

Achieving Maximum Potential With Minimal Time: Effective Strategies for Marching Band

Bob Chreste and Evan VanDoren

As band directors we always hope that our students' final performance will be their best one. It can become difficult to engage students in rehearsals while working to clean every last mistake in the final weeks of the marching season. The question then becomes, how can we develop our ensemble to reach its fullest potential given the amount of time that remains? Whether you have one week left or one month left, read on for a few concepts and strategies that can be implemented for continued growth all the way to the final performance of the season!

Utilizing the "mixed setup" as a means of increasing student performance accountability

After a couple months of marching rehearsals, it can become difficult to see and hear new problems to address with your students. To find and solve performance issues, we suggest increasing student performance accountability by rehearsing in a mixed arc or mixed circle.

Rehearsing in a circle or an arc increases student accountability by providing clear lines of sight and

sound between the director and students. When the director stands in the center (focal point) of the circle, he or she can see and hear each student's performance equally and provide feedback to the appropriate individuals. The students quickly become aware that as a result of the setup, they are unable to "hide" within the group. Instead, they must fix their own performance issues, rather than rely on the players next to them to do their jobs for them.

Picture this: A band director has her band set up in a circle, with each instrument group standing together in sections. The band members perform an excerpt from their show, in the middle of which a trombone player makes a bad sound. Immediately, the director turns to the trombones and addresses them as a section, asking them to make better sounds. We hope that the student realizes their error and will attempt to fix it. However, we have no way of knowing whether or not the student will be aware of his or her mistake.

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In an effort to hold students more individually accountable for their performance, set up in a mixed circle or arc so that no two of the same instrument are standing next to each other. This allows the director to isolate the individual sounds within each section more easily. If the director in the example above had her trombones spread evenly around the circle, she could have immediately turned to the area of the circle where the bad sound occurred, identified the student, and provided direct individual feedback.

There are many other advantages to rehearsing in a circular setup. Students, all of which have a clear line of sight to the director teaching at the center of the circle, will be able to receive instruction more effectively. Students are also able to see their peers on the opposite side of the circle. As such, their peers act as visual reminders of the instructions and as excellent peer motivators of performance quality.

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To met, or not to met, that is the question

It is important to have rehearsals that place students in realistic performance settings. As such, a metronome should be used in rehearsals only as an appropriate reminder of how it feels to move and play at a specific tempo. We stress to the students continually to be mindful of their pulse responsibilities, whether they should listen to a specific pulse behind them (usually the battery percussion), or watch the drum major to acquire and maintain tempo.

Teaching students to play with an audible pulse is relatively simple in comparison with the alternative. Be sure that when rehearsing, the metronome is placed behind the performers, and the volume is at an appropriate level so that the students do not feel they need to compete with it. Teaching students to perform using a visual tempo source can become significantly more challenging, as it requires a higher level of focus from each individual. Teach your students first to place their feet in time with the conductor's hands. Then have the students play with the pulse that they have established in their feet.

Begin working on this concept by playing fundamental exercises without a metronome, continually stressing to students to “put their feet with the hands, and play with their feet.” Encourage students to understand how what they are doing visually lines up with what they are doing musically. For example, do they begin a phrase on their left or right foot? Do they release a long tone on their left or right foot?

Additionally, consider identifying the moments in your production where students must perform using a visual tempo source and practice those moments “on the hands,” without a metronome. Students will initially have a difficult time performing with a visual tempo

source only. With plenty of repetitions, and armed with the strategy of “feet with the hands, play with the feet”, your students will be able to achieve this skill set.

Using your fundamentals time to clean your marching show

Rehearsal time allotted for fundamentals can also be used to clean your marching show. Many directors rehearse traditional visual and music fundamentals, hoping that the students will apply them to their marching show. Instead, let the needs of your show help you create additional exercises for your band that are more directly applicable.

For example, if you have choreography in your show, give your students extra repetitions by incorporating the movements into your music fundamentals. Using unison movement allows the director additional opportunities to clean ensemble

movement. If you have several choreographed moments in your show, allow your students to choose the movements to perform during their fundamentals. The director will not be able to visually clean during this time, but students will have the opportunity to become more comfortable dancing and playing at the same time.

Musically, create fundamental exercises that directly apply to your marching show. For example, while working on air use excerpts from your marching show as exercises. Your marching show likely has a few major impact moments where effect is generated through the volume of the ensemble. Use these moments to allow your students to work on moving a lot of air, addressing embouchure, air speed, air quantity, and tone quality in the process. When choosing tempos for fundamentals, use tempos that occur in your show. For example, if you have faster tempos in your show, then



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give your students plenty of opportunities to perform exercises at those tempos. If your show uses time signatures other than 4/4 or 2/4, create exercises that give your students the opportunity to move and play in 3/4, 6/8, etc. Additionally, you can create articulation exercises based on reoccurring show rhythms. Working on these rhythms on a concert F or other notes will allow you an additional opportunity to address fundamental articulation skills while cleaning your show. At the end of each exercise, perform the applicable excerpt so that your students may easily apply the fundamental skill.

Setting your students up for a successful performance

When weekly rehearsals are over, it's time for our students to apply their hard work and have a great performance! Teenage students are generally uncomfortable performing in front of large audiences. It's our job as directors to do what we can to make them feel confident and comfortable before they set foot on the field.

The first step to a successful performance warm up is to have a plan. Create a written, minute-by-minute plan listing everything you want your students to do during your warm up time. Be conservative with how much you want to accomplish during your warm up. The students should not feel rushed or tired and, as such, it's better to have a little extra time instead of not enough. Use any extra time to talk your students through the show and build their confidence. As you are planning your warm up, choose exercises that your students will achieve at a high level the first time. The students must feel confident as they prepare to take the field.

A performance warm up is not the time to teach a new exercise, as it will only create confusion and insecurity for the students. Do not choose exercises that may need to be repeated as a result of poor performance.

Stress the importance of "one and done" with your students to help them understand they will only have one opportunity to have a great performance. Remember, a performance warm up is not the time to clean your show. It will only add to your students' nervousness.

Additionally, the ability to communicate clearly and effectively with your students during your warm up is an integral part of helping your students feel confident and comfortable before a performance. At football games, you have several distractions including noise from the announcer, the fans, and the other band. During a contest warm up, there are usually several bands warming up in close proximity. For most contests, you cannot use wireless amplification to communicate with your students.

With all of these hindrances it is a difficult task to communicate clearly with your students. There are two important steps you can take to overcome these distractions. First, create hand signs for your fundamental exercises. Using hand signs for your exercises will allow your students to see what you want them to play while also forcing your students focus on the task at hand. Second, practice your show warm up plan exactly as it will be at your performance. By practicing the show warm up process it will be easier for students to anticipate each exercise and, as a result, have more confidence.

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In Conclusion

As directors we are charged with the responsibility of prioritizing what we do with our ensembles to ensure successful performances. All of the procedures and suggestions presented are currently in daily use by the authors and with positive results. The driving concept is to make everything we do in rehearsal relevant and immediately applicable so that students can connect the fundamentals to the actual content.

Bob Chreste is currently an associate band director at Cedar Park High School in Cedar Park, TX. His duties included being the primary director of the Symphonic Band and the Timberwolf Marching Band. Under his direction, the marching band has won numerous BOA Regional class championships, been a finalist at the 2010 BOA Grand National Championships and was named the 2011 UIL 4A State Marching Band Champion. Before coming to Cedar Park, Bob began his teaching career as an associate band director at Berkner High School in Richardson, TX. Bob is also in his ninth year on the brass faculty for the Carolina Crown Drum & Bugle Corps based in Fort Mill, SC. Bob is also an active drill writer and marching band arranger in Texas with his own small business, BC Band Solutions. Bob Chreste has an accomplished performing background as well. In 2001 and 2002, he was the conductor and a

performer in the Tony and Emmy Award winning musical production, Blast! Prior to that, Bob marched with the Cadets of Bergen County Drum & Bugle Corps from 1996 through 1998. His educational background includes receiving his Bachelor of Music Education degree from the University of Houston in 2000 and his Master of Music degree in Conducting from Sam Houston State University in 2003. While at Sam Houston State University, Bob was a graduate teaching assistant under the direction of Matthew McInturf. Bob's professional affiliations include the TMEA, TBA and Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia.

Evan VanDoren began as Assistant Director of Bands at Cedar Park High School in 2009. He received his Bachelor Degree in Music Education after graduating with honors from Butler University in Indianapolis, Indiana in 2009. While at Butler, Mr. VanDoren was selected to the Dean's List, selected as the Jordan College of Fine Art's Outstanding Future Music Educator, and selected as one of Butler's Top 100 Students. While he attended Butler, Mr. VanDoren had the privilege of working with the state and national champion Avon High School Marching Black and Gold. Mr. VanDoren "aged-out" of the Carolina Crown Drum and Bugle Corps in 2008, with eight years of DCI marching experience, including two years as Crown's head drum major. He was honored with the Jim Jones Leadership Award in 2007. In 2009 and 2010, he joined the brass instructional faculty at the Carolina Crown, during which time the corps won its first Jim Ott Award for Outstanding Brass Performance. Mr. VanDoren is currently a member of the Madison Scouts Brass Faculty. Since he begun his involvement at Cedar Park, the marching band has earned a top ten finish at the Bands of America Grand National Championships and the 2011 UIL 4A Marching Band Championship. He is responsible for the Jazz Ensemble and the Concert Band, both of which consistently receive superior ratings. Professional associations include Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia, TMEA and TBA.