The bus pulled into the lot at Merrillville High School, the first recognizable landmark I had seen all summer. This was the home show for three other members of my section as well, Dan Heath, Matt Schneider, and Robert Fitzsimmons. We watched the skies anxiously, hoping for no interruptions. I screamed out the bus hype with a new energy. This performance was personal.

We stood in twos outside the bus. I had to pee. I had gone before leaving the school, but I had been doing lots of hydrating. I was going to need a bathroom during warmup. There was no way I'd get through the show in my current state. Dan came down the line for inspections. I turned, showing both sides of my face before he lifted my chin, touching just below my Adam's apple.

"Shave your chest. You have hair coming out the top of your compression gear." I nodded, acknowledging his command. He still terrified me. Christina arrived, distributing our limp, cream-colored rain plumes. No sooner had I secured mine onto my shako that we were ordered back onto the bus. The wind was gusting violently, pushing the swirling charcoal-colored accumulations in the sky ever closer. Minutes later, a mix of rain and hail came beating down, obscuring the view just beyond the window. The Glassmen's contras were stacked outside their buses, getting pelted by the hail. In the distance, just visible across the lot, the Pioneer flag waved proudly in the wind.

We waited. The storm would soon pass, and we would perform with a delay. I worried about direction changes on the slippery turf, especially The Trail of Tears. A strong pang of discomfort in my lower abdomen reminded me that I still needed to pee. I had heard stories of members filling empty Gatorade bottles, but there was no
I could fit this in just one bottle, and once you start, you can’t just stop the flow. I opted to hold on for dear life, wait out the storm, and go as soon as we left the bus.

The waiting never ended. An hour went by, but the rain continued to fall. The official call to cancel the show had not been made, so we remained on the buses in uniform, ready at a moment’s notice. Glancing out the window, it was painfully obvious that we weren’t going anywhere any time soon. Obvious due to rain that fell, painful due to the intense need to empty my bladder. I sat, hoping to avoid an embarrassing and messy situation that might ruin my uniform and my bus seat simultaneously.

One hour approached two. The rain had stopped, but regular bursts of lightning kept us from safely resuming our show routine. I wondered what I had done to deserve this punishment. I was already upset that my home show was getting rained out, but the not being able to pee part made me hate my life.

“The show’s been called. Get out of your uniforms.” The words coming out of Mark’s mouth had never sounded so perfect. I changed faster than I ever had, throwing my uniform on the hanger. I quickly put on shorts, running to the front of the bus so I could rid my body of its liquid burden. As I stepped off, I was face to face with everyone who had come to watch me perform. Their faces lit up, excited to finally see me in person. I looked at them painfully. It had been six weeks since I had seen my family, but I didn’t care. I sprinted into the school.

Returning, I embraced each in a strong hug. Many of them commented on the physical changes I had noticed earlier that morning. I beamed when I saw Mr.
Earnest with his gears around his neck, but wearing a Blue Stars shirt. I commented on the contradiction.

“Nobody that was involved with the corps when I marched is there anymore. I have no connections to The Cavaliers. It was just the corps I marched. I’m a Blue Star now!” I apologized for the cancellation. Neither Colin nor Tim had seen a live drum corps show. This was their first exposure, and they had only been able to see the Racine Scouts before the storm washed away my chance to perform for them.

We left Merrillville on I-65, heading south for Muncie. “Home show” number two was tomorrow. I’d perform for my Ball State colleagues. My parents were driving down with my grandparents to watch as well. Hopefully this time they’d have something to see. The rain continued off and on for first part of our trip. I spotted a mass of red dots littering the horizon, blinking together. Windmills. I lived just twenty minutes from where we now drove. A pang of homesickness crept into my heart as mile after mile of familiar landscapes came into view then passed into the darkness behind us.

“Everybody, grab your stuff and get inside. Help the pit on your way. Move fast. Go!” Frank addressed us from the press box at Muncie Southside High School. It had been another miserably hot day, and for the last fifteen minutes, those of us on the field had watched as a dense mass of storm clouds crept into view behind the staff. There was a fire in Frank’s eyes as he led our rehearsal. Nobody wanted to be the one to interrupt his energy and point out the impending danger. A gust of wind caught his attention and, noticing the approaching storm, prompted our dismissal.
Muncie was going to get rained out. Currently, my family was somewhere in their three-hour drive to Ball State for nothing. The weather refused to cooperate. I just wanted one show where those I cared about could see me live my dream. Our rehearsal moved to the gym, and Frank fired up once more. It was obvious he was passionate about this activity. When he spoke to the hornline, it was as though his very existence depended on his ability as an educator to help us grow. Frank discussed concepts I had never focused on – free buzzing, how to release notes with a breath, and how to blend as a section. With him in front, I felt like we were in good hands.

The rain stopped, and the show was only delayed by an hour. Wheeling my luggage to the bus, I stepped outside into the storm’s aftermath. To the east, the dark wall of clouds pressed on. Above me was a clear blue sky, just starting to turn colors as the sun neared its setting stage. The air was almost chilly. I imagined how comfortable I would be in the full uniform in a few hours as the sun and temperature both continued to drop.

Staring out the window of the bus, Scheumann Stadium came into view. I felt a bizarre sense of misplacement. I was back at Ball State, my school, but I was arriving on a charter bus. My saxophone was nowhere to be found, the star on my chest much different than the heavy wool uniform I wore for football games. Groups of spectators watched our bus as it turned into the lot. I stared at them. One year ago, that was me.

"Stop looking at my bus!" Nacho was now leaning into my seat, shouting at the oblivious bystanders. "Don’t look at my... you can look at my bus!"
We walked in twos to our warmup, each step bringing me closer to my family in the stands. Before I knew it, I was staring at the home stands from behind the Side 1 end zone. Russ hyped us for the show. I pulled my shako over my eyes and stepped onto my home field.

"...The Blue Stars!" Scheumann Stadium exploded with noise. Home to the Music For All Summer Symposium, the stands were packed with hundreds of energetic high school students who loved music, and they loved us. We had performed so many smaller venues, I had forgotten what a crowd response felt like. The air was electric as we took the field. I knew this stadium well from my Saturdays with the Pride of Mid-America. The turf felt natural under my feet.

"Have a great show, Blue Stars." Mark took the podium. I stepped off my dot, scanning the audience before turning to watch Zack on the back sideline for the start of the show. Somewhere in the sea of faces were my parents, grandparents, and classmates. This performance was for them.

The Summer Symposium kids gave it up for every impact. Each hit boosted my adrenaline. I thought of my family in the stands. As they watched me sprint around the field playing Dvorak, I hoped they finally understood why I refused to take no for an answer when I first wanted to audition. I couldn’t be happier. I moved through the show, fueled by the crowd response and the love of performing.

"...from La Crosse, Wisconsin, The Blue Stars!" I had no idea how the show ended. Leaving the field, I was searching my mind for memories of the show.

_Weren’t we just finishing Part 1? I remember the transition into Part 2, but then... Did we play the ballad? We must have, or I couldn’t have ended up here._ I had experienced
my first autopilot show. My brain and body were working together in perfect unison. My thoughts each second related to musical and visual demands I needed to execute. Once that task was accomplished, the commands disappeared from my memory to make room for the information needed to get to the next set while playing the right music. The end result is like waking up from a dream. You feel the experience and its effects, but you have no idea what actually happened. The only things that stick out are mistakes. I left the field for the first time with a show I couldn’t remember. It was a great day to do it.

I returned to the stadium in sandals, swim trunks, and a t-shirt. With age, my grandparents had lost the ability to walk distances, so I came to them. I spotted my grandfather. A tall man, he was stooped with age, but moved in short, quick steps towards me. Always working outside, his skin had been tanned to a dark mahogany, a sharp contrast to the wide, white grin that he now wore.

“Well, there,” he chuckled. I couldn’t remember the last time I had seen him so lively. He wrapped me in a tight embrace, patting me firmly on the back. Trapped in his loving hold, I saw my grandma as she wheeled herself closer. I knelt to hug her, receiving a kiss as well. She, too, wore a proud grin. My grandparents knew little about music and even less about the marching arts, but they knew that their grandson had just accomplished something challenging. I noticed that my grandpa was wearing a Blue Stars hat, and he made a point to show it off, happy to be supporting me in the process.

There are many days on tour when you just want to quit – to leave the discomfort and the demands behind and go home where you can sleep in every day
on a real bed, eat junk food, and not get yelled at all day. It’s only a matter of time before each person finds his or her breaking point physically, mentally, or emotionally. Some are unfortunate to find all three at once. There are days when you forget why you signed up for this in the first place.

There are also days when you have a great show in your home stadium and see the pride and joy in your family’s eyes – you feel it in their embrace. Those are the days that make the same old routine worth something.
Chapter 6: Minneapolis

We finally arrived in Metamora. I had heard stories all season about this place near the heart of Illinois. In 2011, over half the show changed at this very location. Over 100 sets of drill were rewritten and repped into muscle memory. For the next three days, we would be doing much of the same – changing our ending, learning new drill, reworking music, and enhancing the show with choreography. There had also been stories about the water, and as I filled my jug before rehearsal, they appeared to be true. After just a few inches, I could no longer see into my jug. Instead, the container filled with a pale green liquid. It was sour to the taste and hot on my tongue, but water meant survival, and Metamora was showing no signs of giving us a break from the mid-July heat.

The legend of Metamora compared the grass in the stadium to Onalaska. In an attempt to preserve the stadium for the show in a few days, we stacked along the sideline of a dying grass field outside the school. Mostly dirt and rocks, it provided no cushion as we added our choreography to the show. We added a kneel to a new Part 5 ending. Dangel, Nate, and I were no longer forced to be bumper cars, but it came at a price. A drum break bumped the tempo up to 212 bpm, the fastest we had been forced to march since Ryan maxed out the Dr. Beat in Sparta, only this time it was required. Rep after rep we knelt, knees digging into the dirt, rocks and other debris penetrating our skin. Any pleas against repetition were struck down, and many knees were soon oozing blood as dirt began to infiltrate the wounds.

Our drill revisions were far fewer than ReBourne, ending up with just twenty or so new sets. There was still a lot to clean in the existing drill. We didn’t have time
to learn much more. The intensity of rehearsal had taken its toll on several members. Each section had one or two people on the sideline at any given time. Alan had been struggling with an Achilles injury since Forest City. It had never fully healed, and he was in and out of pain each rehearsal. Today was a bad day, and he sat on the sideline, stretching his leg. Others chatted, feeling ill or dealing with their own injuries. The box had had enough. As we set up for a run, Dave grabbed the microphone.

"Hold up. Why are there so many people on the sideline? Are you hurt? If you’re hurt, you need to go home. If not, you need to get in there and get better like everybody else. Everybody sitting out right now, you’re the ones holding us back. You’re the reason we’re stuck in the middle of the pack. If you plan on keeping your spot, get in the drill right now. If you sit out, we’ll have a little talk with Russ and see about getting you a ride home." The sideline emptied. Taking his spot in the drill, Alan’s face was bright red, but not from the sun. He was cursing under his breath. It was true – a lot of people were sitting out for dumb reasons, but there were just as many people with real injuries fighting to stay in at all costs. After the run, Alan walked with a severe limp, the damage resulting from the run outweighing the benefits of having him in. I felt bad. I could only vaguely imagine what he was going through, and there was nothing I could do to help.

Day one of rehearsal ended, and I discovered that I had left my toiletries in Kalamazoo. I could go three days borrowing soap to shower, but I couldn’t go three days without brushing my teeth. I asked Russ if I could find a gas station to pick up an emergency replacement. After giving me what I hoped was a friendly hard time,
he approved, as long as I did not go alone. Dan agreed to join me, and we started our
journey with no idea of where we were headed, struggling to decipher the map on
my phone. We walked until we saw heavy traffic passing in the distance and
followed the flow of cars. Sure enough, we stumbled upon a gas station, and for the
inflated price of five dollars, I got a travel toothbrush and toothpaste. Not wanting to
waste the trip, I stocked up Oreos.

Dan and I left the gas station and started back for the school. It was not long
before we were enveloped by the dark, empty streets of Metamora. There was just
enough light being cast from the moon and the occasional street lamp to see our way
through the sleeping community. Somewhere in the distance, a campfire burned.
The scent of charred wood hung in the air like the cologne of a passing stranger. My
olfactory memory fired into high gear.

Images flashed before me. Coughing, my eyes burning with smoke. I sat
beside my dad around the fire, its construction a spontaneous decision. He sat with a
beer, opening up about life – his thoughts, ideas, and emotions, the things you could
only get around a summer campfire. I drank my Coke and listened, my head falling
back, gazing up at the stars. Their light traveled millions of miles so that we could lift
our eyes and admire. That light found me walking through Metamora, head back,
gazing up at them. I missed my dad. I was living my dream – marching drum corps,
performing for thousands, but I missed the simplicities of home. I longed to sit next
to my dad as we drove to Lafayette. We usually kept quiet, listening to Car Talk on
NPR. That wouldn't bother me. I just wanted to be there, sitting.
Back at the school, I found my bed in the darkness of the gym and settled in for the night. There was plenty left to change to bring *The Blue World* to life. I would need every second of sleep I could get.

Frank told us his own stories about Metamora. Back while he was still marching Star of Indiana, they were housed in Metamora for rehearsal. Always a popular bunch with the locals, the drum corps community seems to draw an interesting amount of negative attention. Star caught the eye of the football coach, furious that a bunch of flamboyant band kids had stolen his field for practice. In the middle of rehearsal, the coach set up and turned on the field's sprinkler system to force the corps out. Though they had done nothing wrong, Star was seen as the antagonist and had to save face with the community to protect their image. Instead of retaliating, the corps put on a show for the town, marching through the streets, playing *Pines of Rome*.

"That's the thing about this activity," Frank explained. "We had every right to be upset with how we were treated - and we were, but instead of acting out against those who wronged us, we took the high road. We made amends for a crime we didn't commit. That's an important lesson for life in general. At some point in the future, without a doubt, you'll find that you've been wronged. You have two choices. You can either stoop down to the level of your aggressor, or you can display your character. Drum corps taught me what that word is all about. Character. When all is said and done and the season is over, you're going to walk away with some incredible memories and friendships - but how are you going to be different
because of this experience? This is more than notes and dots, remember that. On that subject, though, let’s clean some notes."

Frank focused a lot on free buzzing, something I couldn’t do. My lips moved, and noise was made, but I couldn’t control the pitch of my lips without the mouthpiece. I turned to Jakob Wisdom, another rookie and an euphonium major.

"Does it matter that I can’t free buzz? Like... I can hit the notes and play the music, I just can’t do anything without the mouthpiece."

"You definitely want to try to get better at it. It’ll help your range and flexibility. Otherwise, you’re relying on the instrument too much. It isn’t really you making the choices, the horn is." His answer made sense, but I was getting frustrated. No matter how much progress I made, I was always behind everybody else.

Frank continued to lead our rehearsal, cleaning and adjusting parts in the music. He added an unexpected bVI chord to the closer to catch the audience off guard and peak their interest. I loved it. Each moment in Metamora was painstakingly detailed, but I felt the improvements around me. It was worth the effort.

At the end of the third day, we were allowed in the stadium for one run through. The grass was long, lush, and healthy – a football player’s dream, a marcher’s nightmare. Maybe it was the three days of changes, the crisp night air, or the stadium lights, but I was excited for this run. None of the grass horror stories scared me. The following eleven and a half minutes were far from easy, but there was hype in the air around us. We ended that night a closer drum corps, bound by
our shared experiences in Metamora. It was like a mini spring training in the center of the season, holding us together when times got tough. We were stronger, forged by the fires.

I wanted to quit. Drum corps was hard. I was tired of always being tired. I wanted to go home to a life of sleeping in, air conditioning, and junk food. I wanted to get away from the demands and expectations placed on me at all times. I wanted to exist, not excel. I had made a mistake.

We woke up in Minneapolis to the sounds of roof construction that started two hours before we were scheduled to be awake. I tossed and turned, struggling to get back to sleep amidst the sounds of nail guns and heavy footsteps from above. It was another hot and humid day in the Midwest. The air was thick. The field for the day was an overgrown lot between the stadium we did not have access to and the baseball field currently hosting a game. Every now and then, a foul ball would find its way into our rehearsal space - as if drum corps wasn't dangerous enough. With as many encounters with tall grass as we had had, I still struggled to push through its resistance, and the staff wasn't planning to let up just because today was our first Regional.

Erik pushed us through rep after rep of heartbeat drill. The exercise got its name because our path resembled an EKG. It might as well have given me a heart attack. It required a great deal of energy to achieve the correct path and step size in each of the direction changes, especially at the tempos they were running us at. The grass was the cherry on top of a very miserable sundae. We marched until we ran
out of space. They’d cut the met, reset, bump up the tempo, and send us on our way once more. My ability to get through the exercise soon resembled the December camp visual exercise. My feet barely moved in time. I had all but lost the technique. I no longer worried about the things staff shouted at us during the rep. I just needed to keep moving, and I could hardly manage that. I was thirsty. We hadn’t gotten water. With the humidity in the air, my sweat could do nothing but cling to my body and roll in heavy beads down my face and neck.

We focused on our bookends, the opener and closer. Set by set, we worked through the drill, striving for as much clarity as we could get with such a short rehearsal.

“Heads up!” A ball landed just off the back sideline. Ralph was on foul patrol, ready to warn us of any dangers. It soon became a game for him, enjoying seeing the hornline scramble and duck out of the way of an imaginary threat. As we continued our Part 1 emphasis, I found myself staring off into the distance. In just a few hours, we would compete in our first Regional – the first time we would be measured against every other corps by the same panel of judges. Today was the start of the “real” drum corps season, but I wasn’t sure I really wanted to be there. My thoughts returned to home, to the simplicity of rural living. Motivation was a struggle. On a water break, as I returned to the field, Crissman called out to me from atop his ladder.

“Ekstrom, come here.” My heart stopped. Had he noticed my focus was slipping? I replayed the last few reps in my head, thinking of anything I could have done wrong. He stared down at me from above. “I’ve been watching you over there
for a while." He paused. "You look really good. You're marching well. Keep it up." He smiled. It was one of the few times I had seen him smile. Zack Crissman had complimented me. It was one of the most meaningful comments I had ever received. I forgot my uncertainty and discomfort. I wasn't going anywhere. I was in this for the long haul.

After an abbreviated brass warmup, the hornline joined the full corps for ensemble. Things were moving swiftly, and everybody seemed excited for the first big show of the season. Standing in the shark tooth, the last set of Part 2, we had been idle for quite some time. Guard and percussion staff gave lots of information to their sections, leaving the hornline to wait. In the distance, I could hear The Boston Crusaders rehearsing Pines of Rome. I wondered how close they must be. I had performed the piece at a music camp the summer before, and it brought back many great memories. I joined in the performance, humming.

"Whose show are you more worried about, theirs or ours?" Before I realized Jason had turned to address me, he was facing forward once more, eyes to the box. My face reddened with embarrassment. I looked up to Jason, and he had scolded me for being foolish. He was right. I was giving more attention to BAC than I was my own staff. I needed the discipline to tune out anything that wasn't helping me get better. I wasn't there yet. I remained silent for the rest of the rehearsal.

TCF Bank Stadium was much bigger than I had imagined. Not a fan of college athletics, I knew little about the University of Minnesota. I had seen photos of the stadium when researching our performance venues for the summer, but to see the it
in person was different. This was no Scheumann Stadium. This entire stadium was for college? I struggled to take it all in. For Alex Bauer, another rookie, this was just another day at his college stadium – his Muncie.

The staging area under the stadium was larger than most freestanding buildings. I paced anxiously back and forth in the open space. I never understood how some members could be so relaxed before shows. My brain was computing everything that had happened during rehearsal, keeping my memory engaged so I missed nothing. I didn’t get how some people could be joking around one moment and engaged for the show the next. I wasn’t prepared to flip the switch. I always kept it on.

"Please welcome to the field from La Crosse, Wisconsin – The Blue Stars!" My heart skipped a beat. It was Brandt Crocker. For years, I had heard his voice announce every corps in existence. I could imitate each unique inflection he used for each corps. As a fan, he was as much of the drum corps experience as the corps themselves, and he had just announced our entrance. It was all too real.

"Look for the box, guys," Chris instructed as we marched by. "It’s higher than what we’ve had so far, so be ready." I stole a glance towards the crowd, larger than any we had had so far this season. The press box itself was higher than most of the venues we had been in. It struck me again that all this was for a college. For now, it was all for The Blue Stars. I took my spot and practiced popping to the box a few times before turning from the crowd. The sun beat down from above. We were an early performance. There was no relief from the heat of midday, and long sleeves
did nothing to help. Today's struggle would be the weather, but today's boost would be the Regional hype and the cheers of thousands of happy drum corps fans.

The heat weighed me down the entire show. While my legs got around the field and my fingers played the music in time, I was having a constant battle in my head, forcing my body not to give up. But it's hard. It's what you signed up for. It's hot. And? Can we have a break? This is a show! So? I'm tired. Dammit, you better keep pushing. Ugh.

There's not much that compares to the cheers from a crowd that size. It felt good to know we had done our job, but I was overwhelmed with fatigue, disoriented by the heat. As we left the stadium, I fought to bring my heart rate down. We kept marching, searching for an appropriate spot to circle up for dismissal. All around us, other corps buzzed back and forth in preparation for their own performances. The chaos was a stark contrast to the schedules and precision inside the stadium. It amazed me that the two worlds could exist so close to one another. The routine of the performance is merely a respite from the chaos in the lot.

A proud Blue Star, I no longer held other corps in a higher regard, but I was still a fan of the activity, and I wanted to see what other corps were creating artistically. There were bound to be great musical choices that I wanted to know about as a future educator. I changed, throwing on my corps jacket, and headed back to the stadium.

Someone had once suggested that I buy all my Regional patches as soon as possible in case they ran out. I visited the DCI booth. They had everything I needed. For me, the patches and memorabilia were as important as the performance, serving
as physical reminders of meaningful life experiences. I left the booth with patches for World Class, all the Regionals, and the 40th anniversary pin. I charged it, hoping my parents wouldn’t mind.

I reached the stands just in time for intermission, securing a seat for the top six. I watched their shows, knowing that I worked just as hard as they had. What, then, made them different? Prestige? Show design? Money? I had no idea. All I knew was that I wanted the same recognition they got. People cheer louder for the top six – they look forward to the shows more. Those corps sell the tickets. I felt undervalued by the crowd I now sat in. I had felt the energy of their cheers, but hearing them explode as Carolina Crown took the field, I realized that they had given nothing more than apathy.

When The Blue Devils took the field, the crowd was reserved. Historically, BD has been hated for their success and their recent transition to the abstract. I couldn’t say that I completely disagreed, but this year I hesitated to pass judgment so soon. Isaac Lee was one of the drum majors, and I had recently connected with him. The two of us spoke briefly during a conference call while Jonathan Doerr and I threw around ideas for how to manage a drill writing company he had invited me to join. He and Isaac were partners on another project – The Guardians, a drum corps Jonathan was creating. Isaac and I had kept in touch online since then, and I had followed his posts on tour. I was prepared for the abstract. I kept my mind open. I was in no way prepared for what I witnessed. I sent him a text after the show.

"With all due respect to the corps' performance tonight, what the hell did I just watch? I'm so confused...." My stomach growled. I checked my phone. I still had
time to look for a gas station and make it back to the bus. I hurried out of the stadium. After several minutes of aimless wandering and a quick chat with a police officer for directions, I found my dealer. With the simple swipe of a card, I had my post-show Oreos once more.

On my way back to the bus, I got a reply from Isaac.

"Haha... yeah. We get that a lot this year." A sudden pang from my abdomen reminded me to use the restroom before getting on the bus. I made a break for the stadium. As I climbed the stairs towards the main concourse, waves of people passed in the opposite direction. I felt like a salmon headed to spawn. As I neared my destination, I spotted Mike Halron on his way out. He gave me a smile, thumbs up, and congratulations. He saw the confusion on my face.

"Didn't you hear the scores? You guys are in 11th – above Spirit." I smiled. The Blue Stars were in a Finals spot. All that was left was to climb higher. We were back.
Chapter 7: Texas

The road to San Antonio began in Olathe, Kansas, and it appeared to be lined with ankle-high grass. From the end zone, we watched the Madison Scouts struggle through the jungle on the field. I couldn’t see their shoes, but I could see the horror on their faces – the fight to keep moving through the resistance. My mind brought back memories of Onalaska. I was stronger now, but most of our shows had been turf, and even the grass fields like Mankato had been good to us. This field looked angry, its blades of grass knotted, pulling against the feet attempting to cut through its grip.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the Madison Scouts!” The crowd uttered an apathetic applause as our opponents from Wisconsin left the field, shaken by their recent experience. It was our turn to tackle the menacing sod.

“...from La Crosse, Wisconsin, The Blue Stars!” I may as well have been equipped with a putter; the crowd offered only golf claps. As the show began, I promised myself I would use the technique we had learned. That was the only way to get better – a Box 5 always mentality. Reaching the end of the opener, I popped my horn to the box, belted out my A-flat, and snapped my horn down with a desperate aggression.

I am going to die. For the next ten minutes, survival was my only concern. My lower body was a Cavalier, yet I still struggled to push through the grass’s death grip. Gasping, taxed by the resistance, I struggled to play. This was Onalaska all over again, but now I expected better of myself. There were no excuses this time.
We left the field in an uncomfortable silence. The unspoken energy that normally passed between members was absent, each person standing with their own thoughts. I hated myself for giving up. I hadn’t even tried to fight.

“Standby.” Zack’s statuesque gaze fell on Russ who had entered the gathering. His face scrunched up, thinking. He was silent for quite some time.

“You know, some shows you just don’t need to say anything. You’ll have performances that are spectacular and there are no words to describe them, but I think we can all agree that what happened tonight sucked.” Russ was hardly subtle. “But figure out why it sucked, and tomorrow we get better.” With that, we were left once more to our thoughts. I returned to the bus in silence, disgusted with what I had done in competition.

“I want to tell you guys a story.” Russ addressed the corps the next night as we circled up in Bentonville, Arkansas. “During EPL, some guys were playing basketball in the gym, and I joined in with them. Now it may surprise you to know that I’m not the most athletic individual, but I was really struggling. I missed every shot I took. Finally, I looked at them, and I said, ‘I am going to make this shot,’ and what happened, anybody who was there?”

“You made the basket.”

“You’re damn right I made it!” Russ’ voice shook, his volume rising. The simple story had evolved into a passionate speech with no sign of slowing down. “Last night we missed the shot. We lobbed one up there, and it didn’t hit anything.” His eyes scanned the circle, boring holes in each person his gaze fell upon. “Tell
yourselves right now, 'I am going to make this shot!' Go out there and give everything you have. Be focused. Be controlled. Enjoy being amazing!"

We took the field, my feet gliding across the turf. The press box rose high above Tiger Stadium, its glass façade twinkling under the lights of the stadium.

"Your bells are going to the balcony at the center of the box. You'll see the judges up there. Have a great show, Blue Stars." Chris ushered us onto the field, giving us our focal point. I was ready to throw down.

At the release of the last chord, the crowd was on its feet – one of our first standing ovations of the season. I tried to look serious and intimidating under my shako, but I couldn't help but grin from ear to ear. I felt great about the performance we gave, and the buzzing energy between performers confirmed this.

I heard our score from a gas station parking lot a few blocks from the stadium. On my way to buy my Oreos and milk, I had just arrived when numbers boomed through the clear night air. Score after score, I held my breath, relieved when another corps was announced. We came in second, placing only behind Carolina Crown. We made the shot.

Texas was a miserable state. It was hot, there were giant bugs everywhere, and the food truck ran out of pancakes and waffles for breakfast – perhaps that's part of the reason why Sam Rusch ate a cricket before rehearsal. This was definitely going to be a gallon challenge day. We had two days in Denton, a rehearsal day and a show day. We were reaching the level of clarity where the staff could get pickier with their comments, which meant we stopped more often. The standards were
higher. We got away with less. The intensity was building. I had the sudden realization that the horn was no longer heavy. Without having to focus on the weight, rehearsal started to suck less, but less than a lot still sucks.

I stepped onto the turf for visual. It was like stepping onto a skillet. As per usual, my ankles burned as they absorbed the heat from the turf. I had gotten lazy with my sunscreen at that point. I put on just enough to keep from burning painfully, but I accepted the glowing pink color that was my ginger-skinned “tan.” I was going to sweat it off before we got to basics anyway.

We spent almost the entire block cleaning the new ending to Part 4. The rewrite had a twelve-count block rotation with no defined midsets. The whole transition looked like a blob as the forms condensed and rotated to their new positions. To make the rotation look clean, we needed to force subsets. We ran the segment over and over, count by count, letting the visual staff get a chance to see everything in slow motion, looking for a count to place the subset. The lines weren’t quite vertical on count six, but it was decided that they would need to be. Line by line, the field staff began creating new lines, shaping the rotations and assigning new dots. We would take it back and run the six counts again. Problems were addressed, dots were moved, and we’d do it again. Somebody noticed that the diagonals in each block could be read from the front. Again, there was no clean midset count for these to hit, so we forced a midset on count three. Over two hours went by this way. When all was said and done, I was no longer taking an even path with equal steps to my dot. Going between dots, I waited to hit the cover on count three, took smaller steps so I didn’t overshoot my cover on count six, then opened up the step size to hit the
written dot on count twelve. Our efforts were not in vain. The transition looked
great. We just had to get the other 200 sets to look just as good.

The best part about Texas was that they loved football, and that meant that
each stadium was turf with a box that you had to aim your bell at God to reach. As
the bus pulled into the lot at C.H. Collins Stadium, the outdoor athletic venue for the
Denton ISD, this was obviously true. The home stand's façade rivaled Ball State's
Scheumann Stadium. I never knew high school football could be played on such an
impressive stage. Across the parking lot was the Gonzalez School for Children. The
sign out front cycled through several messages including the date, time, and
temperature. I read it wrong the first time. I thought it said 108 degrees. When it
completed a cycle, I was sickened to see that it was in fact 108 degrees. This is how I
was going to die. Heat exhaustion, sweating to death in a band uniform.

We found some shade under the awning of the school. The staff did
everything they could to keep us in that shade for as long as possible. When we were
finished stretching, we had no choice but to march in the sun. There were a couple
areas left that were still covered with shade, and we positioned ourselves in these
small patches of heaven until it was our time to march. As we wrapped up our visual
warmup, Bluecoats appeared, rounding the corner of the school only to meet the sad
realization that we had the only shade available at the show site.

Ryan returned us to the shade for brass. We abandoned the arc in favor of a
blob that kept us out of the sun. The staff made sure we had plenty of time to
hydrate. I was sweating enough that I didn't need to worry about using the
restroom. The water never had a chance to get to my bladder. Ryan was giving
instructions, but we weren’t focused. He followed our gazes over his shoulder to the Bluecoats rehearsing across the drive.

“Okay, listen up. That’s my corps over there, but you know what? Screw them. We are here to do our job. Let them do their thing. We’re going to do ours. I need your focus. Now!” I did my best to ignore them, but caught myself glancing over throughout the warmup. Just before leaving for the gate, we performed Jewish Chorale. We played our corps song at the Bluecoats. Though we weren’t slotted in the same bracket, we made a statement before collecting our things and leaving. I hoped they had paid attention.

The temperature had cooled off during our warmup. It was only 103 degrees now. As we neared the stands, I understood how large the stadium was. I’m not a fan of cliché’s, but everything really was bigger in Texas. Stepping onto the field, the turf confused me. It wasn’t the usual blades of synthetic grass filled with tire shavings. It was flat with textured bumps that I assumed were supposed to be “grass”. It reminded me of floral foam, only it didn’t disintegrate the moment you touched it. The surface was spongy but supportive. It was hot as hell, but it was going to be a piece of cake for my lower body. Texas knew how to do everything, even turf.

We had one of the best crowd reactions of the season. The performance was electric. Things we focused on during rehearsal showed up in the performance. I found my covers in the Part 4 rotations with ease. At the end of the show, I had enough adrenaline to do the show again, but as we left the field, my body remembered it was running low on water. We arced up outside the stadium, waiting in silence for the drum majors to call us to standby. Sweat dripped from the brim of
my shako. Droplets raced down my neck. I was seeing spots. I did everything I could to control my breathing, hoping to maintain consciousness. It wasn’t unheard of for members to pass out after shows, but I managed to stay on my feet. I glanced towards the school. According to the sign, the temperature had dropped to a cool 101 degrees. Good thing I was wearing my uniform, or I might have gotten cold.

I sat on the curb eating dinner from the food truck. My friend Stephanie Suhr, a mellophone player, joined me.

“How was your show,” she asked.

“It was pretty good, actually. I thought I was going to die it was so hot, but I didn’t really have a bad run. Part 5 is still rough, but it’s getting closer. How was your run?” She lowered her food and looked at me. She said nothing – just stared.

“I haven’t been on the field in two weeks. Myles is marching my spot.” I became incredibly uncomfortable.

“Wait – what happened?”

“My hip. I can’t march anymore. I’ve been running the met. Mello Myles took my spot. He’s been marching it for the last two weeks.” I didn’t know what to say. I hadn’t noticed this change, and I felt terrible. Here was Stephanie, unable to do what she paid and trained to do, and I had reminded her that her season on the field was over. Even when I was trying to be nice I ended up being an asshole. I finished eating and headed back to the stadium to escape the discomfort I had just created. Perhaps watching BD again would give me enough to focus on so I could take my mind off of the news I had received. It did.
I watched the confusingly busy production of *Cabaret Voltaire* for the second time, closer now. I saw young adults like me committed to their performance. There was energy to the show – an investment in every detail’s success from the members, something I had yet to do in my own show. I wasn’t thriving. I was still surviving. I wanted to be like the performers I saw on the field, but as a Blue Star.

We lost fifteen minutes of breakfast for the rest of the season. It was the first of three days at the San Antonio housing site - rehearsal, the Regional, and the San Antonio free day. Mark led our stretch in visual, sharing stories from his previous four years in the corps. Dave Cantoni, an old-school, hard-ass visual tech hated the idea that the corps was losing fifteen minutes of rehearsal to stretch.

“There’s no reason why you can’t wake up, do everything you need to do in the morning, and eat in under 45 minutes.” Ideally he was right, but mornings were one of the few times I felt relaxed in my routine – when I could actually enjoy the time I had. Dave was taking some of that away. His plan would return five hours of visual rehearsal to the remainder of our tour schedule, but it also cost us five hours of already limited freedom. The responses were mixed, but generally negative. Dave didn’t seem to care.

The Texas heat continued to overwhelm. I had to remind myself that these upper 90’s were better than Whitewater, WI when the heat and turf combined to create rehearsal conditions of 114 degrees on the field. At that point, I wasn’t so much sweating as I was leaking water. San Antonio should have felt like a break, but my body didn’t view it that way. It was hot and tired. The field we rehearsed on was
75% dirt, 15% grass, and 10% small rocks. A cloud of dust hung above the field after each rep. I could taste it in my mouth. Grit filled my nostrils. Texas still sucked.

Robert Fitzsimmons was the first to pass out during breathing gym. We had just begun power breathing when a dull thud and concerned looks led my gaze to a collapsed Robbie. As he slowly regained consciousness, he seemed embarrassed. I could understand his concern, but I was also impressed. I had collapsed several times, but I never passed out. I admired his use of air.

"Yeah, Robbie?" The bari/euphs joked with him as he recovered, but we were glad he was okay. Still fighting injuries, we had yet to have a show with no holes. The last thing we needed was another person out.

Brass block deteriorated from there. The bari/euphs were playing a game called "pass the missed release around the section." The only rule was that it couldn't be the same person twice, that way the staff could never fix the problem.

"Guys, stop missing releases." Sean Breast, the vet in charge of the thirds was becoming more irritated. A bari/euph missed almost every release. Telling us to stop missing things wasn't working. I wondered why he didn't go down the line, surveying the section, standing in different spots until he could locate the culprits.

"If I were a section leader," I thought, "that's what I'd do."

The lack of discipline continued. As a result, the section stayed after rehearsal, sustaining pitches with Mark, watching for his cutoff. Even in an environment where we had nothing else to think about but the cutoff, there were hangovers every couple of reps. Tensions rose, causing more errors. The process snowballed. This wasn't even about music anymore. It was about mental stamina.
We were just minutes away from being released for lunch and a laundry block, and some people were already there, making productivity impossible for the rest of us. I walked away from that rehearsal frustrated, knowing that my success was negated by the mistakes of others. I hoped laundry would clear our heads and bring us back to ensemble focused and ready to improve. At the very least, we would come back with a less nauseating odor.

We listened to Richard Saucedo's judge tape on the ride to the laundromat. For twelve minutes, we heard one of the greatest minds in the activity tear apart our performance, calling out mistake after mistake. It was a humbling tape, but few of the members were engaged in listening to it. That was part of our problem.

Twenty minutes into our drive, we merged onto the interstate. Nobody knew where we were going. An hour later, we found ourselves at a laundromat outside San Antonio with less than two hours to finish fifty loads of laundry. To make things more interesting, volunteers from The Academy were already occupying half the building, laundering their uniform shirts. We would not be on time. I shoved all my clothes into a single washer, fed in my quarters, and went exploring for food.

Our bus was the last to arrive at the school. Ensemble had already started. We frantically unloaded our laundry and grabbed our equipment, scrambling to get to rehearsal “on time.” Recognizing that we had missed dinner, Russ set aside time for the brass bus to go eat a small meal before returning for the last block of the day. I was starving, but I felt like the staff expected us to rehearse. I stayed put. As we broke from rewarm, Zack gathered us together. He looked upset. His characteristic
expression of stern cynicism was intensified by something he had been keeping to himself but needed to let out.

"Do you guys know what happens on Saturday for the corps who don't make Finals?" There was silence. "They march in a parade." Zack always terrified me, but in this moment, I wished I had left to eat food. "I didn't pay three thousand dollars to march in a freaking parade. I don't think any of you did, either." He said nothing else. For the first time, I thought about the reality Zack had just proposed. We were sitting in 11th place with just over three weeks left in the season. Nothing was guaranteed. We weren't promised a spot in Finals just for being The Blue Stars. Other corps could get away on their reputation alone. We could not. Zack's words clung to me as I prepped for ensemble, the dust and the setting sun obscuring my view of the field, Mark's hands, and everything I thought I had known to be true.

The Alamodome came into view on the horizon. The bus filled with the chant *home show, dome show*. I had been in domes before, but not with a show like The Blue World. For the last several days, Ryan and the brass staff had reminded us to trust our eyes, not our ears. The reverb in the dome could easily cause an ensemble tear if we let our brains adjust what we played to match what we heard.

Outside the dome, the asphalt baked us as we stretched under the sun, relentlessly beating down from a cloudless sky. My horn was hot to the touch. The water in my jug was warm and uninviting, but I drank it. My success depended on it. The staff patrolled the lot, searching for better real estate that would soon be on the market as corps started their journey toward the Texas landmark looming nearby.
They squeezed us into the shade on the east side of a small building. It was just enough. It was days like today that I remembered they knew we were people. The staff usually frustrated me. They pushed the corps to its limits and further, never letting up. When nobody else wanted to keep going, they were there to force us forward or drag us behind them as they powered towards their goals. Even the smallest blessing, like shade for a show warmup, was a reminder of humanity.

A cold blast of air hit my face. There was a business at the entrance to the dome that reminded me of a beehive. To our left, Spirit was filtering into the tunnel, preparing to take the field. To our right, Glassmen were leaving, their faces flushed, sweat dripping from their shakos. We were suspended, motionless, in the middle. For a few moments, we simply existed. I could relax. The bari/euphs took a photo with Matt Becker, one of our most energetic music techs. He was leaving us. It felt weird to lose a tech. Day after day, the same faces surrounded us, and then suddenly one would disappear to the real world, leaving an uncomfortable void that took far too long to feel normal.

“3...2...1....”

“F...C...Oooooo!” We made our way through the corridors. As we passed the tunnel on the front sideline, I could see Spirit in full performance mode. They seemed oddly distant. Tens of thousands of faces watched them from the stands. The only sound came from the reverb of what had been a large impact. There was a dull roar from the crowd. Whatever sounds were out there weren’t making it through the tunnel. I passed the opening, and they disappeared from sight. My blinders were now on. My race was Blue Stars.
Taking the field was like stepping into a vacuum. A whirlwind of sound filled the vast space overhead, a mix of an anxious crowd, advertisements, and Dan Potter. His words were incomprehensible. I could only tell by his inflection and the rush from the crowd that he had just announced our entrance. It was immediately clear why the brass staff stressed the hands so much coming into this show. I could hardly hear the main PA system used for the massive stadium. There was no way I was going to hear something coming from 40 yards away.

I took off on my jazz run-a-thon. The design team had added props to the field, two of which were in my line of travel. I had to be creative getting to my dots, jazz running through a rock and a buoy before circling around a flat, jumping over guard equipment with Eddie Moore.

*Turn, turn, lock – up, up, lock.* I was stronger now. I push more air. Belting out my F, I hesitated. Nobody else was playing. No, there were definitely other sounds, but why were they so quiet? I brought my dynamic down, trying not to stick out. A frenzy of sounds struck my senses. *Where is the pulse?* My mind went into overdrive. *Find the hands. Hands. Hands. Hands.* Nothing I played matched anything around me. I wasn’t sure if this was the dome, me, or both, but I knew I didn’t like it. The show was a twelve-minute sensory overload. Domes were weird. I hated Texas.

The scores that came in that night weren’t good. We had dropped to 12th, over half a point behind Blue Knights. Just 0.4 behind us was Crossmen. How they could even be near us was beyond me. I felt sick on the drive back to the school. I thought about what Zack had told us the day before. Corps that don’t make Finals march a parade. We were in an uncomfortable spot. I felt like the swimmer on the
cover of *Jaws*. Lurking beneath us was a shark, waiting to strike. We had to swim faster.

"Get up! Wake up! C'mon, let's go!" Mark was flipping mattresses. It was almost ten. I hadn't slept in this late all tour, and for the first time it was allowed. It was Sunday – the San Antonio Free Day. Members competing in I&E had already left. I chose to sleep in with the majority of the corps. Mark wanted us up and out. "The sooner you get up and going, the sooner we can leave. The sooner we leave, the more free time we have. Get up!" I begrudgingly rose, stiff and sore as usual. Today was for fun – we were expected to get our gifts for Christmas in July, but it was also an opportunity for physical and mental recovery.

Rolling down the interstate, The Alamodome once again came into view. I looked down at my sandals, khaki shorts, and t-shirt. It felt strange to be dressed like a real person. I had spent the last nine weeks either shirtless with commando athletic shorts or in compression gear and my snug uniform. This regular comfort was uncomfortable. The bus came to a stop outside Rivercenter Mall. Joseph released us for the day with his favorite chant. *Who dat say they gonna' beat the Blue Stars?*

I joined a group headed to Fuddruckers before seeing *The Dark Knight Rises*. I wasn't sure what else to do. I got along with most of the hornline, but I still didn't have much of a connection with anybody but Dan and Alan. They were not planning to see the movie, making me the thirteenth wheel of another close bunch. I tried to stay out of the way. Once in the theater, I sank into the deep cushions of the chair,
rocking back and forth slowly. In the dim lights, the comfort mixed with my fatigue, and I began to drift. I questioned how I was able to push my body so hard every day and keep going. Newton’s First Law.

In the middle of the movie, Joseph Gordon-Levitt’s character reached out to a boy whose brother was found dead outside a tunnel.

“You know what he was doing down there in the tunnels?”

“A lot of guys been going down the tunnels when they age out.” The theater rang with cheers and laughter. Filled almost entirely by drum corps kids, we had a very real connection to the term “age out.” In just three short weeks, the DCI Class of 2012 would celebrate their final days on the field. Batman was getting a little too real.

I spent too much on my meal at the Lone Star Café. At that point, I figured I might as well stick with the trend. I was nearing forty dollars on the day, and we hadn’t stopped for ice cream or Christmas presents yet. I was charging it all. My parents were going to hate me. We sat overlooking the River Walk. I wasn’t sure why people hyped the river so much. I had grown up on the Iroquois. The River Walk was like putting a sidewalk on the sides of a dirty ditch. As long as we were in Texas, I wasn’t going to be happy. I stuffed my face with country-fried steak before lumbering back to the bus. The ageouts were the last to return after a day of hearty drinking. The life of an ageout seemed much simpler. I tried to imagine what my corps experience would be like in two years – the 2014 DCI summer tour. I couldn’t.

After one final stop at Buc-ee’s, the largest, most Texas truck stop I had ever seen (Does everything have to be so big? What are you guys compensating for?), the
bus set off on a six-hour drive east into the dirty south. First stop: Louisiana. I had heard bad things about this leg of tour, dubbed "Swamp Tour." I closed my eyes, hoping to remain comatose for the rest of the trip. I was sure I could survive the south. Anything had to be better than Texas.
Chapter 8: Swamp Tour

"Welcome to the most miserable place on Earth." I looked out my window, seeing nothing. There was one security light outside the school, and by its faint glow, I could just make out the condensation clinging to the bus. Once suspended helplessly in the air, it now had a place to rest. I stepped out of the frigid bus AC and into the moist night air. It was thick and heavy, trying to weigh me down. Inside the school was no better. There was no AC. The small gym had just enough space for the court. We piled our bags in heaps, trying to conserve precious floor space. I was practically sharing a bed with the guys around me. Looking across the gym, the girls had it just as bad. For the first time all summer, they didn’t have half a gym to sprawl out on. We were literal sardines in a hot, wet can. My sleeping bag was useless. I wanted nothing on me. Fatigue was my only salvation, pulling me back into sleep.

I had not opened my eyes, but I could hear Megan’s voice.

"The fields are all mud, so be careful. Also, there are fire ants and dead frogs all over the place, so it might be a good idea to leave your backpacks in here so they don’t get ruined. Welcome to the south!" This had to be some sick joke. There was no way anybody willingly lived here. I took her advice and left my backpack in the gym, leaving for breakfast. It was far from “sunny” out, a solid layer of clouds covered us, but the sun had only made it more miserable. I was going to drown just trying to breathe. The ground was spongy under my feet, leaving muddy streaks in the grass as I walked. The school refused to let us use their stadium. I didn’t blame them. We would have immediately ruined it. Instead, we got an open field behind the school, bordered with homes. Fenced in one yard, watching us from just beyond
the end zone were three alpacas. Or were they llamas? I had never known the difference. They sat, observing our visual rehearsal.

Basics were a giant game of “avoid standing on an ant hill.” It was impossible. Somebody always ended up in the warning circle drawn by field lining. I felt something crunch beneath my foot. I looked down. Staring up at me with lifeless eyes was a boated, rotten frog. It was Monday. We were stuck down here until we left the Georgia Dome on Saturday. I embraced my fate, accepting that the south had to be miserable – a drum corps rite of passage. The portion of the field used for basics was now sloppy and unusable. Ralph moved on to drill. There were several things to clean at the beginning of Part 4, and we didn’t have much time left before brass. I ran to the sideline to get my dot book from my backpack. My heart stopped. Taking Megan’s advice, I left my backpack inside, but I had failed to take with me the things I would need for rehearsal. The gym was too far to run to before we started. I didn’t want to tell Mike I had messed up. Everybody was in a bad mood already. I carefully approached the scaffolding, staring at Ralph until we made eye contact.

“Yes?”

“Sir, I left my dot book in the gym. Would you like me to go get it? I promise you I have every dot memorized.” I wasn’t lying. I started listing my dots back to him for the first sets of Part 4. He waved me away. I would be fine. Grabbing my horn from the stack, I knew I had dodged a bullet. I felt naked without my dot book, and it felt like everybody was staring at the spot on my hip where it should have been. Nobody said anything. We kept rehearsing.
“Why haven’t you filled your water jug?” It was Dan Smith asking the questions this time. Michael Gold continued to dodge the question. Water was something Dan took seriously. He went through more than anybody, and as he confronted Michael in that moment, he was unnaturally aggressive. “Dude, go fill your water jug. Are you stupid? You need to drink.” Dan’s voice was rising, continuing his assault as he followed Michael onto the field. Mike appeared, shoving Dan aside.

“What the hell, man? What’s your problem? Who’s the leader of this section, huh?” His face was flushed. He demanded an answer.

“You are.” Dan’s eyes were at the ground.

“Exactly, so shut your mouth, and bring any problems to me.” He stormed off, returning to his spot in the drill. I had not yet had a good experience since we arrived in the south. I imagined it watching us, laughing as it got under our skin, tearing us apart from within.

Our time in Louisiana stretched on. After playing so loudly in brass block that we got the group of alpacas to stand up and run away, our ensemble rehearsal was rained out. The extra time was added to EPL, and we’d need it. The men’s locker room was no larger than the standard dorm room. It had two toilets – neither with doors, and the line to the showers cut them off from the sink. It didn’t matter. No water came from the faucet. There were no lights. The shower had four heads. One did nothing, one trickled frigid water down the wall (I got that one), and the other two were tucked away in the corner. In the shadows lurked a blob of unknown origin. Almost otherworldly, we named it “the alien”. I did my best to get clean, but
my white towel turned black as I dried off. I was still covered in dirt. The shower had done nothing. I threw on my shorts and headed to the cook truck. A group of three or four guys were already showering with the hose, smiling as I joined them.

After the show that night, we exchanged Christmas in July gifts. Just before San Antonio, I had drawn Jen Bruijn’s name. In her third year with the corps, Jen had been my drill partner while we learned the opener. She went down with an injury and lost her drill spot, but she had stayed on tour as a conductor. Jen had hearing aids in both ears. Every now and then the staff would give her instructions, and in return, she would stare blankly, the batteries having gone bad.

It was my turn to share. I headed to the front of the bus with the gift I had picked up at CVS after the show while getting my Oreos and milk.

“Okay, I had Jen. Now, we know that you’re always running the met for battery rehearsals. The met is loud. Drums are loud. I’d hate for you to go deaf, so I got you these earplugs.” I grinned. I thought it was clever, or at least a break in the monotony of gifts bought from Spencer’s – the one-stop shop for humor tees and things shaped like penises.

We rolled through the south for the rest of the week, stopping for shows in Mississippi. During ensemble in Ocean Springs, Ryan called our attention to a lone individual at the top of the stands.

“Everybody, say ‘hi’ to Dell.”

“Hi, Dell.” Who the hell was Dell? He shouted back at us.

“You guys sound good, I’ll tell you what.” No, really. Who was this guy? He followed us around the state. After the show in Hattiesburg, he pulled us aside just
outside the stadium. As he spoke, Dan paced anxiously. He had needed to pee since warmup.

"Hoo-eee, that's the best twelve minutes of drum corps I've ever seen. You're communicating. You're expressive. You look good. You sound good. I can't wait to see what you do the next two weeks." Spirit passed by, their show finished. Dell continued to speak. The next corps filtered by our circle. BD, the final show of the evening, was preparing to take the field.

"Well, I want to thank you guys for your time. It's been exciting seeing what you're capable of. You're in good hands. Have a great season." To this day, I still have no idea who Dell was. Dan took off for a porta potty in agony. I inhaled the warm smell of incense as I passed the BD front ensemble, wishing them well. There was no harm in giving them good luck. They were no threat to us.

When we pulled into our Atlanta housing site, I was too tired to inflate my air mattress. I threw down my things, unrolled my sleeping bag, and collapsed onto the floor. The concrete beneath me was oddly soft, comforting my aching body. I woke the next morning sore and stiff, my back giving me spasms of pain. Something had changed during the night. The concrete was no longer soft and supportive. It dug into my hips, pressing against my weight.

We had two rehearsal days to get better. Our results in San Antonio had not been pleasant, and the shows since then were mixed. Atlanta would be our only chance to see how we compared after a week of cleaning. Today was the day the
staff rolled out a series of new changes, mostly musical. We split into subs to review the changes. Brian walked us through the revisions.

“Okay, so. Look at Part 2. You know those runs after your little feature? Yeah, those are gone. You’ll just be playing beats two and four now. Done. Next one. Five bars after letter ‘O.’ Got it? We’ll be adding a measure of 4/4. Rest on beats one and two. On three and four play the note you have the measure before; we’re just making that phrase longer. The judges think that moment is too abrupt, and it doesn’t line up with the visual.” We went through the whole show this way, carefully constructing a more interesting performance.

I had learned to stop forming personal opinions on changes. Russ was a change I once hated and now loved. In Madison, we had turned the beginning of the ballad to face the end zone. I thought it was a stupid idea. The sound it created was ethereal and serene. I didn’t bother trying to evaluate the changes now made. I simply played what I was told.

The other main focus of rehearsal was choreography. Michael Shapiro was in to work with the guard, and he would be working with the hornline on choreography in the ballad as well as at the start of the show for low brass. The number one rule from vets and staff alike was to not ask questions. Michael had a very specific instructional process, and he would likely answer any question during the course of his teaching. Too often, members would remind him that they were holding instruments or wearing shakos – as if he were too ignorant to take that into consideration. It was best to remain silent. After all, this was the mind behind the
greatest Blue Star shows ever put on the field and the innovative guard work each year. If we followed his instructions we would be successful.

When the time came, there was an uneasy silence over the hornline. He addressed the low brass first, guiding us through our new opening poses. I observed his teaching. He was thorough, detailed, and thoughtful. I did my best to copy his gestures. Watching, he would provide assistance when needed, but we had much more to do. His job was to teach, not clean. We moved on.

"No, it’s 1, 2 – AND, 3..."

"I promise you, it’s 1, 2, 3, 4-and, 1." A sudden rainstorm had kept us inside with nowhere to rehearse for much of ensemble. With just over an hour left in ensemble and no lights on the field, the decision was made to rehearse the new ballad body in the parking lot. The problem: nobody could agree which counts the movements were on. Efforts by the visual staff to come to a decision were futile. Somebody was always upset, claiming that it negated what Shapiro had told them. I could hardly do the motions, let alone argue counts. I splashed my foot in an oily puddle, waiting for my reflection to return. It was getting dark. Another heavy storm was on its way. I felt like I might actually be getting worse. I sang halfheartedly through the ballad with accompanying motions, doing my best to stay in time. Being the tip of the form was great, but I was so far from the information, I struggled to keep up. My morale dropped with the sun.

Rain came down hard that evening. Flashes of lighting lit up the sky like a strobe. It had been a while since I called home, and sitting against a wall, I listened
to my dad discuss what had happened at home since we last spoke. There wasn’t much, but I enjoyed the time with him on the line. As we talked, I picked at a toenail. It had died long ago, unable to survive the toll drum corps takes on your feet. Thick and black, it showed signs of being ready to fall off. I tested its strength as my dad got ready for bed, ending our chat. I grabbed my toenail clippers, examining the damage.

My feet were mangled and calloused. My heels had dried out, and large chunks of skin were breaking off, leaving visible, crater-like holes. The nails that weren’t already dead were dying. I took the clippers to the worst of them. The clipping disintegrated, freeing the rest of the nail to break free. It tore off with little resistance. Beneath it was a healthy, fully-grown nail. It had been there, hidden, waiting for its opportunity to take responsibility for whatever it is that toenails do. I cleaned up the mess I had made, grabbed my phone, and headed to bed, collapsing on the floor. Whatever argument my body and the concrete had that morning had been forgotten. I closed my eyes, accepting the sleep that was soon on its way.

No lot had been hotter than Atlanta. Arced on the blacktop, we warmed up in more ways than one. I eyed the billowing white roof of the dome. I knew how cool it would be inside, and I wanted it. I oiled my valves before stepping off the bus, but the heat was too much for the metal. They expanded, seizing up, rendering my horn useless. I poured water into the horn through my mouthpiece, hoping to contract them enough to facilitate movement. The process repeated all around me as
bari/euphs emptied their horns of water, the liquid evaporating the moment it hit the pavement.

Nobody watched our rehearsal. Tucked away in the far corner by some small trees for what little shade they provided, we were as far from the stadium as we could get. Nobody wanted to venture that far to see the Blue Stars hornline. It was calm, but it was also lonely. I wanted to be the corps that fans looked for in the lot, hoping to catch a glimpse of our rehearsal. I wanted YouTube to be filled with videos of our warmups. We continued in isolation.

"You're about fifteen cents sharp. Pull out." Ryan moved on from me to tune the next person. I pulled at my main tuning slide. It didn't budge. I tried pushing it. Nothing. I hit it a few times with no success. He turned back, eyeing me. I pretended to pull my slide out, giving him a nod when I finished. He moved on, suspecting nothing. I made a mental note to play flat.

It was a long journey to the dome. Weaving around other corps and through spectators, I did my best to command their attention as we passed. If they wouldn't go out of their way to give us attention in the lot, I'd give them no choice. I put on what some called the "shit face," the look of content arrogance that makes those around you wish they were you. It was time The Blue Stars got the recognition they deserved. I demanded it with my gaze.

As we neared the tunnel, I relaxed, and my nerves took over. It hurt to walk. I had injured my knee earlier that morning practicing an illusion. A loud pop accompanied a burning sensation that registered in my brain as a very bad thing. I didn't want to be sent to the sidelines like Stephanie, so I put on a happy face and
mentioned it to no one. Though I was nervous, I was looking forward to this show more than others. We had several new changes to unveil, the crowd was rumored to have record numbers, and we’d get to leave the south tomorrow. There wasn’t much that could mess this up.

I hit Sean in Part 1. This had only happened once before. Late in rehearsal before the Kalamazoo show, we had just turned front field. Flying past each other at 192 beats per minute, our paths had never intersected. A sharp blow to the head from his contra changed that. Sean did a 360. I was knocked out of the form, not knowing what had just happened. At the end of the rep, I was surrounded by every visual tech on the field. Matt Carfagna got to me first.

“Dude, you okay?”

“I... I think?”

“Can you see me?”

“Yeah...” I tried to play it off like nothing but hesitated. “Can I sit out for a bit?”

“Do you think you can still march?”

“Probably.”

“Alright. Stay in, then. Okay?” I nodded. I would be fine. As the season went on, it became a “remember when” story. Now it was in front of 16,000 people. The blow was not as painful as it had been in Michigan. I had the advantage of a shako to cushion the impact, but I popped out of the drill. A split second is all it takes to stick out. I worried that the entire stadium was now watching me. I struggled to regain my composure, unable to shake the feeling that I was now on display. For all I knew,
the jumbotron zoomed in on me with a banner reading *Watch the idiot that just ran into the tuba.*

I wasn't the only person who struggled. There were several falls. Christina had managed to get up from hers just as a line of baritones came barreling toward her.

The work we had done all week hadn't seemed to pay off. We headed back to Ohio – still a 12th place drum corps, our recovery of 11th slipping from our grasp.
Chapter 9: Allentown

Allentown, Pennsylvania. J. Birney Crum Stadium. Noted as one of the most historic performance venues in drum corps, JBC was a bowl that would eat you alive, or so I was told, home to old Cadets fans who sat on their hands for anybody else. Allentown was our focus for the week. Our last chance to see how we stacked up to other corps before Finals, everybody felt the urgency in our rehearsals. We started the week 460 miles away in Dublin, Ohio, but our eyes were fixed on Saturday night’s stadium lights.

“There’s a late baritone over here every time.” Ryan’s face was scrunched, frustrated. “Whoever it is, you’re the only person not together. Listen. Open up your ears, and play with what’s around you.” We were in deep cleaning mode. The final rhythmic statement of Part 2 had been a mess all season. Rushing, dragging, everything in between. We had finally gotten a sense of vertical alignment, but one baritone ruined that clarity every rep. Ryan motioned for the staff to go in search of the rogue musician. We played the chunk time and time again, the staff slowly passing our bells each rep. They hovered near the leads. Their nods confirmed the guilty party. Ryan stepped toward the baritones, listening. There was nowhere to hide. It didn’t matter. Mike had no intentions of hiding.

“Mike. You’re late. Fix it.”

“Everybody else is early.”

“Well whatever it is, you sound wrong.”

“I’m right.”
“Excuse me?” Ryan looked stupefied, unable to believe that a member was challenging him.

“It’s rushing. Nobody is playing with Mark’s hands right now except for me. I promise you, I’m right.” He began to demonstrate the error. Ryan cut him off.

“I don’t care. Right now you are the only person playing it like that. The judges aren’t going to care that you’re right. All they’re going to hear is one baritone playing later than the rest of the hornline. You have to adjust.”

“How am I supposed to adjust to something that’s inconsistent? There’s no guarantee we’ll play it like this again. I need to...”

“Go run.” Ryan’s face was unburned, but bright red. Mike stared back, expressionless.

“No.”

“What?”

“I’m not going to be punished for doing what’s written.” Ryan exploded.

“Put your horn down and go run! Get out of here if you can’t cooperate.”

“Fine.” Mike eyed the circle. “If anybody wants to be right, come run with me.” He had been testing the waters of rebellion for the last minute and had just taken the plunge headfirst. No sooner had a shouting match begun that it ended.

“Hey, woah, woah... you’re not an asshole. Everybody, why don’t we take five? Let’s bring it in for a bit.” Russ had appeared out of nowhere. He could have aparated for all knew, but he was in the right place at the right time doing exactly what Russ did best – absorb conflicts and wring out solutions. At the rate we were going, JBC wouldn’t be able to eat us alive. We would do that ourselves.
I looked out over the streets of Allentown. The rehearsal field across from Trexler Middle School was perched atop a hill, fenced in for the safety of young students with either poor judgment or depth perception. The view was simple but breathtaking. If I looked long enough, focusing on nothing in particular, the fence disappeared. The void between near and far blurred into one. The far away streets started where the grass left off. I was weightless, suspended in the infinite. Another field with no lights, ensemble was a race against time. As the sun set, I could see JBC in the distance, a bright dot on the expansive horizon. If I listened closely, I could just make out the impacts of the corps performing. It was an odd feeling. I could sense their performances in the distance – I could see their venue, but they were unaware of me. I felt like a spectator.

"Let's run that again. Start with Hey, Sailor." Erik reviewed new choreography we had gotten that morning. The entire visual block was spent deconstructing the scatter that got us into the ballad, building the resulting form part by part, layering in choreography – anything that could boost our GE and visual interest. Another Shapiro addition, we had just one day to perfect it for competition. We used vocals to keep time with the actions, each phrase corresponding to a particular action.

"From the top."

_Hey, Sailor. Look up there! Here's a pie. Boob, forced arch. Bend down, bring it around, lighthouse. Jel – ly – fish._

"Again." The sun had set. I could see nothing but the lights on the horizon. Over at JBC, I thought I heard Crown. _Hey, Sailor. Look up there!_..
"Hey, we’re waking up early to go to Dunkin’ Donuts tomorrow. You want in?" A group of us walked back to the school from McDonald’s. It sat across from a Dunkin’ and a Rite Aid. At this point in the season, any small store or fast food place felt like a resort. I could buy things. I made decisions about what I wanted. I relaxed. I thought about the painful fatigue I felt every morning, sneaking an extra five or ten minutes of sleep after wakeup. Did I want to lose that? I loved donuts, but at what cost? I thought it over, sipping my frappe.

"I’m good, thanks though." We approached the school, heading for the cafeteria. It was corps history night. The tables were already filling as members trickled in, bringing with them their own bags of fast food or bus box snacks. We never seemed to stop eating. At the center of it all stood Russ, Brad, and the drum majors. It was Russ who spoke first.

"We are fortunate enough to be part of an organization with a rich history in this activity that does far greater things than any of us could as individuals. We are approaching our fiftieth year, and for those of you who don’t know, that is a big deal considering what we’ve faced in the past.” There was something about the way Russ spoke that captured the attention of all in the room. We clung to his words like life itself.

"We began as The First Federal Blue Stars, generously supported by the First Federal Savings and Loan in La Crosse. Education has always been at the forefront of our mission. The founders, Frank Van Voorhis, Dave Dummer, and David Kampschroer, all believed in more than competition, but they also believed in
excellence. If people were keeping score, The Blue Stars would be aiming for the highest one.

"The corps had tremendous success early on. We were one of the founding members of Drum Corps International, and as most of you know, we came in second at the first ever DCI Finals in 1972. The success of the corps continued until financial difficulties rose in the early '80s. After the '82 season, the board met to discuss whether it was time to let go of The Blue Stars. They were prepared to fold the corps, but they didn’t. Why? Because of those of you sitting in this room. They had no idea what the future of this organization would look like, but they knew that the kids involved in this organization were too important to abandon.

"Instead, they scaled back. They formed the Blue Star Cadets, in many ways starting over. They recruited as many kids from La Crosse as they could get. In fact, your very own Brad Furlano started as drum major. Brad, you wanna’ tell them about that?"

"Well I started out on drums, but I was too small to carry it with the harness, and they said I looked cute on the podium." He chuckled, relaxing for the first time I had seen.

"How to become drum major, ladies and gentlemen." Russ continued. "But it was that group that stuck around, that grew the organization. In 1989, the corps won the A60 World Championship. If it weren’t for their dedication, there would have been no corps for me to join. I started marching baritone here in '93, the same year we won the Division III title. The corps continued to be successful, winning the Div. III title in '01 and '03. In 2006, the corps registered as a Division I drum corps
for the first time since 1982. In 2008, we returned to DCI Finals and ended up finishing 8th, and here we are today. I couldn’t be prouder of what this organization has accomplished. You are continuing an important legacy down a road paved with the sacrifices of those who came before you – members and staff who refused to believe that this corps would be anything but phenomenal.” The cafeteria was silent as we pondered his words.

“The corps necklace…” Mark took over. “We didn’t have a corps necklace for quite some time. When I was a rookie, the necklace wasn’t as big a deal as it is now. You paid the drum major five bucks and he got you a string and a bead. I had mine for a week before the bead cracked in half. We take much more pride in these now.” He held up a coin. “You’ll notice that regardless of how many beads we have, every necklace has this coin. It’s a British West-African one tenth of a penny. On it is the Star of David. The corps claims no affiliation with the religion, but we played a collection of Jewish songs back in the 70’s for several shows – that’s where the corps song comes from. It reminds us of that heritage.” He had cut his necklace off, reconstructing his new one as he spoke. “The first bead you’ll get is the rookie bead – the white one. It goes to the right of the coin, and the star faces the bead.” I watched as he carefully threaded the parts onto the wire of his new necklace.

“Next, for each additional year you march, you get a blue bead. These go on the other side of the coin.” A series of blue beads slid down to meet the rest of the necklace, a physical symbol of The Factory, Houdini, and ReBourne. “Finally, when you age out, you get your red bead. The original uniforms were blue with white straps and red plumes, so that’s how we get the colors. The red bead goes on the far
left side of everything so that when you wear it,” he reached back, tightening the clasp, “the ageout year is closest to your heart.” Five beads hung with pride around Mark’s neck. He had given over a year of his life to this organization. Tonight would symbolize my three months of dedicated servitude.

“Before we begin, I want every rookie to pair up with a vet. Vets, talk about what the corps necklace means to you. How do you wear it? Why do you wear it? What did you learn while earning it?” I somehow ended up at a table with Foth. As he began talking, I realized that I had been unfair to him. Just as I assumed he held a grudge against me, I let a conflict from two years ago affect my perceptions of a vet—an ageout in his third year who had been through more than I could imagine. I was not the same person I was two years ago. Neither was he.

“To me, this is about the experience. Scores are great and all, but what you really take away from drum corps are friendships and skills. When I wear this necklace, I’m reminding myself of what I’ve gone through. It was hard, but I pushed harder than my obstacles and came out on top. I see other people wearing these beads, and I can relate to them. They might have marched different years, but they fought for the same corps. I have an immediate bond with people I’ve never met because we share these experiences. That’s what’s contained in this necklace for me, and I take pride in that.”

Mark came to our table with supplies. I grabbed a coin and a bead. I eyed the coin, turning it over in my fingers. It was tarnished and slimy. I scrubbed it off with condensation from my drink. 1942. The coin predated even The Blue Stars. I set my bead gently on top of the hole in the coin as I worked, carefully measuring the length
of the wire I wanted. I slipped on the bead and coin, holding the ends so I wouldn't lose the precious cargo. The line for the crimper stretched around the cafeteria. As I waited, I gripped the ends tighter, watching my peers screw the clasp of their new accessory shut, sliding the contents to the right location.

I reached the table where Zack and Mark worked to complete the necklaces. He slid on an end screw, gave a tight squeeze with the crimper, and sent me on my way. I pulled the ends around my neck, connecting them securely with one another. The new weight against my neck was foreign and uncomfortable. I played with the parts.

"Ekstrom, let me see!" Ben Owens, an ageout, stopped, turning me to look. I put my hands at my sides, fighting the urge to fidget. "Looks good, man! Congrats!" I spent the next several minutes staring at my reflection in my phone camera. Hanging from my neck was a symbol of hard work that few would ever obtain. Wearing this would forever identify me as a Blue Star. I slipped into sleep that evening, the feeling of the necklace growing more natural, becoming part of who I was.

I was going to pee my pants. Even worse, we were already in uniform. The stadium at JBC was bigger than I had expected. The stands were packed, a sea of faces engrossed in the performance on the field. As they watched the corps before us, all I could think about was exploding. Several Blue Stars had left the twos to sneak over to a nearby bathroom. It was my only hope. I heard Dan groaning behind me.
“Hey, you gotta’ go to the bathroom?”

“Oh my gosh, yes.” His eyes were wide.

“I’ll be your two. Let’s go.” We sped up the near-vertical hill. I wasn’t sure how the front ensemble got their stuff up here, but I was glad I didn’t have that responsibility. The door was in sight. My bladder relaxed, anticipating the freedom I would soon give it. Not so fast, man. We aren’t there yet. We still gotta’ get this uniform off. Chill. Soon. My foot crossed the threshold.

“Blue Stars! Hey! No. We don’t do that. Get back here.” Russ was running after the most recent wave of members to attempt a sneaky leak. “Get back in your twos. Hurry.” I groaned at the irony. Russ was always in the right place at the right time, but at the moment, it was the wrong place at the worst possible time. I was going to die. I could feel it.

Maybe I could just pee myself right now – get it over with. Nobody would notice, right? How dark do you think this grey would get? Who’s going to notice one darker grey spot out of 80? We were set up for the show. I decided to hold it. Maybe I’d lose control of my bladder during the illusion in Part 5. That’s the only way Part 5 could get any more miserable. Zack’s hands gave the start. I went into performance mode. I didn’t have time to think about personal problems. The only thing my brain could process were the instructions I would need for a successful performance. Turn, turn, lock – up, up, lock.

Allentown cheered. A lot. I was told to prepare for silence because we weren’t The Cadets, but the audience responded better than any crowd since Bentonville. Fueled by the energy they gave back to us, performing was fun again.
Before I knew it, the show was over. I ripped my horn down. The audience stood.
From what I had heard, standing ovations were rare in this town. I smiled.
Somewhere in that crowd was my aunt Lori, my mother’s sister. What a great show
for her to watch. I couldn’t wait to greet her at the busses, but first – holy God, I had
to pee.

We were in an unusually happy mood for having the second-longest bus ride
of the season. Allentown had been good to us, and we carried that momentum into
Pittsburgh. We beat Spirit. After the show, their frustration was evident. We
celebrated our small victory. Dan Heath puffed casually on a cigar.

“In 2009, I got one of these during the season, and I told everybody that I was
going to smoke it after we beat Phantom Regiment. They said I was crazy. Nothing
felt better than smoking that on Finals night, knowing what we had accomplished.”
He blew smoke, smiling. I had to admit it felt good. After the stress we’d been under
the last week – the arguments, the reps where even our best wasn’t good enough,
the reminders that our season would soon be over – it was nice to see something
come from our hard work.

Now on our way back to Indiana, we enjoyed the last long bus ride we’d
share together. We had several more rehearsal days ahead of us, continuing our
climb up the competitive ladder rung by rung. For now, we looked back. Riding
through the darkness, passing quiet, sleepy towns, we were alive and well. I was
going to miss these people. I was going to miss this life.
Chapter 10: Finals

The sun was up when we pulled in to Frankfort High School. Do not confuse that with the sun was rising. The entire town was bathing in the light of a sun that had taken ownership of the sky. I watched cars getting filled at the gas station across the street, their owners well into the start of their days. My eyes were heavy. I pulled hard against the resistance to force them open. As I sat motionless, I felt as though I were made of lead. I pressed myself deeper into the seat. Normally the cushions did little to comfort me, but at this very moment, it was as though I were drifting freely in a hammock. The microphone clicked on. I shut my eyes, bracing for the impact of Mark’s voice.

“Okay, guys, listen up. It’s about... nine o’clock right now. We’re gonna’ get a few hours of floor time, so move quickly. You’ll go through the doors just outside the busses. The gym will be on your right. Guys on the far side, girls on the close side. Ready, go.” I trudged along to my spot. I always aimed to set up camp just outside the lane, lined up with the hoop. There was something about the lines on the court that anchored me amidst a sea of chaos. I threw my things down and collapsed onto my mattress. The warm glow of the sun crept in through windows along the top of the gym, lulling me to sleep.

When I woke, it was just past eleven. We had an afternoon of rehearsal left, knowing that everything we did here would directly affect our Finals performance. The pressure was on. I stumbled out of the gym in search of a bathroom. What I found instead was a group of high school athletes waiting for yearbook photos. A volleyball player caught my eye. Her name was Emily. I had met her a few years ago
at solo/ensemble contest. We met up at the mall a few weeks later to hang out, but had since lost contact. Who'd have guessed that I'd come stumbling out of her gym in pajamas two years later? What even is drum corps?

The staff was holding nothing back today. It was time to decide how clean we were going to be. Brass staff started cutting people from parts and watering down others. Matt Carfagna kept the section after visual rehearsal for what he called “baritone boot camp.” He had used this system earlier in the season with mixed results. It was nothing more than an extra fifteen minutes of rehearsal for the section. We had cleaned marching basics, posture, and drill, but it had never been routine enough to make us not hate losing more of our breaks. Dave had already stolen fifteen minutes from our mornings. We didn’t want to lose more from our afternoons.

“Alright, guys. Our horn snaps kinda suck, yeah?” Matt was not one for sugar coating things. “Circle it up, and let’s start looking less like babies and more like baritones.” We snapped up and down every four counts. Fatigue was setting in. My forearms burned. I was getting slower.

“Guys, think of it like this. Horn snaps are supposed to be one count, yes? Well when I marched, we always thought of them as zero count horn moves. They’re down, then they’re up. There’s no in between. Motion both starts and ends on the same count. If you blinked, you’d miss it. It’d be like magic. That’s what you’re going for. That’s what makes an intimidating section.” We continued our boot camp in rhythm. 1-2-3-crush-up-2-3-crush-down-2-3-crush-up...
The football team filed into the stands for their photo. I could hear them jeering amongst themselves.

"Win State! Win State!" Alan added vocals to the exercise. We laughed, but we let his humor motivate us. 1-2-3-Win-State-2-3-Win-State-2-3...

The fire hose finally reached the bari/euphs. At the end of the opener, we had eighth-note slurs and staccatos between partials. It had been a struggle to clean all season, especially for me. My flexibility was still limited, and it was a gamble each time the part came up in a show situation. It didn’t help that I was jazz running. The eighth notes alternated between chord tones, so Ryan split the part between players. I was given more donuts to play. He reassured us that the clarity we’d get by changing the part would outweigh the loss in content. There wasn’t much of the original opener left. All my favorite parts had been cut, some as early as Sparta. I was losing the content that motivated me through the monotony. I had to trust the staff. They had more training than me.

I finished dinner quickly and tried to relax. I lay on my mattress, stuffing my face with Oreos. My aunt Lori had given me three packages in Allentown. One of them didn’t survive the trip back to Indiana, and the second would soon be gone. It didn’t matter. I could eat whatever I wanted. No matter how much food I consumed, I was still losing weight. I’d soon be emaciated. If Oreos could prolong my existence, so much the better. I finished another row, then stood, making my slow return to the field for ensemble.
My mom watched me from the stands. She had arrived that afternoon to volunteer for a few days. I felt exposed. My anonymity within the ensemble was gone. She tracked me around the field, learning my every move. I missed an assignment, going on after I should have stopped. I dropped to the ground for the pushups I knew I deserved while she watched from the stands. I wondered if I would have made the same error had she not been there. I couldn’t wonder for long, or I’d miss more instructions. I wished she would leave.

It was an interesting feeling. When we were in Merrillville, all I had wanted was for friends and family to see me marching. Something changed. Any contact from the real world annoyed me. It reminded me of reality. That reality confirmed the impermanence of the life I now lived. Reality would soon come to destroy the world I had grown to love. As hard as it was, drum corps was surprisingly easy. If you focused on your job and did everything asked of you, there was nothing left to worry about. The world didn’t matter. School didn’t matter. Grades were not a concern. There was no unknown, because every choice was made for you. I had forgotten that this was a fantasy, an ideal scenario that disappeared at the end of the summer save my memories and a twelve-minute show on a DVD. It was impossible to return to that fantasy with a piece of my reality watching from the stands.

I had woken up to pee – nothing unusual. It was just the result of staying hydrated. On my way back from the bathroom, I was alone with my thoughts, surveying the quiet halls. This was all about to come to an end. In just a few days, I would be home, preparing my return to Ball State. My new family, now quietly
dozing in the gym, would be miles away. Some of them I would never see again. We had come so far together. Spring training felt like years ago. It was difficult to think that it was the starting point of the same timeline I was on now, and as we neared its final event, every moment left with these people was sacred. My footsteps echoed in the empty corridor.

The air ducts in the gym boomed as the metal expanded. Filling the halls, I had never heard a duct system so noisy. I wondered why it hadn't woken me up before. There was shouting from the gym. The doors on the men's sleeping area were open, and the battery was running outside. Mark cut in front of me, chasing after the drumline.

"Hey! Get back inside. Get in here now!" He sounded like an angry parent disciplining a child. I stayed out of his way. The drama and commotion continued to draw more attention to the far door. Outside, there was more shouting. I had no idea what was going on. Perhaps I was hallucinating, the product of three months of fatigue. As Mark corralled the battery back indoors, I heard an interesting array of words thrown around. Bomb. Eggs. Police.

Evidently several members of the football team were less than excited to have a group of strange band nerds take over their home facilities. Never mind that at this point, the majority of the corps was strong, fit adult men and toned, tan, half-naked women. They didn't like us. They didn't understand us. They didn't want us. A small group had snuck back to the school in the middle of the night, set off small explosives by the exterior doors, and attempted to egg the members who rushed out
to investigate. Of the nineteen individuals who ran outside to explore, not one egg hit a human target. We had been attacked by some truly remarkable athletes.

The wind was picking up. The final Pink Wednesday of the season was just one run through away from ending. Last night’s run had been my best yet, and I was looking forward to an even better one. I could count the remaining runs of the show on one hand. Including tonight, we would perform *The Blue World* just four more times. After that, it would be gone forever. We had survived three long days of rehearsal – the last rehearsal days of the summer. The show was noticeably better, and I felt stronger. We were ready to charge into Lucas Oil and prove that beating Spirit in Pittsburgh was no mistake, but we would first need to beat the wall of lightning heading our way. Brilliant streaks and flashes shot across the sky above the school. Beneath the clouds, peeking through the black, were the last golden tones of the sunset. As the clouds choked out the last rays of light, the run was called. The pit scrambled to cover their equipment and shelter it from danger. I grabbed my gear and took off for the safety of the gym. Heavy drops of cold rain whizzed past my face. Several struck me, their intensity building. There was something about Indiana and rain this summer. I stood by the far door, watching the storm blow in.

Having cancelled our performance, it performed for us instead. The steady fall of rain droned on, ringing against the ground and the roof. Sometimes lightning tore across the sky, followed by a splitting, crackling thunder. Other times, I’d catch flashes in my peripherals, looking just in time to miss them. Quiet, delayed rumbles
were the only confirmation that what I had seen really existed. I stood in awe of the beauty – independent, unchoreographed. I wondered if nature watched us perform with the same intrigue. The rain slowed, now a gentle pitter-patter. It was time to go out. I grabbed my wallet.

I found it interesting that what seemed to be the most important week had the least enforced sleep schedule. People wandered around well into the evening. Conversations echoed through the gym. Members made late-night trips to the Village Pantry. I was on my way to McDonalds. A ten-minute walk, it gave me a chance to be alone with my thoughts.

The town was sleepy. I walked along the main stretch. I knew it well. Part of my route to Ball State, it was always bustling and crowded. Tonight it was desolate. I glanced over my shoulders. This was how people got kidnapped, but the idea of a mocha frappe was worth the risk. It also got me away from the monotony of food truck meals. I had stolen away to McDonalds each night. Few Blue Stars ventured that far, opting for the Burger King or Taco Bell across from the school.

I took a seat across from the TV. The Olympics had been the main focus of the media. I watched as world's top athletes competed to bring recognition and prestige to their country. We had a lot in common. They were on a completely different level, but the premise was the same. We were the best at our activity. We sacrificed a life of ease to perfect our craft. Each group sought to bring recognition and prestige to their corps. I sympathized with them. The product of their training was soon coming to an end as well.
The labyrinth within Lucas Oil Stadium swallowed me. The last time I travelled these halls, I promised myself that I would march drum corps. The promise seemed to be paying off. Staged in the tunnel, I peered into the stands, realizing just how few people attended DCI Prelims. It didn’t matter. I was about to perform in Lucas Oil Stadium as a member of a drum corps for the first time. Taking the field, I gazed at the expanse above. My shoes brushed lightly across the turf. The largest stage of the DCI tour was set. All we had left to do was display the work we had done over the last three days.

"Have a great show, Blue Stars."

You know those dreams where you’re running from something and you keep tripping? Or you’re chasing something, but no matter how fast you run, you never get any closer? That’s what my Prelims performance felt like. It wasn’t bad per se, but it didn’t feel right. My actions felt forced and unnatural. Everything stayed together, but there was enough friction to make for a very uncomfortable eleven minutes. If you’ve marched drum corps, you have likely had at least one show like this. If you haven’t marched drum corps, I hope you never have to experience this. Leaving the field, I had no idea what had happened. I didn’t know what to think. I had had enough terrible shows called great performances by the staff to know that my instincts couldn’t be trusted. Still, I couldn’t shake the feeling that we had somehow repeated Olathe, Kansas.

“What do you guys think of that performance?” Ryan’s voice was calm and thoughtful. *Meh...* and *Ehh...* were the responses returned to him. “Yeah, I agree. It was just a show. Nothing terrible. Nothing spectacular. It sounded like you guys
might have been afraid to open up in there, but now it’s not new anymore.

Tomorrow we come back and really show them your training, yeah?”

Another storm swept across the center of the state, heading straight for us. We had no intentions of sticking around after the performance, but we rushed to leave early. Rain pelted the windows as we traveled back to Frankfort. It was still falling steadily when we got to the school. Most of the restaurants were closed. With business slow and a storm on its way, they had chosen to close early, forgetting that a herd of young adults would soon be searching for something to do instead of sleep. I could always count on the Village Pantry to be open, and I made my way through the rain.

I took a seat, accompanied by donuts, chocolate milk, and my thoughts. We wanted to come out swinging, but our punch found nothing but air. Spirit was back on top of us, but even worse, Crossmen were dangerously close. They had been climbing all season. With Glassmen out of their way, we were the only corps standing between them and a Finals appearance. My mind was back in Texas. “Do you guys know what happens on Saturday for the corps who don’t make Finals? They march in a parade.”

“You know, guys, I’ve been around this activity a long time, and sometimes things just aren’t fair,” is the last thing you want to hear Tom Aungst tell you on Semifinals day. Things had been clicking during rehearsal. Field lining had even taken the time to paint all the different hashes and numbers we’d see on the field so
that nothing caught us by surprise, but Tom’s end-of-rehearsal speech left me feeling uneasy, and I couldn’t shake the sensation. It followed me to Indy.

We stepped off the bus at Military Park and followed the staff as they took us to the far side of the park for warmup. Passing other corps, I was envious of their closure. They knew that this would be their last performance. As much as that sucked, at least they knew. Their performance could have a sense of finality. We either had a show tomorrow or it was over tonight. The bubble was thin.

“If you knew that this was your last show, how would you perform it differently?” Megan had always been a source of cheer and positivity. This was the most serious I could remember her being, I thought about her question. The staff had always told us that a show was no different than rehearsal. If you try to do things differently in a show – give more energy, play louder, hit your dots with greater precision – then rehearsal is a waste. Performances are about consistency, not exceptionality. Still, I knew that I could do more. If I had nothing left, why not give it all? Why hadn’t I taken that approach all season? Because it was hard? Because I was new? Because I had always been counting on one more performance? Those were questions I could no longer answer. We were preparing for what might be our last show. The only thing I could do now was perform as though it were.

Lizzie and I stayed behind with Mike Halron as he anxiously checked his phone for updates on our performance from within.

“You know, it’s gonna’ be close,” he stated, checking once more for news, pocketing his phone when it failed to contain the desired information. Nearby,
Crossmen were huddled together, searching for the answer to the same question. I stood, looking up at Lucas Oil Stadium as it engulfed my field of vision. Inside that building was everything I had ever wanted. I thought back to Minneapolis and how for a few fleeting moments I had wanted to quit. I thought back to Forest City when this all first came together – how hard it had been in the beginning. I wasn’t sure how long I would make it, or if I could survive spring training at all. I thought back to a year ago, sitting in the stands for DCI Finals, promising myself I would march – and the hours I put in to learn a new instrument. This corps had become my home and family. I couldn’t fathom that it might be ending.

Mike checked again. No news. It was difficult to stay still. Anxiety rushed over me, leaving me powerless to stop from pacing. We waited there, silently acknowledging the shared fear. Time stretched on in ways I had never experienced, each moment bringing us no closer to an answer. We hung there in limbo, victims of each passing second.

Cheers erupted from the Crossmen, the silence shattered by a sudden hysteria. Members grabbed at each other, embracing, tears and laughter filling their faces with streams of jubilation. My heart stopped. Endorphins flooded my system, ending the adrenaline-induced anxiety. My body prepared for an emotional crash. I felt nothing.

“That’s not good.” Lizzie headed towards our buses. All the while, the Crossmen continued their celebrations – jumping, shouting, hugging, screaming. I could not escape them.
As we approached, Travis met us, his face empty. He looked at us, shaking his head. Our season was over. They had won. His face filled with tears as I passed and stepped onto the bus. There was a lifeless silence. What was normally an energized home for over 50 members – a place to shout and tell inappropriate jokes, a place where you could vent about the days’ frustrations or belt out hype music at the top of your lungs now acted like a black hole, sucking in everything. The only sounds that escaped were the sobs of a corps whose final performance of the season had just been taken from them. Walking the aisle into the mourning, I noticed that I was not crying. I was sad. I knew I should be crying, but my body had yet to break me down. I became uncomfortable, self-conscious of my dry cheeks. We had done everything together, and I couldn’t even cry with my brothers and sisters.

Reaching my seat, I sat down, studying the colorful pattern of the upholstery on in front of me. I looked around at the filthy floor – our home. I reached back, grabbing my zipper to release myself from the jacket. As I pulled, I realized I would never again wear this uniform in competition. I would never again perform *The Blue World*. My face became streaked and contorted. My breathing was shallow and fast, my body attempting to take in air between horrendous sobs. I had never felt this much pain. I never thought my season might end on Semifinals night, yet that was the reality I was living. My jacket not fully off, I held my face in my hands and deteriorated. A firm hand rested on my back. I looked over to see Nacho’s arm extended towards me. In November, Sean had been the member who reached out to me, motivated me, and made me feel at home. It seemed fitting that he was the one
setting aside his own emotional struggles to give me strength as I continued to break down.

It took quite some time to get out of my uniform. I didn't want to take it off. I finally placed it on the hanger, ensuring that everything looked perfect. Making my way off the bus, I pushed past those still mourning. Many of them were ageouts. My heart continued to break, but this time for them. I had another season and a chance at redemption. Their story was over. Many of them were Houdini rookies. They had experienced the best season since the corps' return to World Class. They had fought a season-long battle in 2011 before taking their place in Finals. What they were experiencing was new, unknown, and unwanted. I left them to their emotions. Stepping off the bus, I was met by Mark, still in uniform. He stepped towards me, and we embraced.

"Thank you for being a great leader." I barely choked it out amidst tears.

"Thank you for being a great rookie." Mark had risen with the corps since 2008. His third year of leading the corps from the podium, I didn't want to know what he was feeling.

Back in the lot, celebrations continued from other corps. I stood there, not knowing what came next. As members regained their composure and left the buses, we followed the only routine we knew. After shows came food, so we walked to the truck. None of us wanted to talk about what had just happened, but no other conversation seemed genuine. Behind every happy story was the quiet understanding that we were all miserable. At the food truck, the volunteers had gotten word of the results. Their feigned enthusiasm did little to reverse the
emotional devastation that we had just endured. Loading my boat with too much food, I sat down in the gravel and ate my feelings until they were completely extinguished.

There was no reason to wake up. The only thing on our schedule was the pity parade, and I needed to pencil in extra time to sulk. The night had been rough, and I had binge eaten the rest of my Oreos. Other members came and went through the gym all night. Nobody wanted to settle down. When it was time to get up the next morning, the prevailing question was “what for?” I mustered up enough energy to go eat some cereal, the only food for today’s EPL.

Everything at this point was damage control, protecting our integrity. We had taken a heavy blow, and it knocked us to the ground. Staying down would only confirm that we belonged there. Pulling ourselves back up and handling the parade with pride would make a case for the worth of our organization. We needed to show that we were better than 13th, and that started by embracing our new agenda. We were marching in the parade.

Warmups had never felt so relaxed. Circled in a parking lot in downtown Indy, we went through the usual motions. Across the street, Glassmen performed chunks of their show. My focus was scattered. This was a parade, and parades were boring. There was only one thing left that needed to be serious.

“Ageouts, come to the center. Everybody else, fill in the holes.” There was an uncomfortable silence. A Finals day tradition, Ryan had given the ageouts the choice to do this yesterday. They refused. To agree would have meant anticipating defeat.
With no other options, it was time to give them their moment in the circle. Some were already crying. Others seemed desensitized, staring blankly at the ground. We began with the ballad.

It is almost impossible to play while crying. I would never play this music with this hornline again, but I had to play it one last time for a group of sobbing ageouts, the members who had set the standard for what it meant to be a member of this organization. I saw my role models fall apart before my eyes. Mark battled his emotions as he conducted us, winning in his arms but losing in his face. It tore me to pieces. I was shaking with hysteria. This was supposed to be an opportunity for celebration. Instead, it was another time for mourning.

"Jewish Chorale." Mark called out our corps song. Each note was painful. This was the end, but where was our crown? When it was over, we took some time to regain our composure. The only exception was Zack Crissman. He stood on the opposite side of the circle, unmoving, expressionless. He was ready for orders. I wasn't always sure he was human.

As the parade block approached the viewing stand, the announcer introduced the corps.

"And here we have the Blue Stars from La Crosse, Wisconsin. One of the top groups, they've been consistent finalists recently, and were just tenths of a point away from a Finals performance tonight. You really gotta' hand it to these kids. They work extremely hard. I can't imagine being that close." Each word dug deeper into the wound. We turned to face the crowd as Mark conducted the last chunk of The Blue World. The Blue Stars would ever perform.
"I want to see each and every one of you back next year." Dan Heath addressed the baritone/euphoniums outside the equipment truck. Other sections checked in instruments and uniforms, but he wanted to have a word with us. "Think of how much you learned this summer. Don't make us start from nothing again. If you can come back and I see that you went somewhere else, you're dead to me. I'll delete you from Facebook, and we won't be friends anymore. Seriously, come back." I already knew I'd be back. When I promised myself I'd march drum corps, I never planned to settle for 13th. I dreamed of standing on the field for retreat. I could do that without leaving. This was the corps that had produced Houdini. I wanted to make Blue Stars history. At the very least, I wanted to leave the corps in better shape than I found it, and that didn't mean abandoning it after one season. I was in this for the long haul.

I found myself once more in the back seat of the family car, this time on the northbound side of I-65. It was weird to be in real clothes. Going home felt more like leaving home. For the first time in 85 days, I was separated from the corps. I had no schedule. My decisions were my own. I was free but lonely. My mom bombarded me with questions about the season, and the stories flowed with ease. I played with my coin as I spoke. Storytelling was therapeutic. It put me back in the moment, if only in my mind. My corps family surrounded me once more as we suffered and triumphed together.

The tears and anger of Friday night. Most of the summer I wouldn’t tell her about, and the things we chose to discuss meant nothing to her. I spoke and she listened, but there was no way for her to *really* understand without being there. With each passing moment, the miles between my corps and me grew. Spinning my coin, I drifted off to sleep, counting down the days until November brought me back.
Research Analysis

Drum Corps International, self-described as “Marching Music’s Major League,” is widely considered to provide young people with the highest level of music competition within the marching arts. Each summer, approximately 3500 student-musicians up to twenty-two years of age perform live for nearly 400,000 fans in some of the greatest sporting venues in the country (Drum Corps International, 2015). Year after year, members return to the activity and their respective corps families, stopping only when they age out. The experience is said to help corps members grow as musicians, athletes, people, and leaders. I joined the Blue Stars Drum and Bugle Corps as an enthusiastic saxophone player with just three months experience playing the baritone. By the time I aged out, I had served as a small group leader, the baritone/euphonium section leader, and was the model for the euphonium section, used for tuning and other musical demonstrations.

Despite the tremendous growth I experienced, drum corps is often perceived negatively among classically trained musicians and music educators. For example, a graduate assistant and trumpet performance major once negated my opinion on the subject of music pedagogy, identifying me as “just a drum corps guy.” Anecdotally, I often hear of performers returning to their high school marching bands, thrilled by what they have accomplished during their summer with drum corps, only to be told by their directors or private teachers that they are, in some ways, worse than before they marched. Many teachers even discourage their students from participating in the activity. These negative perceptions seem to follow corps members, but they are not indicative of what I experienced while marching with the Blue Stars. Based on the experience that I wrote about and the additional two summers that I marched, I feel that many of these perceptions
are unfair and not representative of the average experience in the activity. The purpose of this study, then, was to determine the perceptions of participants regarding their musical growth and the benefits of drum corps experiences. Survey results were used to test the hypothesis that drum corps is a positive experience for student musicians with quality educational outcomes. Specific questions that drove this inquiry included:

1. What are participants' perceptions of their musical growth as a result of drum corps participation?
2. Which participants, if any, had more positive perceptions of their musical growth as a result of drum corps participation?
3. Is drum corps a positive experience with quality educational outcomes?

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

To answer the stated questions, the researcher created an online survey and distributed it to a convenience sample of those who participated in drum corps between 2012 and 2014. All of the participants (N = 74) were from the same organization, the Blue Stars Drum and Bugle Corps, and were asked to evaluate their perceptions of musical growth resulting from their participation in the drum corps activity. Perceptions were measured with a Likert scale. Participants responded to twenty-four items, scaled from 1 to 6 (Very Strongly Disagree – Very Strongly Agree), with higher scores indicating a more positive perception of one’s musical growth as a result of marching with a drum and bugle corps. Some items were negatively phrased and randomly presented within the questionnaire to minimize the potential for response sets among participants. Negatively
phrased items were reversed scored to prevent any distortion of one’s perception score. The questionnaire used for data collection is included as an appendix to this document.

In addition to the twenty-four Likert items, the questionnaire also contained a number of open-ended prompts. Respondents were asked to elaborate on any additional positive or negative aspects of marching with a drum corps that was not addressed in the Likert items. Likewise, the respondents were asked to identify who had commented on their drum corps participation and to report the nature of these comments as either positive or negative. Finally, the participants responded to several demographic questions so that the researcher might better understand the differences in perceptions among the respondents. Demographic items included the number of years marched, one’s current or anticipated major in college, and the size, quality, and competitiveness of the participants’ high school marching program.

RESULTS

The mean perception score among the participants (N = 74) was \( M = 121.8 \) with a standard deviation of \( SD = 18.8 \), indicating that the average participant had a positive perception of his or her musical growth as a result of marching with a drum and bugle corps. The lowest recorded score was 68 and the highest recorded score was 144. Ninety-six percent of respondents indicated at least a somewhat positive musical experience as a result of marching drum corps. The remaining 4%, while not positive, were only somewhat negative in their perceptions of musical growth. The number of participants in each classification category is outlined in Table 1.
Table 1

Frequency Distribution of Perception Score Classification Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Score Range</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Cumulative %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very Positive Perception</td>
<td>125 - 144</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Perception</td>
<td>105 - 124</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Positive Perception</td>
<td>85 - 104</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Positive or Negative Perception</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Negative Perception</td>
<td>64 - 83</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Perception</td>
<td>44 - 63</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Negative Perception</td>
<td>24 - 43</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participant’s perception scores were also correlated with the various demographic characteristics included in the questionnaire. The first correlation explored by the researcher was between participants’ perception scores and their college major. Participants identified themselves as a non-music major, music education major, or some other type of music major. The correlation generated from the data was \( \eta = .18 \). The coefficient of determination indicated that approximately 3% of the variance in participants’ perception scores was influenced by one’s college major. While not a strong correlation, the data suggest that those participants that were more likely to have a positive perception of their participation in drum corps were either music education majors or non-music majors.

The next correlations explored by the researcher were between the perception scores and the relative size and perceived quality of participants’ high school marching ensemble. The correlations generated by these data were \( \eta = .25 \) and \( \eta = .27 \),
respectively. The coefficient of determination indicated that approximately 6% of the variance in perception scores was influenced by the size of one’s high school marching band. Likewise, approximately 7% of the variance in perception scores was influenced by the perceived quality of the participant’s high school marching program. No relationship was found to exist between the competitiveness of one’s high school marching program and participants’ perception scores.

The final correlation explored by the researcher was between perception scores and the number of years the participants marched. The Pearson Correlation gathered from this data was $r = .15$. The coefficient of determination indicated that approximately 2% of the variance in perception scores was determined by how many years one marched. Though not very strong, it is positive, indicating that those with greater number of years marched tended to have higher perception scores.

When analyzing these correlations as a whole, we begin to see a profile of the participants who have the most positive perceptions of their experiences. These members are either non-music majors or music education majors who come from mid-sized high school ensembles (50-150 members) of average quality, and they are likely veteran members returning to the organization.

Descriptive data analysis of the open-ended prompts contained in the questionnaire indicated that 59 participants (80%) received positive comments from a band director, private teacher, peer, or other individual regarding their habits and overall musicianship after returning from marching drum corps. Seventeen participants (23%) received negative comments. Two participants received only negative comments. Some of the perceived benefits participants elaborated on included greater attention to detail,
improved time management, development of a successful warmup routine, increased ensemble awareness, better understanding of intonation tendencies and adjustments, and a stronger work ethic and discipline. Members listed these as benefits as a result of marching drum corps. A negative aspect articulated by some participants was a need to abandon one's primary instrument in order to focus on the secondary instrument they were playing within the corps.

DISCUSSION

When exploring the data, the researcher was not surprised by the overwhelmingly positive perceptions of the participants' regarding their drum corps experiences. However, it intrigued the researcher that other music majors (not music education majors) had lower scores than non-music majors. The researcher speculated that this might be related to those members majoring in music performance. Of the seventeen respondents that indicated they received some sort of negative feedback after tour, fifteen of those comments came from private teachers. Since most private teachers and studio professors are often more concerned with the technical aspect of playing an instrument than the pedagogical benefits future educators receive, it remains plausible that music majors outside of education would have less positive, applicable content to balance out the criticisms received by private teachers.

The profile of the participants who have the most positive perceptions of their drum corps experience was also interesting to the researcher. These members were either non-music majors or music education majors who come from mid-sized high school ensembles (50-150 members) of average quality, and were likely veteran members returning to the
organization. Anecdotally, this demographic profile covers a very large number of students throughout the country. As such, thousands of young musicians who fit this description would likely have some sort of positive experience marching drum corps.

One negative result from marching drum corps that was articulated by some participants was the necessity of abandoning one's primary instrument for the entire summer. As one might expect, this has the potential to create issues when returning to the primary instrument, but there are many solutions. Members can bring their primary instruments on tour with them to practice during laundry blocks or meals. Even though they are off their primary instruments, these individuals are still studying music and performance all summer, something that wouldn't necessarily happen if the students stayed home to take summer classes or work. One participant stated that the limited range of the music caused issues after the season, and another stated that the instructional staff would often give members comments that didn't relate between high brass and low brass. This member went on to write:

All in all, I more blame [my complaints] on certain educators being lazy, ignorant, and cutting corners, rather than the activity as a whole. Everything I have listed in this box is greatly outweighed by the pros of marching drum corps. In my opinion, it is just very easy to do in a way that inhibits the growth of brass musicians. I believe the activity as a whole is moving in a direction where this won't be as much of an issue any more in the near future.

Overall, the data seem to support the researchers' hypothesis that members of the Blue Stars, specifically, believe their time in drum corps is a positive musical experience.
Convenience sampling prevents the researcher from interpolating the perceptions of members from other corps or those from the Blue Stars that did not participate in the study. But at least for the current participants, the negative opinions of the activity must come from sources other than member’s perceptions. The trend of external criticisms seems to follow a pattern of linear causality. An unhealthy emphasis on performance leads to flaws in education, resulting in bad performance habits by students. By analyzing these claims, one can better understand the reality of what occurs in the Blue Stars and why member data refutes these ideas.

INTERVIEW DATA

Drum Corps International as an organization is built on a highly competitive summer tour. With over one hundred performances across the country for corps to choose from, The Blue Stars have traditionally competed in over thirty shows during the season (Blue Stars Drum and Bugle Corps, 2015). These shows are more or less the purpose of the activity. They are what corps prepare for, how they reach fans with their product, and during the three-day DCI World Championship Finals, they are how the corps are ranked, crowning a champion. For some, however, these competitions emphasize the wrong things. As an attempt to gain a greater understanding of some of the perceptions of the drum corps activity, the researcher also conducted interviews with two music education experts with significant drum corps experience.

Dr. Kevin Gerrity, Associate Professor of Music Education at Ball State University and the former Assistant Director of Capital Regiment Drum and Bugle Corps, discussed his
concerns and criticisms of drum corps as they relate to music education. Dr. Gerrity (2014) explained that:

The overall big criticism is that it is an absolute focus on performance, performance, performance, performance, performance – *only*... Depending on your situation, the goal is “we need to do this, and we need to really play better, and we need to get more dynamic contrast, vertical alignment – we need to do this in order to achieve the greatest success as measured by a Box 5 description if we’re going to be competitive. And that’s what people are signing up for – I get that. They want that experience of wanting to go ahead and compete, which is great, but music is not supposed to be inherently competitive. We make it that way, but music is not supposed to be competitive.

Dr. Gerrity went on to discuss critique, the time after shows that staff members meet with judges to discuss why the corps received the score it did. Though most drum corps staffs are now made up of highly trained music educators, “[they’re] looking at this panel of people to tell you what to do to get a higher score. Do you really need somebody else to tell you what is good?” (Gerrity, 2014). With this perspective, it would appear that music educators teaching students in drum corps abandon their own ideas in favor of what judges tell them will give the corps a higher score to be more competitive.

Dr. Russ Gavin, Assistant Professor of Music Education at Baylor University and Corps Director with The Blue Stars Drum and Bugle Corps speaks from the opposite side of the debate regarding performance. When asked the same question regarding his concerns and criticisms of music education in the drum corps activity, Dr. Gavin (2015) stated:
First off, the prioritization of scores over learning, I think, is false. We are in a performance venue, in a performance mode, for approximately 350 minutes out of the 80 days of tour, so we’re looking at six hours. We do six hours of rehearsal after noon on every rehearsal day. The amount of teaching and learning that goes on – it is the journey. The scores – we keep score because that’s what the activity is.

Dr. Gavin continued to discuss the idea of progress, stating that the corps hopes to win in the future, but knows that it won’t happen this year. That knowledge, however, does not affect the emphasis of raising the standards from last year at the ensemble level, and for returning members, at the individual level. Dr. Gavin (2015) went on to compare the emphasis on scores to his son playing baseball, explaining:

Sometimes, [my son’s team] gets a lot of hits, and they score a lot of runs, and they win the game – and sometimes they don’t, and they lose the game. It is the reaction to that score that defines the experience for the kid... I think that when this activity is done well it is similar to that... In my band room, I could be anti-competition, but if I react in the wrong way to a kid butchering Mary Had A Little Lamb, that’s a negative reality for that young musician, that young learner. It’s all about what you do with the information.

It is important to note that Drs. Gerrity and Gavin agree in many ways about the overall benefits drum corps offers students, but their opinions on the activity’s use of education is the point that separates the two ways of thinking. The difference in these two approaches to performance and competition is clear. The critics fear that competition is leading the educational process at the expense of quality learning, the “teach to the test” mentality
used by some educators for high-stakes testing. For Dr. Gerrity, this means focusing on technical facility and execution at the expense of other music standards typically included in an educational environment such as composition and relating music to history and culture. It may be necessary, then, to consider participation in drum corps from the competitive aspect, not as a public institution, taking into account that the outcome for the activity is competitive success through quality education, but that not all standards for music education influence that outcome. It is interesting to note, then, that none of the research participants, not even those who had a somewhat negative experience, cited the competitive aspect of the activity as a negative factor. The supporters view competition as the application of the education and experience that is the drum corps activity, even if that means ignoring a select few music standards. As a supporter of the latter mindset, Dr. Gavin brought this mentality to The Blue Stars where myself and others benefited from an environment focused on pedagogy, not competition. In this way, The Blue Stars defy the criticism that an emphasis on competition causes pedagogy to suffer. This becomes clearer when one examines the quality of educators giving the information, and how this influences future music educators in the corps.

For the majority of its existence, drum corps has been, according to Dr. Gavin (2015), "a hobbyist's world." In a time before Drum Corps International existed as an organization, the drum corps activity was run by competitions hosted through the VFW and American Legion, both militaristic in their origins, but neither inherently educational in their approach. During that time, corps existed primarily as youth programs. Dr. Gavin (2015) compares historical pedagogy to today, stating:
You know, back in the day, when there were 80 drum corps, Sal the baker could come in and teach the trumpets. Now that there are really only 20 something, I get 40 applications a year to be on our brass staff. 38 of those are people with some level of teacher training, and in most cases a high level of professional experience prior to that point.

In my time as a Blue Star, every brass teacher that stood in front of me teaching had a bachelor’s degree in music. Others such as Richard Saucedo, Kris Hammond, and Dr. Aaron Witek have graduate degrees in music, making them much more knowledgable about music and pedagogy than “Sal” every could have been. It is difficult to believe that a staff as knowledgable and experienced as ours could possibly be encourgaing habits deemed to be detrimental to young musicians. In fact, under Mr. Saucedo’s instruction, the hornline would often play nothing but quiet long tones, the absolute fundamental of sound, not moving on until he was completely satisfied with our execution, a far cry from the loud, “drill and kill” method we are accused of being taught with. One must also consider the operational model being used in drum corps, a model that many high schools are following. The pedagogy of drum corps also includes how future educators are being prepared to apply their marching experience to their future programs. Dr. Gerrity’s concern for young music educators who march is that they are being taught to adopt an operational model that cannot be sustained in most high school environments. Dr. Gerrity (2014) refers back to competition, stating:

That’s my other problem with drum corps. It sets a very dangerous example for how music education should be funded in the public schools. If I want to be competitive, I need a fancy backdrop, I need 17 pieces of equipment, I
need a fancy uniform change. All of these crazy things you see, down the road you see all these high school programs try to do these things they saw in drum corps, and they'll shell out the money for it... When there are people like you in [drum corps] and that's all they get, that's dangerous.

In my three seasons, I marched with just three other music education majors from Ball State. My university experience differs from most of the future educators I marched with. I had Dr. Gerrity as a professor, constantly reminding me of these same points of consideration throughout my education. I cannot speak for the training others got outside of drum corps, so I cannot speak for how they will react to the operational model we saw employed at Blue Stars, but as far as my experience goes, my teacher training had a tremendous influence on my perception of the effectiveness of drum corps education.

Early in my Ball State career, I was introduced to the ideas of Swiss educator Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, particularly his concept of Eurhythmics. Developed as a kinesthetic approach to music, Eurhythmics focuses on how students respond physically with their bodies through time and space. This awareness between physical and musical ideas relates directly to the visual achievement rubric for judging in drum corps. Because of my educator training, I was able to identify that aspects of our visual proficiency scores were based on concepts taught at universities as encouraged educational practices. Music and motion are paired in the drum corps activity by definition. Without staffs needing to adapt instruction, each marching member studies music through Eurhythmics each day of tour. One respondent, a trumpet performance major, stated that, "A lot of the teaching techniques used by the staff, more along the lines of explaining concepts has helped me run sectionals outside of drum corps" (Ekstrom, 2015). Though this individual studies privately on
trumpet, the member learned effective teaching techniques that he or she still uses when working with other musicians. Like an emphasis on performance, the criticism that bad pedagogy is a trait of drum corps does not seem to be true for The Blue Stars. One must consider where, then, these bad habits and negative perceptions are coming from.

When speaking about the quality of instruction, Dr. Gavin (2015) stated:

The people who like to criticize this activity have plenty of people that they can fixate on as being the wrong example and say "this is the way drum corps is," but that is just as ignorant as me going to the local middle school and saying "Oh, this is a bad school, because Mrs. Smith's third period English is being taught ineffectively." That has nothing to do with the school. It has everything to do with that individual teacher.

The same concept is true of individual learners. In a class that is being taught effectively, there are bound to be students who struggle to keep up. In a drum corps environment led by highly qualified educators, there are bound to be performers who do not meet the desired standards. At this point, the educators and the activity can only be held partially responsible for any bad habits students return with. A drum corps critic once stated that the activity teaches one method of breathing and one method of articulation, and that method is often wrong. How, then, does this differ from a student who developed a bad habit on their own or studied with a private teacher with a different approach to playing the instrument? This is where many of the biases against the activity become blanket statements with little justification.
CONCLUSION

Individual educators and performers in drum corps do not and should not define the activity as a whole. The overwhelming majority of members indicated a positive experience as a result of marching drum corps. Data from my research, quotes from university music educators who have been involved in the activity, and my own experiences, such as the ones contained in my memoir, support my hypothesis that drum corps is a positive experience for student musicians. Discouraging this experience for young people is discouraging a very real possibility for growth. Many of the criticisms of the activity are based on what individuals experienced twenty or thirty years ago. The activity is rapidly evolving. The standards of the 80s and 90s no longer apply to the activity today. Participants are being taught by some of the nation’s top educators, and those educators are using techniques with a foundation in quality music education. The overwhelming majority of experiences are positive. “Blanket labels are the tools of people who don’t want to think deeper on the subject” (Gavin, 2015). I have thought deeply. I have looked deeply. The results are in. For members of The Blue Stars Drum and Bugle Corps, the activity has been a positive experience with quality educational outcomes.
Works Cited


Appendix:

Data Collection Questionnaire
# Perceptions of Musical Growth as a Result of Marching Drum Corps

Evaluating the effects of marching with The Blue Stars Drum and Bugle Corps on student musicianship and education.

Please read each question carefully, noting that the scale for your responses is subject to change each question.

* Required

## 1. I believe that the fundamentals in the horn routine made me a better player. *
1) Very Strongly Disagree 2) Strongly Disagree 3) Disagree 4) Agree 5) Strongly Agree 6) Very Strongly Agree

Mark only one oval.

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<td>Very Strongly Disagree</td>
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## 2. I believe that singing warmups helped make me a better performer. *
1) Very Strongly Disagree 2) Strongly Disagree 3) Disagree 4) Agree 5) Strongly Agree 6) Very Strongly Agree

Mark only one oval.

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## 3. I believe I have better tone as a result of marching drum corps. *
1) Very Strongly Disagree 2) Strongly Disagree 3) Disagree 4) Agree 5) Strongly Agree 6) Very Strongly Agree

Mark only one oval.

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<td>Very Strongly Agree</td>
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4. I believe I play better in **time** as a result of marching drum corps.*
   1) Very Strongly Disagree 2) Strongly Disagree 3) Disagree 4) Agree 5) Strongly Agree 6) Very Strongly Agree
   Mark only one oval.

5. I believe that **breathing blocks** were an effective rehearsal strategy.*
   1) Very Strongly Disagree 2) Strongly Disagree 3) Disagree 4) Agree 5) Strongly Agree 6) Very Strongly Agree
   Mark only one oval.

6. I believe that my ability to play expressively has been negatively impacted by drum corps.*
   1) Very Strongly Agree 2) Strongly Agree 3) Agree 4) Disagree 5) Strongly Disagree 6) Very Strongly Disagree
   Mark only one oval.

7. I believe that I play with better technical facility as a result of marching drum corps.*
   1) Very Strongly Disagree 2) Strongly Disagree 3) Disagree 4) Agree 5) Strongly Agree 6) Very Strongly Agree
   Mark only one oval.

*Note: The options for each statement are 1) Very Strongly Disagree, 2) Strongly Disagree, 3) Disagree, 4) Agree, 5) Strongly Agree, and 6) Very Strongly Agree. Mark only one oval for each statement.
8. **I believe that singing negatively affected my ability as a performer.**
   1) Very Strongly Agree 2) Strongly Agree 3) Agree 4) Disagree 5) Strongly Disagree 6) Very Strongly Disagree
   *Mark only one oval.*

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</table>
   Very Strongly Agree | | | | | | |
   Very Strongly Disagree | | | | | | |

9. **I believe that my tone has suffered as a result of marching drum corps.**
   1) Very Strongly Agree 2) Strongly Agree 3) Agree 4) Disagree 5) Strongly Disagree 6) Very Strongly Disagree
   *Mark only one oval.*

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</table>
   Very Strongly Agree | | | | | | |
   Very Strongly Disagree | | | | | | |

10. **I believe that drum corps has helped my intonation/ear training.**
    1) Very Strongly Disagree 2) Strongly Disagree 3) Disagree 4) Agree 5) Strongly Agree 6) Very Strongly Agree
    *Mark only one oval.*

    | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
    |---|---|---|---|---|---|
    Very Strongly Disagree | | | | | | |
    Very Strongly Agree | | | | | | |

11. **I believe that breathing blocks were a detrimental rehearsal strategy.**
    1) Very Strongly Agree 2) Strongly Agree 3) Agree 4) Disagree 5) Strongly Disagree 6) Very Strongly Disagree
    *Mark only one oval.*

    | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
    |---|---|---|---|---|---|
    Very Strongly Agree | | | | | | |
    Very Strongly Disagree | | | | | | |

12. **I believe that my technical facility has suffered as a result of marching drum corps.**
    1) Very Strongly Agree 2) Strongly Agree 3) Agree 4) Disagree 5) Strongly Disagree 6) Very Strongly Disagree
    *Mark only one oval.*

    | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
    |---|---|---|---|---|---|
    Very Strongly Agree | | | | | | |
    Very Strongly Disagree | | | | | | |
13. I would utilize a similar brass routine in an educational rehearsal environment. *
   1) Very Strongly Disagree 2) Strongly Disagree 3) Disagree 4) Agree 5) Strongly Agree 6) Very Strongly Agree
   Mark only one oval.

14. I believe mouthpiece buzzing warmups made it harder to play well. *
   1) Very Strongly Agree 2) Strongly Agree 3) Agree 4) Disagree 5) Strongly Disagree 6) Very Strongly Disagree
   Mark only one oval.

15. I believe that drum corps has helped me play more expressively. *
   1) Very Strongly Disagree 2) Strongly Disagree 3) Disagree 4) Agree 5) Strongly Agree 6) Very Strongly Agree
   Mark only one oval.

16. I would use singing in an educational rehearsal setting. *
   1) Very Strongly Disagree 2) Strongly Disagree 3) Disagree 4) Agree 5) Strongly Agree 6) Very Strongly Agree
   Mark only one oval.

17. I believe that my sense of timing has suffered as a result of marching drum corps. *
   1) Very Strongly Agree 2) Strongly Agree 3) Agree 4) Disagree 5) Strongly Disagree 6) Very Strongly Disagree
   Mark only one oval.
18. I would use breathing blocks in an educational rehearsal setting.*
   1) Very Strongly Disagree 2) Strongly Disagree 3) Disagree 4) Agree 5) Strongly Agree 6) Very Strongly Agree
   *Mark only one oval.

19. I believe mouthpiece buzzing helped me as a brass musician.*
   1) Very Strongly Disagree 2) Strongly Disagree 3) Disagree 4) Agree 5) Strongly Agree 6) Very Strongly Agree
   *Mark only one oval.

20. I believe that drum corps has made my intonation/ear training worse.*
   1) Very Strongly Agree 2) Strongly Agree 3) Agree 4) Disagree 5) Strongly Disagree 6) Very Strongly Disagree
   *Mark only one oval.

21. As a whole, I believe that my knowledge of music grew as a result of marching drum corps.*
   1) Very Strongly Disagree 2) Strongly Disagree 3) Disagree 4) Agree 5) Strongly Agree 6) Very Strongly Agree
   *Mark only one oval.
22. **I would use mouthpiece buzzing in an educational rehearsal setting.*
   1) Very Strongly Disagree 2) Strongly Disagree 3) Disagree 4) Agree 5) Strongly Agree 6) Very Strongly Agree
   **Mark only one oval.**

   1 2 3 4 5 6

   Very Strongly Disagree 0 0 0 0 0 0 Very Strongly Agree

23. **I believe the fundamentals in the horn routine had a negative impact on my playing.*
   1) Very Strongly Agree 2) Strongly Agree 3) Agree 4) Disagree 5) Strongly Disagree 6) Very Strongly Disagree
   **Mark only one oval.**

   1 2 3 4 5 6

   Very Strongly Agree 0 0 0 0 0 0 Very Strongly Disagree

24. **As a whole, I believe that my knowledge of music EDUCATION grew as a result of marching drum corps.*
   1) Very Strongly Disagree 2) Strongly Disagree 3) Disagree 4) Agree 5) Strongly Agree 6) Very Strongly Agree
   **Mark only one oval.**

   1 2 3 4 5 6

   Very Strongly Disagree 0 0 0 0 0 0 Very Strongly Agree

25. **Are there any ways not listed above that marching drum corps has had musical benefits?**
   If yes, please explain.

   ___________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________
26. **Are there any ways not listed above that marching drum corps has had a negative musical impact?**

If yes, please explain.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

27. **Others have noticed an improvement in my overall musicianship since marching drum corps.**

If yes, please define.

*Check all that apply.*

- [ ] Private Lessons Teacher
- [ ] Band Director
- [ ] Others have not commented positively on my musicianship.
- [ ] Other: ____________________________

28. **Others have noticed additional flaws in my playing since marching drum corps.**

If yes, please define.

*Check all that apply.*

- [ ] Private Lessons Teacher
- [ ] Band Director
- [ ] Others have not commented negatively on my musicianship.
- [ ] Other: ____________________________

29. **Years Marched**

What years were you in the Blue Stars hornline? Check all that apply.

*Check all that apply.*

- [ ] 2010
- [ ] 2011
- [ ] 2012
- [ ] 2013
- [ ] 2014
30. **What Instrument Did You March?**

Please indicate whether this is your primary or secondary instrument. *Mark only one oval.*

- Trumpet - Primary
- Trumpet - Secondary
- Mellophone - Primary (Horn/Trumpet)
- Mellophone - Secondary
- Baritone/Euphonium - Primary
- Baritone/Euphonium - Secondary
- Tuba - Primary
- Tuba - Secondary

31. **Are you a music major? If so please select your specific major. If not listed, please list your music major via "other."**

If not, please select "I am not a music major." *Mark only one oval.*

- Music Performance
- Music Education
- Music Theory/Composition
- Music Media Production
- I am not a music major
- Other:

32. **My high school marching program was...**

Choose the option that best describes your HS marching experience. *Mark only one oval.*

- <50 members
- 50 < members < 100
- 100 < members < 150
- 150 < members < 200
- 200 < members < 250
- 250+ members
33. **My high school marching program was...**
Choose the option that best describes your HS marching experience. 
*Mark only one oval.*

- ○ Very Low Quality
- ○ Below Average Quality
- ○ Average Quality
- ○ Above Average Quality
- ○ Very Good Quality

34. **My high school marching program was...**
Choose the option that best describes your HS marching experience. 
*Mark only one oval.*

- ○ Competitive
- ○ Non-competitive