

Spend Time on Fundamentals For a Better Musical Result

Rob Toups

Those of us who teach music agree that it can be an incredibly rewarding career. Being a band director is unique and special for many reasons, including a variety of performance activities directors and students are able to engage in. One challenging and rewarding activity is marching band. It provides a unique mix of art and athleticism with energy and grace and awesome crowd appeal. In many ways it is similar to Olympic figure skating. There are so many variables and the challenges are great.

At Canton High School, we are grateful to have won the prestigious 2006 UIL Texas State Marching Championship. Defending our 2002 and 2004 state titles made this year's challenge very special for our Eagle band students. Much thought and work goes into a marching presentation and I wish to share with you a few of these ideas, fundamentals and rehearsal techniques most used in the CHS band program.

Obviously, there are many warm-ups, marching drills, and rehearsal ideas used by successful programs throughout Texas and elsewhere. Our program like others, uses concepts and

techniques passed on by director/clinicians and proven professionals in our field. The ideas I share with you may or may not be to your liking, and that is OK. However, it is important to note that any series of warm-ups and/or fundamentals you use will ultimately work to improve a marching presentation if you are consistent.

Consistency is key.

Each August CHS band students begin camp with music already learned and in most cases already memorized. The overall show concept is in place; the drill books and coordinate sheets are complete and ready to hand out.

Tone

The first two days of band camp focus on tone production. Students are drilled on concert F until each student is able to produce an intense, well-centered concert F with a full sound on the

tongue start, sustain and with an open throat release. This process is slow and very tedious. Students must be reminded often that this process is critical. When every

student begins producing a correct concert F, we move down a half step and work for the same outcome with the new pitch, etc. The concert F remains our model pitch all year long.

By the second or third day of August rehearsals, we begin transferring the "tone" expectation to the musical phrases. All aspects of musical production gradually come into the warm-up.

Articulation, repeated articulation, air follow-through, body and presence of sound to point of release are all examined in the music and drilled on F remingtons.

Much like the musical performance, the marching/visual production should be centered around fundamentals. There should be no confusion as to what is expected in a UIL performance. It is wise to use the UIL descriptor/qualifier sheets to guide you in rehearsal.

Articulation

Students practice intake and outflow of air via breathing exercises. After carefully timed

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preparatory breaths, students begin F remingtons. First, whole notes with tongue starts on each, listening for fullness of body and presence, growth and direction on the sustain. As students repeat the articulation on subsequent whole notes, the tongue must not interfere or alter the body of sound/air. The final release should “ring.” The unison band sound should be unique. The various instruments must not be heard outside the ensemble sound. I tell my students that the “band unison sound” is a new kind of instrument that produces the texture and colors of each of their instruments combined, without necessarily hearing the individuals. Fast, pointed air, visualizing the sound far in front of each player and listening for that unique band mix is everything.

We warm-up with remingtons everyday using whole notes, half notes, quarter notes and even eighth notes. The expectation is always the same. Even note shapes up and down the horn, centered, well focused air with intensity, no interruption of air at articulation, releasing and ringing together.

It is important to note that the more time spent on fundamentals, the better the musical result. Too often, directors feel it is necessary to rush into the music so that the band does not fall behind in performance

preparation; but, we must realize that fundamentals are music preparation. It is remarkable to witness the transference of consistency from drilled fundamental concepts as the music is rehearsed. It is ultimately a

time saver, not to mention the band will sound so much better.



Review

1. Get into a circle outside. Begin breathing exercises.
2. With a metronome, begin F remingtons (whole notes, half notes, quarter notes.)
3. Lip slurs and divided intervals.
4. Get into music, phrase by phrase—slowly, then at tempo.
5. Do not progress to anything new until convincing results take place in each area. Students must be sold on the importance of fundamentals and they must be totally focused.

Music

In Canton, most of our rehearsals take place outside with students in a circle, with instruments mixed around. Mixing the instruments promotes correct ensemble sound. Harmony is addressed as we play through each phrase. I do not use chorales. It is more prudent, in my opinion, to slow down phrases so that harmonies, moving lines, layering and alignment can be addressed. I may work only one or two phrases or musical capsules (sub-

phrases) a day. The trick is to get the students hearing conceptually and critically. Ultimately they are more able to adjust to their expectation, “steering” the musical sound as it is produced.

Additional

In an effort to reinforce air concepts and flexibility, lip slurs are used everyday. Woodwind instruments execute chromatic scales on slur starts to improve facility. Everyday I divide the circle into two halves.

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Students play a concert F with their best intense, correct unison “band sound.” Then I cue each half to move chronically in opposite direction. The goal is to maintain clarity and intensity from each group. Go back to unison F, then skip to the next interval. Listen for the intensity and clarity on tongue start, body, compactness and tonal presence on sustain and ring on release. Continue this for 3 or 4 half steps, then reverse the groups and repeat the process.

Much like the musical performance, the marching/visual production should be centered around fundamentals. There should be no confusion as to what is expected in a UIL performance; that is, correct band sounds on individual and ensemble levels as well as correct marching and visual execution and fundamentals on individual and ensemble levels. Thus in Canton we prepare our students in posture, carriage, stride, uniformity, visual clarity, arrival and overall appeal. It is wise to use the UIL descriptor/qualifier sheets to guide you in rehearsal.

As students execute all marching fundamentals, instruments are held above parallel and pointed to

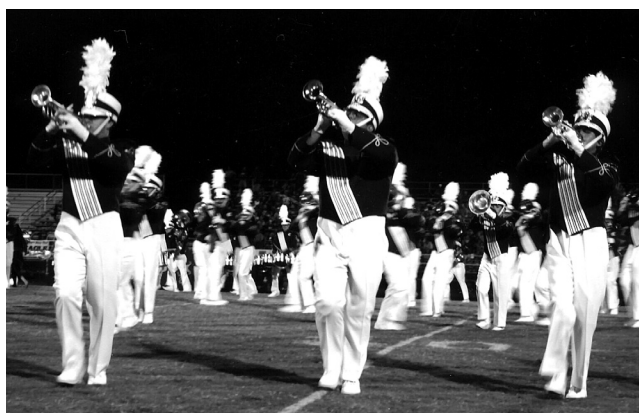
the press box. The upper body must not sway or move around at all. We make sure that upper body posture is tall and students strive to minimize the bending of knees on stride. There are so many great marching warm-ups and fundamentals which help build consistency and a very clean look on the field. It is important to remember that “sameness” is everything. Alignment depends on every individual marcher being exactly the same throughout every step of the performance, even to the smallest detail. Do not forget trouser length. Correct trouser length enhances

visual consistency.

No high school group in any classification is ever perfect. However, working on fundamentals everyday will result in a better overall marching presentation, start to finish. Do not hesitate to invite an experienced director/clinician to your rehearsals.

Welcome constructive

criticism and assessment. Demand the best effort possible from every student. Be willing to adjust and change when necessary so that the final production’s sound and visual concepts are correct.



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The various instruments must not be heard
outside the ensemble sound.**

Rob Toups is the director of Bands and Fine Arts for Canton High School, a class AAA school in Region III. He has been in Canton since 1991. He is a member ATSSB, TMEA, TBA, TMAA and Phi Beta Mu. Rob has a Bachelor of Music degree from the University of Southwestern Louisiana and 21 years of experience in public school music. The Canton bands earn consistent Sweepstakes awards and has remained in the top three in both UIL marching and TMEA concert honor bands since 1998. The band has performed in Europe, Canada, West Point Military Academy and Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The concert band was named the TMEA State AAA Honor Band in 2003 and the UIL State Marching Champion in 2002, 2004 and 2006. Rob served as the ATSSB AAA representative to the State Board 1998-2004. He is currently the President-Elect of ATSSB and the TMAA marching band Vice-President. He and his lovely wife Carolyn have three children, Leah, Lindsey and Mark.