

# The Coordinate System

***Making drill coordinates an integral part of the marching band program to improve rehearsal efficiency and student accountability***

**Mitch Rogers, sponsored by Marching Show Concepts, Inc.**

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In my 20 years as a drill designer, marching instructor and show design consultant, I have never heard a band director say: “We have too much rehearsal time, too many well-trained marching instructors, and too many excellent marchers who never miss a rehearsal.” In fact, I’m certain I’ve never heard any director claim even one of these conditions was true about their band program!

Usually, what I hear from band directors is this:

“I have 50 complicated charts to teach, no staff, the band is half freshmen, and kids are constantly leaving rehearsal for private lessons, labs or tutoring. Our rehearsal time is eaten up by bad weather, rehearsing with the drill team or cars parked on our practice field. How in the world am I to get this show taught and cleaned?”

Many band directors, driven by the pressure of getting the show on the field, don’t take the time to create a system to help them achieve that goal. I’ve seen countless marching band visual rehearsals where a band seems as if everything they do, they’re doing for the first time. The band is learning the closer no more efficiently than they learned the opener.

## **COORDINATE SYSTEM SAVES TIME**

Systematizing the challenges of learning and cleaning drill helps a band use precious rehearsal time more efficiently. One of the most effective systems for meeting these challenges is The Coordinate System.

The Coordinate System offers a way to overcome many of the typical obstacles faced by most band directors including:

- ***Complex drill designs***
- ***Limited and untrained staff***
- ***Fluctuating attendance***
- ***Inexperienced or struggling performers***

Using The Coordinate System helps maximize visual rehearsal efficiency. It gives each student control and responsibility for his or her performance. Perhaps most importantly, The Coordinate System helps hold each student individually accountable for his or her visual performance.

## **DESIGNED TO WORK**

The Coordinate System begins with the way the drill is designed.

Transitions from set to set must

be created to allow the students, with minimal exceptions, to move from their current position to their next position in a straight-line path. If this sounds like a major restriction forced upon the drill designer, than it may surprise you to know that the kaleidoscopic designs of such groups as The

Cavaliers, Santa Clara Vanguard, and Bluecoats as well as many other top marching bands and drum corps are created using straight-line path transitions.

Once the drill is designed, each student must receive a list of their position coordinates—Cartesian-grid (X,Y) type descriptions of the student’s position on each page of drill. Coordinates are usually written referencing the yard-lines, hashes, and sidelines. The coordinates designate the student’s left-to-right

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**Mitch Rogers will discuss The Coordinate System in a presentation on Sunday, July 22 at 11:45 a.m.**

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and front-to-back position on the football field. For example, for a drill of 50 pages, each performer would receive a list of 50 coordinates designating where that student should be on each page of drill.

### TEACHING STUDENTS THE SYSTEM

Before students take the field, they need to be taught how to read the coordinate tables, how to interpret their meaning and how to find their coordinates on the field. This can first be done in a classroom setting and then out on the field. Many directors create handouts describing coordinates and how to use them.

Often directors create coordinate tests and include the test results as a component of student grades. A coordinate test could include a sample coordinate alongside a small football field grid. Students demonstrate their understanding of coordinates by placing a dot on the grid indicating the position the coordinate represents.

### THREE EASY RULES FOR STUDENTS

After students understand how to read and find their coordinates, they must be taught how to transition from one coordinate to the next. Using The Coordinate System, the student's responsibility boils down to three basic rules:

- 1) Move from one coordinate to the next in a straight-line path
- 2) Take equal sized steps
- 3) Use all the counts assigned to that phrase and no more (do not arrive early or late)

If every student is able to consistently obey these three rules to arrive at the correct coordinate, the drill would be performed perfectly!

### OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

How do the use of coordinates and these rules help overcome some of the challenges I mentioned earlier?

#### • *Limited and untrained staff*

The Coordinate System, properly implemented, allows one director to teach the whole drill to the band from the tower with no assistance. Each student has the information needed to find the next position and an understanding of how to get there.

#### • *Fluctuating attendance*

Students no longer need to rely on other students to determine their positions. "Guiding" and "Covering Down" are no longer the principal method students use to find their positions. An absent "guide-point" no longer needs to throw other students off course.

Proper use of The Coordinate System makes each student accountable for his or her position

on the field. No longer can a student respond to being singled out for an error by saying "But I'm supposed to be behind so-and-so!" The student either is or is not on the correct coordinate. The ambiguities associated with guide, dress and cover are nearly eliminated.

#### • *Inexperienced or struggling performers*

Much of the discussion regarding fluctuating attendance applies to this problem as well. In addition, struggling or inexperienced performers can spend extra time practicing their drill without the need for the rest of their section (or line, or arc, etc...) to be present.

*(continued)*



## The Coordinate System

### TO REVIEW:

The basic building blocks of The Coordinate System:

- *Drill designed utilizing straight-line path transitions*
- *Set of coordinates representing the performer's position on each page of drill*
- *The three rules describing how to transition from position to position*

These basics are important but there is much more to completely integrating coordinates into your marching program and visual rehearsals. The use of coordinates dictates how each set is taught, which marching fundamentals are emphasized, and even how the field is marked.

The most important areas affected by the dedicated integration of coordinates into your marching band program is the visual rehearsal process and the feedback the director gives the students.

### CLARIFIES STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES AND DIRECTOR FEEDBACK

If students have been given the responsibility of transitioning to a coordinate in accordance with the principles of the three rules, then the director feedback should hold them accountable for *only those* responsibilities. In The Coordinate System, this does not mean the student is responsible for “covering down” or “getting behind somebody” or “getting in the arc”.

For example, when the director observes a student lagging behind a moving form, the director must

determine what has gone wrong in terms of the student's responsibilities. Did the student start and end on the correct coordinate? If the answer to that question is yes, then the director needs to evaluate which rule or combination of rules did the student violate. The answers to this question will determine what feedback should be given. Rather than tell a student to “cover down” or “get in the form”, the feedback might be “take a bigger step on count 1 and maintain it throughout the phrase. or “you're not on your coordinate, move over a quarter step”.

### STUDENTS GROW WITH THE SYSTEM

Using The Coordinate System does not mean eliminating other information students could use to find their position within a form but it should be, especially early in a season, the principal method of determining where a student should be. As the season progresses, students can be given more responsibilities regarding how to find their position and evaluate their transition but that's a subject for another article.



*Mitch is a drill designer, marching instructor, and clinician who works in the U.S, Japan, Thailand and Singapore. His designs have been performed in those countries as well as The Netherlands, Switzerland, Taiwan, China, and Malaysia. Mitch has served as the visual caption head of the Cavaliers Drum and Bugle Corps leading the corps to two consecutive DCI visual caption awards and the 1992 DCI World Championship. He has written drill for the Cavaliers, Bluecoats, and Troopers Drum and Bugle Corps. Over the last 30 years, Mitch has designed drill for high school bands throughout the country including Stephen E Austin (Sugar Land), Plymouth-Canton(MI), Kell (GA) and many more. More about Mitch at [www.mitchrogers.net](http://www.mitchrogers.net)*