

Helpful Marching Percussion Techniques—Bass Drums

Richie Viano

One of the most important sections of the marching band is without a doubt the bass drums. With a musical approach, solid technique and thoughtful and creative arranging, this section has the ability to improve the overall quality of a percussion section as well as the entire marching ensemble. Here are several key items you can check and reinforce to help your bass drummers.



Standing up straight is a great place to start

When dealing with technique, I usually tell my kids, “Sounding good begins with looking great”. For a large ensemble to play well together, we have to standardize our approach to the instrument. For starters, make sure that you have the right body types for the right size drums. The drums only get heavier as the rehearsal goes on. Although some may disagree, I strongly suggest that battery players should wear their drums whenever possible, so their bodies can develop the stamina to go the distance. Participating in marching basics, with the drums on, is

extremely important too. Being able to control the drum with your body while keeping the drum still, gives the player a stable surface to play on and provides optimum conditions for playing with a good stroking technique.

Proper Technique

Have your students drop their hands to their sides, with the mallets in hand. Bending at the elbow, raise the mallets to the center of the drumhead. The mallet should not make contact with the head, but be as close as possible. The most important factor is to be relaxed. Tension and drumming do not mix. As you bend at the elbow, make sure that the palm of the hand is facing the drumhead and cock the wrist slightly. I highly recommend using mirrors, so the kids can see the difference. When you have everyone’s hands in the proper position, have the kids push their arms into the rim slightly, so they can feel where their arms meet the rim. This will give them a point of reference until stick positioning becomes second nature.

Implementing a practical exercise/warm-up program is essential

Choose or create exercises that reinforce good basic technique and support the content of your show. Bass drums have a tendency to be too loud and sound choppy when playing something tonal. Volume is something the bass drums can provide, but it’s only effective when chosen and performed in the correct context. Have your bass line practice all their warm-ups at all dynamic levels. Stretch their dynamic range. A musical bass line is a tremendous asset to your band. When it is appropriate to play loud, remember that five guys playing impact together modestly are always louder than five guys trying to kill their drums causing separation and distortion. As an adjudicator, I spend a lot of time explaining balance. A majority of the bands I see have bass lines that play two dynamic levels: loud and louder. Encourage the players to listen to the ensemble. Point out the subtle innuendoes and teach them how their part relates to the music.

With their full body sound, bass drummers are the perfect players to supply pulse, outline meter and/or define the groove. Let your students know that playing bass, even for one season in high school, will improve their

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ability to drum tremendously. For some reason, in high school, bass drummers may be looked upon by their peers as players that didn't have what it takes to make snare or tenors. In reality, they hold a much more valuable position and the likelihood of them becoming even stronger percussionists is inevitable.

Richard Viano is originally from Center Harbor. He currently resides with his family in Oviedo, Florida. He did his undergraduate studies at Morehead State University in Kentucky and Rollins College in Florida. While attending Morehead University and studying under Frank Oddis, MSU was crowned the 1989 Percussive Arts Society's National College Indoor Drumline Champions, including Best Snare Line, Tenor Line and Pit. Richard was also the 1989 PAS Individual Snare Drum Champion. In that same year he was named the Drum Corps Midwest and Drum Corps International Individual Snare Drum Champion. He marched 5

years with the Suncoast Sound Drum and Bugle Corps. He taught the 1990 Orlando Magic Drum and Bugle Corps and has been the Percussion Coordinator and Arranger for Cypress Creek High School in Central Florida for the past 7 seasons. Richard was a member of Future Corps at Walt Disney World's EPCOT Center for 8 years. He is the leader of the Village Beatniks at Disney's Animal Kingdom and Percussion Designer/Writer for the Boston Crusaders Drum & Bugle Corps, as well as the Percussion Specialist/Music Director for Express Music Services. The diverse experience of Richard Viano is exhaustive. He began the new millennium in the role of Assistant Musical Producer and Percussion Arranger/Choreographer for the Superbowl XXXIV Halftime Show. He was also the Percussion Consultant and Arranger/Choreographer for Walt Disney World's uniquely inventive Tapestry of Nations.

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