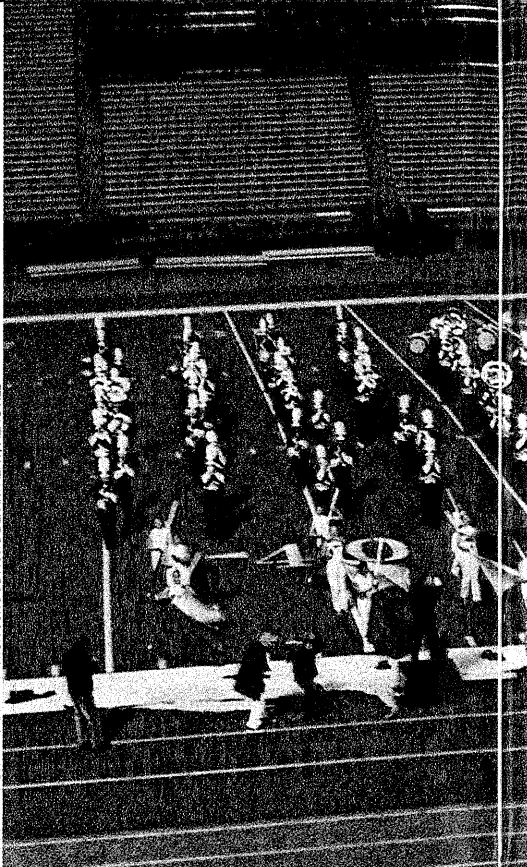


# TEACHING THE VALUES OF

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# COMPETITION

I first learned about the values of competition as a member of the 1989 Star of Indiana Drum and Bugle Corps. Because we played more than thirty shows that summer, it was common to compete two nights in a row. I vividly remember one such occasion. Our first show was outstanding, and we finished second. Everyone was upset and depressed. The following night we did not play our best, but we won the show. Everyone was happy, celebrating the victory.

The response to these two shows had a profound impact on me. It bothered me that some preferred playing a subpar show and winning to playing an excellent show and losing. The competitive result took priority over the

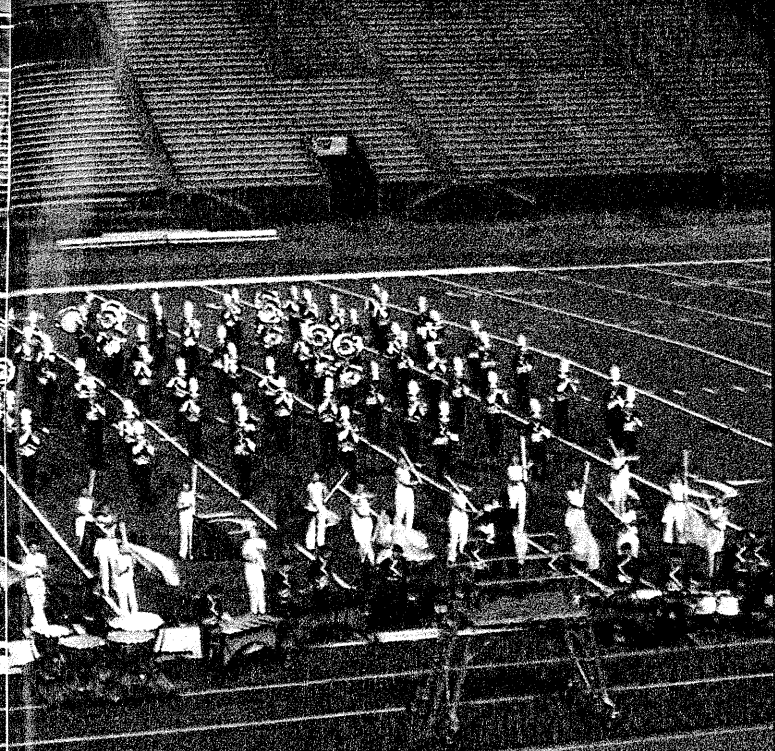
quality of our performance.

My stance has also been fueled by teaching drum corps, teaching high school band in Texas, adjudicating numerous marching band festivals, and talking to my students who came from competitive high school programs.

## The Pros of Competition

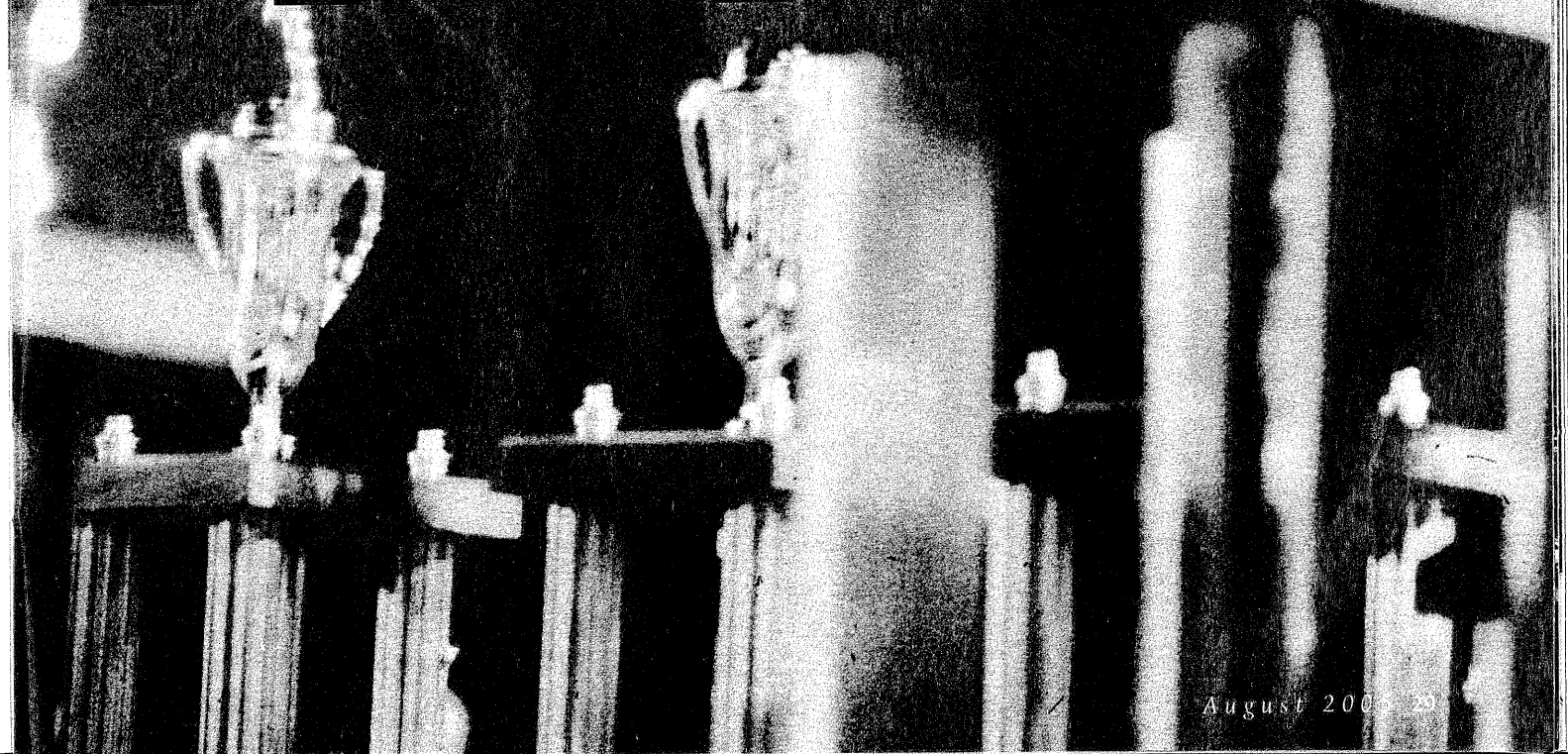
Band competitions offer several

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BY PAUL BUYER

# TION



positive and educational benefits, such as establishing goals, instilling motivation, and providing feedback. Goals are established by scheduling competitions and planning target dates for preparation, the same way a group prepares for a concert. Once the commitment is made, goals are clear and rehearsal schedules can be defined.

Competitions also provide students with instant motivation. Performing for (or against) other bands and receiving scores from judges provide plenty of incentive. The audiences are also more attentive and receptive than those at a football game. In addition, there is the opportunity to see and hear other bands perform.

Competitions also offer feedback from judges in the form of tapes and written comments. These comments can be powerful educational tools and can help students improve by providing immediate, specific, and constructive feedback.

Life skills such as hard work, preparation, confidence, commitment, consistency, attitude, leadership, teamwork, and focus can be developed by participating in competitions. Although band members can learn these skills without competing, their value is reinforced when a group receives rankings, ratings, and scores. Students become better people.

Competition can provide a healthy, effective, and meaningful way to pursue a passion for music. With the proper approach and the right values in mind, competition can provide the spark that some students need to get excited about band. It can also be an effective recruiting tool.

### **The Cons of Competition**

Unfortunately, marching band is often treated as an Olympic sport, and winning becomes the ultimate goal. One of the most alarming trends I've noticed is students becoming conditioned to respond only to motivation associated with competition. This motivation, although very effective, is extrinsic. But

without competition as part of their musical experience, students struggle to see a meaningful and worthwhile reason for their effort and commitment. They ask, "Why am I doing this?"

I believe students deserve the opportunity to develop intrinsic motivation even though, by definition, we cannot force or require it in our students. Rather than being dependent on others to motivate them, they become self-motivated. We need to teach our students the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. If competitive bands were intrinsically motivated, they would gain a unique perspective and newfound appreciation for what they're doing and why they're doing it. Students would see the big picture.

A final concern about band competition is the burnout factor. For many competitive high school marching bands, the educational value of performing one show throughout the season is, at best, questionable. Although there is much to be gained trying to perfect a show, many students get burned out working on the same music and drill for such a long period of time. Also, aside from not being exposed to a variety of repertoire and musical styles, the sole purpose behind this quest for perfection is meeting the criteria established by adjudicators and the desire to succeed under those criteria.

### **A Refreshing Philosophy**

In April 2004, I attended a leadership conference in Atlanta to hear former UCLA basketball coach John Wooden speak. Named "The Greatest Coach of the Twentieth Century" by ESPN, Wooden had coached teams that had won ten national championships in twelve years—including seven in a row and an eighty-eight-game winning streak—all records that may never be broken.

One of the things that made Wooden such an extraordinary teacher, leader, and coach was his philosophy on competition and the lessons

he taught his players. After hearing him speak that day and reading his book *My Personal Best*, I noticed that the values of competition that Wooden taught in basketball were healthier than the values often taught in band.

His philosophy on competition can be applied to any field and can be broken down into three core values and beliefs: what counts is the effort, winning is not the goal, and success is doing your best.

### **What Counts Is the Effort**

Effort was the quality that Wooden demanded from his players above all else. It was more important to him for each player to give 100 percent than it was to win a game. Wooden did not believe in winning ugly. He believed in reaching one's potential by working hard every day to improve. What was the primary reason Wooden put so much emphasis on effort and not winning and losing? He said, "You have control over that. The other you don't" (John Wooden and Steve Jamison, *My Personal Best*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004, pp. 4–5).

When a band's goal is to win and it does not, a variety of responses can follow. Blame, anger, envy, low morale, and even hostile rivalries can develop. We must understand that we have no control over how another band performs. What we do have control over is our own preparation and performance. Wooden's philosophy can be applied here:

We can't control what those other fellows do to get ready. We can only control what we do to get ready. . . . Let's worry about our own preparation. . . . That's *all* I can do—to come close to *my* level of competency, not somebody else's.  
(Wooden, p. 85)

### **Winning Is Not the Goal**

According to Wooden,

Competitiveness must be focused exclusively on the process

of what you are doing rather than the result of that effort [winning or losing]. I never mention winning to my players. I never refer to "beating" an opponent. Instead, I constantly urged them to strive for the self-satisfaction that always comes from knowing you did the best you could to become the best of which you are capable. That's what I wanted: the total effort. That was the measurement I used, never the final score. (Wooden, p. 88)

Why aren't we teaching these values more in band? Teaching the values of competition means keeping our priorities straight. If a legendary basketball coach never talked about winning or beating someone else, then why don't more music educators do the same? Taking pleasure in "beating other bands" and impressing the judges should not be the priority. Performing our best should be. One of the greatest lessons John Wooden learned from his father was, "Don't try to be better than someone else, but never cease trying to be the best you can be" (Wooden, p. 4).

If band programs taught this value more, competition would be much healthier. According to Wooden,

It is never simply a case of win or lose, because I do not demand victory. What I demand—and that's exactly the word—is that each player expend every available source of energy to achieve his personal best. Victory may be the by-product, but the significance of the score is secondary to the importance of finding out how good you can be. (Wooden, p. 177)

### Success Is Doing Your Best

Wooden defined success as "peace of mind, which is a direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you did your best to become the best that you are capable of becoming" (Wooden, p. 87). If you look at how our society defines

success, chances are that this would not be the definition you would find.

In band rooms across the country, trophy cases are prominently displayed for all to see. Often, trophies, medals, plaques, and certificates become affirmation that students are being taught the right values in music education. "Success and recognition of success," according to leadership expert John Maxwell, "are not the same thing" ("Let's Talk about Books," *Maximum Impact Direction in Leadership* audio lessons, 8, no. 8, 2004). Success in band does not come from winning awards; it comes from the things we can control: our effort, a desire to perform at a high level, and reaching our potential.

It is said that success is a journey, not a destination. The journey to success refers to the process, the effort, and the daily commitment to improve that Wooden so strongly emphasized. Arriving at a destination implies the end of the road, and for many, the end of the effort.

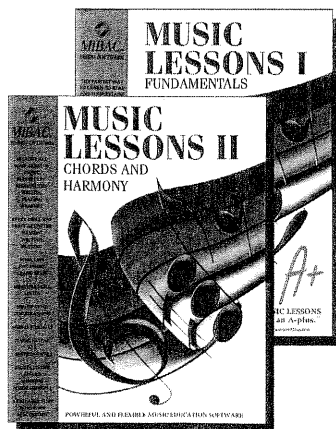
COMPETITION IS HERE TO STAY. IT works. It motivates. It's fun. It creates goals, provides feedback, and

presents challenges. So it's safe to assume that many bands will continue to compete, and many directors will continue to emphasize marching band competitions for years to come. I believe competition has the potential to help our students become better musicians and that competitive bands can be more successful in developing self-discipline, good practice habits, high expectations, and pride than bands that do not compete.

Whatever our attitude toward competition, it is ultimately up to each of us to decide how we manage it in our programs. What kind of experiences do we want our students to have? What do we believe is most important? Do we walk our talk?

In the end, we compete against ourselves more than anyone else. How often do we give everything we have? How often do we take our work as far as we can? Athletic coach Casey Coleman (quoted at [www.coachmeyer.com](http://www.coachmeyer.com), 2004) put it in perspective: "Your toughest competition in life is anyone who is willing to work harder than you." ☺

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