is a large stadium or one that has a track around the football field. Both will set the group up for potential failure. It is true, we should be challenging our students but we must know what their capabilities and limitations are, choose appropriately then provide them with the performance opportunities where all of their hard work can be properly evaluated and rewarded.

- c. Utilize some sort of band handbook. This simple technique will save you hours of time if written and utilized properly. Be sure to include ALL expectations regarding rehearsal procedures / etiquette, uniform maintenance and wearing, instrument maintenance and care, procedures regarding day to day band operations, grading procedures, full year calendar including next year's band camp dates, attendance policies / expectations and how to address approval for excused absences and any additional topics such as ensemble admittance (auditions), band leadership duties / procedures, awards, participation in extracurricular activities such as Solo and Ensemble, All-Whatever Band and such. If written properly, it should answer all potential question before they can be asked so if a student or parent does ask, all you have to say is, "The answer is in the Handbook." With technology today, many schools put a copy on the band web site so it is always there for reference. Whatever format you use, make sure you have your administrations approval so they can back you up if ever questioned. The

use of a signature page that the parent and student both sign acknowledging responsibility for the material contained within is essential. I always required this signature page be returned by the first Friday, first week of school and usually associated extra credit points for everyone who did (students love getting extra points).

- d. Daily, monthly, seasonal, yearly goals. It is vital to the success of our students that we guide their progress through the setting of goals or proficiencies. All opportunities and experiences we provide them should culminate in the achievement of those goals whether short or long term. Otherwise, we are not enabling them to be successful learners and they can pick up on that quicker than we care to acknowledge. Know how you want your groups to look / sound and what you want your students to leave the particular activity enabled to do and plan your teaching accordingly.
- e. Enable your students to acknowledge learning / progress is taking place. Teach them the difference in achievement and underachievement. Provide them with the tools and opportunities to determine improvement such as examples of high achieving performances or allowing them to come out a few at a time and observe a marching band run through. But, be careful, if we teach them to be knowledgeable about what is good and not good, we have to be sure we are on our "A" game at all times, right?

- f. Efficient rehearsals are the key to successful teaching / learning. I am continually stressing to my student teachers as well as methods students every day that pacing is vitally important. Students know when a rehearsal is ill-planned / executed and that sends the message that their time together is not important. This is not saying we cannot have a bad rehearsal every once in a great while but that **MUST** be the rare exception. Keep the students on task, the musical opportunities consistently available and the environment vibrant and exciting. They will be running to get to band because they will be enjoying what they are doing and accomplishing so much more
- g. Try to utilize the amount of excessive time in marching band effectively. We all put in probably 6-8 hours a week after the school day to rehearse marching band. Many director's complain about the amount of time when they should be looking at is as an opportunity to teach their students. We are so lucky to be able to have this extra time and are foolish to not take full advantage of it. I tried to always look at is as opportunities to teach some of the following:
1. Proper warm up techniques / practice techniques
 2. Teach / reinforce proper tone production, articulation technique.
 3. Rhythms - Typically, a lot of marching band music (especially stand music) employs rhythmic combinations not found in most traditional concert band music. Take

advantage of this opportunity to explore these combinations and build the rhythmic capabilities and understanding of the students.

4. Perfection of a phrase or piece of music. Spending so much time on 8-10 minutes of music allows you to set the example of how much preparation the students need to do on all future music, plus provides the opportunity to teach / reinforce phrasing, expression, balance, blend, rhythmic accuracy / timing.
5. Insisting on “perfection” of all aspects of a marching band show can “set the tone” for the level of expectations throughout the rest of the program. This is a wonderful opportunity to teach our students the self discipline and preparation necessary to be successful at anything in life. For my students, there was no transition from outdoors to indoors because the same principles / concepts / expectations existed in both places. Transference was automatic.

2. Attitude. While simple in concept, this aspect is so important to our students and the overall tone of each year. If you are not excited to be there each and every day, why should your students be excited. Over the years I have noticed the following points:

- a. Students directly reflect their director. If you do not like what you are seeing in your students, remember for the most part they are basically a mirror. If you are enjoying what you are doing and teaching them, odds are, they will be

enjoying it too.

- b. Are you excited? Do you show it? Many times we are too “mature” to be excited about a piece of music or a marching band show. Let your “hair down,” be a bit more human and let your students see that side of yourself. And most importantly, don’t be afraid to make a fool of yourself in fun.
- c. Make sure you keep everything in context / don’t blow things out of proportion. When we become agitated about an issue or situation that is not really deserving of that kind of attention, we again send a negative message to our students. Save those moments for when they are really appropriate and remember, it is only one incident in one day. Everything will be fine as long as we work hard and allow it to be.
- d. Make sure you let students know you appreciate their efforts / sharing of their talents. How often do you thank your students for their hard work and for being there? It makes a HUGE difference to know that they are appreciated (it does with us as well, right?) Positive feedback accomplishes 10 times that of negative feedback.
- e. Fair and efficient methods for evaluation / grading consistency in approach. This is probably one of the most important aspects in our classroom management and has a greater effect on the tone of the year than perhaps anything else. If the students feel you are not being fair in evaluating their performance (and remember we are teaching them to self evaluate) or are favoring a particular student or group over another then we are sending a very negative message. Nothing brings a group down quicker or further than this improper handling of an

important aspect of our profession. Be professional and above reproach in regards to grading and assessment. Make sure your grading system is foolproof and is set up clearly. Then follow it to the letter. Every student must be the same to your pencil recording the grades - no exceptions.

3. Mixing it up - provide various and different opportunities / techniques to keep them engaged.
 - a. Bring in guest clinicians / conductors. Outside eyes and ears always prove to supply us with input that we miss due to hearing / seeing the same thing day to day. Likewise, a guest usually ends up saying the same thing we tell our groups and because it is someone else, they tend to hear it.
 - b. Change the set up inside. Granted this is easier to accomplish with younger ensembles vs more mature ones, but can still be done. By changing the set up on occasion (face a different direction, place a different section on the front row, etc.), the students become intrigued to see how they are going to set up today. This even works with my college students.
 - c. Choice of music. This is perhaps one of the most important considerations. Chose appropriate, challenging music but also provide some "fluff" for the students that they can have fun with and enjoy. Likewise, consider sight reading a lot. It helps with that skill and provides the students with a larger repertoire of experiences and music. I even sight read pieces on concerts. Parents love it and it takes the edge off the concert for the students.

- d. Work in history, theory, etc. into the rehearsal. Nothing spurs on the excitement for students than to have them understand the context in which the music they are performing was written or how the construction permits certain situation to occur. With greater understanding comes greater appreciation and performance.
4. Expectations vs. abilities / talent level
- a. It is vital to the success of a season or year that we as directors are painfully realistic with our goals and carefully analyze our programs so as to set goals that push the students but don't continually frustrate them. This careful analysis should enable us to provide challenging and exciting educational opportunities without turning the students off throughout the year.
 - b. Likewise, we have to have standards that are appropriate to our situations without sacrificing quality or success. Perhaps the most important statement I can offer is that our students will perform to our expectations-nothing more and nothing less. It is up to each one of us to make sure those expectations are of a level that will set our students up for success. There is absolutely no reason our groups cannot perform musically and accurately each and every time (unless we give them a reason). Many times, we are our own worst enemy when it comes to this concept.

For example, at one of my previous public schools, a majority of the students in my top performing group took private lessons from professors at a nearby University. For admission into the group, the students were required to be perform all of the major scales (complete

range of the instrument), and all 3 versions of their minor scales - all including arpeggios from memory along with sight reading at a level of the music the group would be performing.

Likewise, for the district Solo and Ensemble festival, any student from that program regardless of level who wanted to perform a solo had to be able to perform the work for me from memory and then on a recital from memory with accompaniment (we require them to memorize music for a 10 minute marching band show but recoil at the thought of memorizing a 4-5 movement from a solo).

Finally, I would stop a rehearsal at any point and ask a student to perform a scale of my choosing or to identify an interval by sound. If they could not execute the request, they were moved to last chair and had to challenge their way back to their position. Of course, I would not do this in the window of two weeks prior to a concert but otherwise, they were all fair game. I acknowledge this system took several years to get into place and implement and would possibly not work in a very rural situation where private lessons were not readily available. However, aspects could be employed in even the smallest ensembles. Instead of moving a student to last chair, perhaps move them to the bottom of their part (1st, 2nd, or 3rd) so the music rehearsals are not interrupted and the displacement would still create enough of a stir to enhance the challenge (practice) situation. I believe the solo expectation could be phased into any program. The freedom that the students experienced as a result of memorization allowed them a degree of musical expression rarely achieved otherwise.

The point to all this is those students did not realize what

I was asking was difficult. It simply was the expectation and they rose to the occasion. Granted, not all of the students were able to accomplish this level of performance, but the expectations were tailored for the other groups so that the students could be successful (symphonic band had to perform their major scales and natural minor scales for admission; concert band, major scales).

In conclusion, as we all stand at the door of a new year, remember our students are looking to us for many forms of guidance and direction. Our experience and expertise should allow us to honestly assess our programs and develop instructional experiences that will challenge and entertain our students though out the year. It is us, not them, that have to establish what type of year we are going to experience and each and everything we do must be towards that goal. How are you going to set the tone for the year in your very first interaction with your students this year?

I wish each of you a successful and educationally satisfying school year. Thank you for your time and consideration of these points.