



**Texas Bandmasters Association
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**Achieving Success with the Beginner
Guard Program**

**CLINICIAN:
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Demonstration Group: Vista Ridge Guard

Achieving Success with the Beginner Guard Program

Vista Ridge High School Color Guard
Erin Kosman – Director
2019 Texas Band Masters Association Convention
Friday, July 26th, Exhibit Hall 4B: 1:00 PM - 2:00 PM

Overview

As our activity develops, marching band performances are trending toward more elaborate productions. The demands these shows put on color guard students are extensive! Typically, the guard is the section most heavily tasked with bringing the show concept or theme to life. This realization can be daunting when the color guard is an inexperienced group. Fortunately, you can still have a cohesive and dynamic production and a strong beginner color guard with a carefully created culture, design plan, recruitment strategy, and training program. I will be discussing each of those key elements to success and subsequently, my students will demonstrate exercises that we utilize to develop and maintain our skills as part of our technique program.

Culture

New guard students will come to you with very little prior knowledge of the activity. You have the unique opportunity to open their eyes to all of color guard's fantastic aspects and grow their love for spinning. Just like in any classroom setting, is vital to setup the best environment possible. This way your students will want to come back day after day and pour their hearts into performing.

- **Establish Non-negotiables** – These are the principles that your program depends on. Always refer to them so that members know and understand exactly what they must do in order to be a member of good standing in your program. Ours are respect and passion.
 - **Respect** – exhibit respect for yourself, teammates, instructors, program, equipment, uniform, volunteers, and school.
 - **Passion** – show passion for the activity and your team. This requirement translates to members being present, on time, prepared, engaged, communicating properly, and giving their best on a daily basis.
- **Build Positive Relationships** – Teenagers want to know that they are cared about and have a safe place to belong. If you create a positive environment for them, their performance aspects will flourish. It will also be essential for the director to build positive relationships with program stakeholders such as parents, boosters, admin, and fellow staff members.
 - **Inclusivity** – Frequently, students who gravitate towards color guard have not found another organization to join. Make sure they know that they are accepted for who they are and that they won't face discrimination or bullying for any reason. It is your job to express this often and address any situation that might arise.
 - **Support** – Without crossing boundaries, let students know that they have your support on and off the field. They should feel comfortable coming to you when they need help or advice.
 - **Comaraderie** – Many friendships on your team will happen naturally, but others will need cultivation. Make sure to promote positive interactions when possible, so that all members

feel valued. One example is through student mentorship of younger members and providing opportunities for group recreational activities.

- **Professionalism** – Practice what you preach. Let your students see you interact with fellow instructors, directors, and program stakeholders in a positive and respectful manner always. Encourage them to do the same on and off the field.
- **Inspire Passion** – Students will join your group for a variety of reasons. Once you get them in the door, make sure to nourish their love of the activity!
 - **Set the Example** - Teach with enthusiasm, energy, and excitement! Students give back to you what you give them.
 - **Showcase the Best** – Introduce the students to the best performers in the activity through videos, experience camps, and live performances. Showcase the history and evolution of the activity for them. Encourage the students to emulate what impresses them. Select talented clinicians, teachers, and choreographers to come and guest instruct your team.
 - **Form Team Rituals** – Discuss and decide how the team will approach rehearsals, parades, football games, and shows so they know what to expect in each situation. Create fun ways to bond through special team sayings, hypes, games, and good luck traditions.
 - **Develop a Performer** – Nurture your students’ love for performing. Give them the skills and confidence they need to excel in front of audiences. Do not wait until performances to discuss how to emote and engage the audience - do it from day one. Provide as many opportunities for students to showcase their skills as possible.
- **Create a Growth Mindset** – You want your students to be constantly improving and growing their skills. Set them up for success by teaching them that learning and achieving occurs over time and should never stop.
 - **Set Achievable Goals** - Set your intentions about where you want the program to be in the future. Determine what is reasonable for them to achieve by the end of the season as well as pivotal points along the way. Discuss your vision with the members often.
 - **Make Feedback Constructive** – Make sure corrections always include solutions for the student to fix problems and grow their abilities. Teach students how to accept information and use it in a positive way.
 - **Value Working Hard**- It is vital for students to understand that they won’t be able to do everything correctly the first time. Teach them it is okay to struggle and how to practice new skills. Reward them for their efforts.
- **Develop a Leadership Team** – Crafting excellent student leadership is a crucial topic. Entire seminars and clinics cover just this alone.
 - **Don’t Rush Things** – It is okay to not appoint leaders your first year. Give the students time to learn what your expectations and visions are for the program are before expecting them to carry them out.
 - **Select Quality Candidates** – Eventually you will have quality veterans to showcase your program’s standards and help lead the group. Be diligent about who you select and the roles you ask them to perform. Poor leadership can impede the program’s development. Great leadership on the other hand will accelerate your path to success.

Design

It is essential that you make strategic choices that will allow for the most success for a beginner group. Here are tips for various aspects of color guard design.

Choreography

- *You want the students (not the choreographer) to shine. Make sure that what is written is achievable by the end of the season. Challenging your students is important, but the work must be relative to what is realistically possible for the group. You do not want to spend the end of the season adjusting massive selections instead of perfecting the show.*
- *Use simple design concepts to create interest and complexity within the show. Layer the same choreography front to back for counter motion. Use an A and B part during a feature to showcase more skills and add depth to the phrase. Draw the eye to certain parts of the field by using a ripple. Canons (contagions), partner work, and add-ins are other simple and effective choreographic tools.*
- *Expand on the variety of skills over time. Keep it simple and achievable the first season. Utilize a handful of skills in the writing - display mastery before adding range and variety.*
- *In subsequent seasons, explore more spatial planes, work in and out of the ground, add more lower body effort, manipulate around the body and with different mechanics, and explore a wider range of tosses.*
- *Make sure that musicality is always a top priority when choreographing. The guard needs to be the visual representation of what is being heard by the audience. Achievement will not matter if what they are asked to do does not relate to the music.*

Equipment

- *Keep the equipment focus narrower in the beginning. Concentrate on building skills and developing the foundation for strong proficiency on flag before expanding to props, rifles, and sabres. Flags will give you the most color, effect, and impact possible out of the various pieces of equipment. Thus, you will want to invest your time here first.*
- *Swing flag is the easiest piece of equipment to feature in your show. It requires the least amount of training to do reasonably well. The swing flag helps beginner students to develop wrist dexterity, lower body coordination, and planal awareness.*
- *As your color guard's skills increase, do not feel the need to shy away from utilizing swing flags. Some of the most beautiful moments on the field are created with them and they are a fantastic choice for maximum color and the visual impacts on the field.*
- *Focusing on flag first does not mean you cannot introduce weapon skills and training early on, but you do not want to incorporate them into the show until the performers can reasonably achieve choreographic demands. Each piece of equipment that you select for the show should enhance, rather than distract from the overall product.*
- *When it comes to deciding when to begin weapon training, consider the availability of rehearsal time. Pulling your students in too many directions could take away from the overall success. Off-season practices most likely will be the best time to begin rifle and sabre training.*

- *Creating and spinning unique props is one way to enhance the show concept, but not necessarily over-challenge the performers. They can manipulate these non-traditional pieces of equipment similar to rifles and sabres but in a more achievable manner.*

Uniforms and Flags

- *Uniforms must be designed and selected to flatter each body type. They should make your performers feel like superstars. Students will not want to belong to a group in which they must wear something that is ill-fitting for their age and figure. Also, take into consideration your ensemble's image will affect recruitment as well.*
- *Skirts on a uniform are a great way to increase the presence your group has on the field. They make the guard look larger in number than they really are and add to the overall color out there. Another benefit of the skirt is that it hides inexperienced lower bodies.*
- *Contemporary color guards at the top of the activity have a uniform unique to each show design. The fabrics, colors, and silhouette are carefully selected to match the concept and aesthetic of the show. New programs will often need to educate stakeholders about this idea. Make sure to have those discussions early on so that no surprises arise.*
- *Utilizing a uniform more than once is possible if you go with a versatile design. Designing an indoor production around the fall uniform or passing them down to a JV/middle school program are ways to get more than a season's use out of your investment.*
- *Just like uniforms, flags are typically designed to fit each show concept. Advancements in digital printing technology have made possibilities endless. Flags can be digital, sewn, or hybrid on a variety of fabrics, and in a wide range of shapes and sizes.*
- *Judging panels will not deduct points for uniforms and flags, however well-designed aesthetics will enhance the overall effect of your show and drive the concepts home.*

Within the Overall Show

- *Consider what the role of the guard is going to be and how they relate to the show theme. Are they telling a story, portraying a specific character, embodying an emotion/idea, or are they simply providing color to music? Make sure that the expectations of the guard in relation to the overall show is achievable with a beginner group. Some complex concepts are best left for later down the road.*
- *Communicate with the drill writer and the program coordinator so they know the ability of your color guard. Make sure they keep that in mind when deciding how to stage and feature the guard. Simple drill with holds will be more achievable for a young group while creating more choreographic opportunities, as discussed earlier.*
- *When possible, feature your more advanced performers with solos or small groups.*
- *Make sure to plan color guard transitions in and out of moments, but especially for equipment changes. Draw the focus away from the transition whenever possible or make sure the transition is a moment or effect in and of itself.*
- *Always go back to the music when deciding what the guard will do in any given moment. Make sure to match the feeling, instrumentation, accents, and style of what you hear.*

Recruitment

Effective recruiting will be essential to increasing membership. Students want to belong to groups that have a wide following and respect of their peers. Very few will jump at the chance to join a small group - for young people the goal is fitting in, not being singled out. The more visual your group is around the campus the more interest you will get. Make sure to focus recruitment efforts on the youngest students possible so you have them for the most seasons.

- **Participate in EVERYTHING!!!**

- Pep Rally's
- Homecoming Parades and Events
- 8th Grade Nights
- **Methods for Recruiting**
 - Flyers
 - Announcements
 - Instagram Posts
 - Gym Classes
 - Dance Classes
 - Open Training sessions
- Club & Activity Fairs
- Band Concerts
- Dance Showcases
- 8th grade specific auditions
- Speak during lunches
- Mail post cards
- Teacher recommendations
- Performances
- Promise ice cream

Training and Fundamentals

The foundation for any successful color guard is a great training program. Make sure to invest a large amount of time establishing proper equipment and movement fundamentals. Explain the why and the how to your students for each exercise you do and build from the ground up. Focus on one isolated skill at a time, detailing how the musculature of the body and physics work together to achieve it. Revisit these concepts frequently throughout the season to ensure growth and mastery. As the students progress, add complexity and rigor to the training fundamentals.

Dance Training:

- Everything the guard does stems from moving the body. Dance is the most important aspect of your training program. Quality dance training translates to strong and capable spinners. If students lack an understanding of how their body moves through time and space, it will severely limit how well they spin and perform.

Movement Exercises

- **Warmup(s)**– Gets the body moving, blood flowing, prepares muscles for stretching, begins to detail how to approach specific movements as a group
- **Floor work** – Allows students to isolate skills on the ground without the added challenge of gravity. Develops long leg lines and learn how to move all four quadrants of the body.
- **Upper body** – The arms and hands are responsible for manipulating equipment and expressive qualities within dance phrases. Focus on placement, energy, and carriage of the arms along with great upper body alignment and projection.
- **Lower Body** – Gets the team from point A to point B in the drill, so the approach must all be the same for visual clarity. Strong toe point, feet flexibility, and understanding of the lower body allows students to build on vocabulary over time.

- **Across the Floors** – Works skills while traveling, provides opportunity for isolation, repetitions, and adjustments, facilitates feedback in small groups, allows for building of complexity over time.
- **Combination** – Combines a variety of skills, challenges students with longer phrases of choreography, incorporates expressive qualities, and builds comprehension of style and nuance.
- **Improvisation** – Used as a higher-level exercise that opens the door for student ownership of character and performance as well as choreography. Develops their connection and interpretation of movement and music.

Equipment Training:

It is important to successfully prepare your students for the choreography you will ask them to perform within the context of the show. Basic exercises on flag, rifle, and sabre will develop and train students on the skills, muscle control, and techniques they need to support spinning phrases of equipment work.

Flag Basics

- **Drop spins** – focuses on timing and wrist manipulation, simple achievable skill to build from
- **Pull hits** – preparation for tossing, trains to initiate and terminate motion of the flag
- **Cones** – teaches carving through space in a circular motion above and below the waist
- **Slams** – works articulations and common flag positioning relative to the body
- **Tosses** – need to be an incorporated part of the basic’s routine. Be sure to break down the muscular mechanics behind vertical tosses from a variety of hand positions on the pole. Increase rotations over time and explore non-vertical tosses as the students progress.

Rifle and Sabre Basics

- **Spins** – focuses on timing and wrist manipulation
- **Spins and Stops** – preparation for tossing, trains to initiate and terminate motion
- **Flourishes** – develops the dexterity of the wrist
- **Tosses** – need to be an incorporated part of the basic’s routine. Be sure to break down the muscular mechanics behind vertical tosses and approach to solid catches. Increase rotations over time and explore non-vertical tosses as the students progress.

A Note on Training

Establishing a winter guard will accelerate the growth and achievement of the group significantly and provide you with the most time to focus on dance and equipment training and skills. Similar growth may be possible through winter training sessions, but typically students have a higher level of investment when they are competing and performing. Establishing a JV or a middle school program will advance your group even more.

Some Must have Apps for Guard Directors

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| – Remind 101 or Band App | – Competition Suite |
| – Group Me | – File Manager |
| – Apple Music or Spotify | – Darksky & My Radar |
| – UDB | – Private Facebook Group for Videos |
| – Metronome | – Rehorse, Dancemaster, or Step In Time |
| – Google Classroom | – Instagram |
| – Dropbox | |

Email me at erin.kosman@leanderisd.org if you have any questions or there is any way I can help your beginner team down its path to success!