

# It's All About the Details

Ferd Vollmar

---

So, your band has learned 45 sets of drill. Congratulations! During the month of September you find yourself several rehearsals into the year, but what have you accomplished? You might even have the majority of the show on the ground, and marched a portion of it at your first couple of football games, but are you pleased with the product? Now is the time to go back and perfect the show. As you introduced new drill pages was there enough review and repetition, or did the urge to continue to learn more drill pages often prevail? Detailing the show requires a balance between patience and impatience...knowing when to move on and when to review is a difficult decision for the director. The fear of falling behind is always in the back of our mind.

In order to improve the band's performance, you must strive to fine tune your plan of attack for the months of September and October. Your plan needs to be even more specific than the month of August, but what should your plan include? Below are a few suggestions that will work with any style of marching band show, and help you perfect the performance.

## Physical Warm Up:

Continue to begin your rehearsal by preparing the performer's body

for the activity. Proper stretching and physical warm up is important in order to prevent injuries.

## Fundamental Block:

The fundamental block is an essential start to every rehearsal. The block exercises speak to basic concepts such as posture, timing, subdivision, step size, horn carriage as well as specific skills needed in the show. It's not just a summer band exercise. As you begin to feel pressed for time an abbreviated block focusing on one specific skill each day is still beneficial. Another



technique is to break the band into smaller groups and allow your more accomplished marchers to provide the necessary instruction. This is an excellent use of student leaders and provides student ownership in the program.

## Music Rehearsal:

The outdoor music rehearsal is very important. It may be the only time you combine Band I, Band II, and Percussion since they may meet separately during the school day. Outdoor balance and refinement of sound is very different compared to the balance achieved indoors. Place the students in a rehearsal arc and develop the musical standard you want to hear when marching the drill. Students should have their music on the field for quick reference and correction. While playing through the music, students

should mark time with step outs at the beginning of each set.

Another necessary technique for improving music ensemble performance is through sectional and individual "pass offs" of the music. It is very difficult to solve the individual student's needs

## It's All About the Details

in the full ensemble rehearsal. Working with the different sections really helps to clarify their role in the ensemble. Correcting or assisting individual musical needs can only be accomplished in small group or individual listening sessions. This is usually accomplished by having an assistant director hear individual students during the band class rehearsal. Another method is to have students record the music individually and directors listen to those recordings outside of class. It sounds like a lot of time, but the result outweighs the inconvenience. Band directors that find the time to address the individual, sectional and full ensemble needs are the ones that truly detail the overall product.

### Metronome:

All of the exercises and methods mentioned above require consistent use of the metronome. Basically, it needs to be audible for the conductor only, so that the performers are learning to watch and not listen for the pulse. Students must have their music committed to memory, and can perform it individually at a high level. Insecure individual music performance will create timing issues for the entire ensemble.

### Previously Taught Sets:

Students must use problem solving and higher level thinking skills in order to perfect the bulleted items listed below:

- Spatial relationship while moving
- Upper body orientation to sideline or press box
- Bell angles
- Line of travel
- Musical responsibilities (melody vs. harmonic material)

- Eyes on the conductor while moving
- Eyes into the form while moving
- Uniformity of marching style from each member (refer to fundamental block)

Practice the drill set on counts first, review music standing still (musical standard), and finally, combine the movement with music. Singing through the set is also useful. Determine a reasonable number of reps that will begin the cleaning process without getting “bogged down”. Constantly remind the students that the use of fundamentals while playing and moving is just as important as arriving at the correct location. Students must be responsible for their own musical and visual intonation when maneuvering through the show.

### Connecting Sets:

Connecting sets for the performers is sometimes a difficult task. After learning several sets independently, it is now time to connect the sets. One technique that has proven useful is the “Plus One” / “Minus One” Step Drill. This method of practice allows you to begin connecting sets together.

■ After moving through a set of 16 counts take one step (“Plus One”) in the new direction for the next set. Now, place the left foot back one count (“Minus One”), and give the command to move into the next set.

■ Next, insert eight counts of hold between the sets keeping the metronome running. Move the 16 count set with one step in the new direction (“Plus One”), recover to the “Minus One” position on count 3, hold counts 5,6,7,8 and then step off for the next set and repeat. (Remember to pivot the balls of both feet when changing direction, and take the true size of step on count one.)

## It's All About the Details

■ Now, remove the hold on counts 5,6,7,8, and simply take the “Plus One” step. Recover to the “Minus One,” and step out continuing into the next set.

■ Finally, you will keep the flow going without any interruption between the sets. Eventually, you will want to combine or group individual sets into “units” to speed up the cleaning process and continuity of the drill. The “Plus One” and “Minus One” is a technique that really works for connecting drill sets because it allows the performer the time to process and prepare for the next move.

### Introducing New Sets:

The students must be prepared with all the necessary tools when learning new drill pages.

- Students must have drill charts/coordinate sheets in hand.
- Mark the set position with paint, chip, chalk, etc. when instructed by the director.
- March it without music using correct skills and fundamentals.
- Play music to the newly learned set without movement.

- March with music using the correct skills and fundamentals.

- Determine the number of reps, and continue on.

When refining your marching band show, remember to stick to the procedures and protocol you established during your August band camp. Students must be punctual, have drill materials, proper marching shoes, water bottle, instrument, and music. Miscellaneous items such as a sunscreen, sunglasses, hat, etc. are important as well. Always leave some time for feedback, encouragement, and announcements at the end of each rehearsal.

I know that all of us have our tried and true methods. Hopefully, the suggestions and ideas mentioned in this article will prove beneficial as you continue to prepare your show. Remember, the skills and discipline utilized during marching season transfer well into preparation for solo, ensemble, and concert band performances. (The good news is you won't have to move around for those!) Have a great marching season and good luck in October and throughout the entire school year.

*Ferd Vollmar assumed his duties as Director of Bands and Professor of Music Education at the University of the Incarnate Word in the fall of 2009. His responsibilities include directing and coordinating all aspects of the UIW Cardinal Marching Band and conducting the Wind Ensemble. Professor Vollmar also serves the School of Music as Director of Instrumental Studies. Prior to his recent appointment at Incarnate Word, Mr. Vollmar served as the Director of Music Education for the North East Independent School District in San Antonio, Texas from 2001 to 2009. Mr. Vollmar's duties included supervising band, choir, and orchestra programs at seven high schools, thirteen middle schools, forty-four elementary schools, and the district's Fine Arts Magnet School. Mr. Vollmar also served successfully in the public schools as Director of Bands at Winston Churchill High School from 1987-2001, and at Santa Fe High School from 1977-1987. Under Mr. Vollmar's direction, the Churchill and Santa Fe Bands were consistent TMEA Honor Band and UIL State Marching Band finalists. Also, the Churchill band has been a Bands of America Regional Champion five times and twice a finalist at the BOA Grand Nationals in Indianapolis, Indiana.*

*Mr. Vollmar holds a Bachelor of Music Education Degree from Sam Houston State University and a Master of Music Degree from the University of Houston. Mr. Vollmar is an active adjudicator and a clinician in Texas and throughout the South. He has served UIL and TMEA in many different positions, including Region 12 Band Division Chairman, representative on the UIL Music Advisory Committee, and contest host for UIL State Marching Band Contest since 2003. His professional affiliations include the Texas Music Educators Association, Texas Bandmasters Association, Phi Beta Mu, and Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia.*