

Lessons Learned On and Off the Field

BY PAUL BUYER

I have been a sports fan all my life. Growing up in the Chicago area, I followed the Cubs, Bears, and Bulls on a regular basis. In high school, I played on the golf team and played in band. In college, I started teaching drumlines and later marched drum corps. As I became more involved with marching percussion at the college level, I started to notice that marching band and football were becoming a unique laboratory of study. The more I explored, the more interested I became in the lessons common to sports, music, and life.

I have studied leadership for several years, and it has quickly become a passion. Many of the lessons I teach my drumline during the season are about life. These are not lessons on stick heights, timing, or technique, but lessons on teamwork, leadership, and commitment. These are lessons that, hopefully, my students will apply to their lives as they prepare for their careers. Marching percussion and marching band activities can serve as a vehicle for teaching our students some of life's most valuable lessons. Following are nine lessons I have learned on and off the field.

HARD WORK

"There is no substitute for work." — *Vince Lombardi, Hall of Fame football coach, Green Bay Packers*

It is no secret that to achieve anything significant in life, hard work is required. People who work hard have initiative and a mind-set to go after something. They exhibit determination, persistence, and relentless effort. They arrive early and stay late, burn the midnight oil, and go above and beyond what is expected. People who work hard are passionate, driven, self-motivated, and self-disciplined.

To achieve success in a marching percussion ensemble, all members must be willing to work hard. They must practice individually, memorize their music, and give their best effort in rehearsals. They

must be willing to have sectionals outside of rehearsal and spend time maintaining their equipment. In a drumline, as well as in the workplace, a strong work ethic is not optional. Author and coach Bruce Brown states that once good work habits are developed, it essential that all success enjoyed by the individual or group is attributed back to the preparation that preceded the performance.

PREPARATION

"Failing to prepare is preparing to fail." — *John Wooden, Hall of Fame basketball coach, UCLA*

Preparation is the key to success. Although preparation does not guarantee a successful outcome, it sure puts you in position for one. At the beginning of the season, I talk to my drumline about the importance of preparation. The following is an excerpt from my syllabus:

You must practice outside of rehearsal. Since we usually have just two weeks to prepare a show, the playability and memorization deadlines will require you to learn your music sooner rather than later. This will give us more time to clean the show and will give you more times to run through it with the band successfully. By doing this, you will become confident in your performance. Musicians need consistent repetition over a period of time to perform at a high level. "Cramming" does not work when memorizing music. Cramming will always lead to your mind "breaking" when it comes time to perform. To help you memorize your music, repetition, visualization, vocalization, taking one chunk at a time, and practicing with recordings are all recommended.

I also emphasize the importance of having quality rehearsals. Eliminating the myth that rehearsals are not as important as performances will get the drumline and the band in the mind-set that in order to have great performances, they must have great rehearsals. Having

sufficient rehearsal time to prepare music and drill at a high level is also critical to a successful performance.

CONFIDENCE

"The biggest thing is to have a mind-set and a belief you can win every tournament going in." — *Tiger Woods, PGA Tour golfer*

This quote is unprecedented. No professional golfers in their right minds, until Tiger, could ever conceive of winning each tournament they entered. But Tiger Woods has complete confidence in his abilities because of his outstanding work ethic, meticulous preparation, and past successes. Developing a strong work ethic leads to good preparation, good preparation leads to confidence, and confidence leads to believing in yourself and trusting in the fact that your preparation and hard work will pay off in the long run. As author and leadership expert John Maxwell observes, "Hope is not a strategy."

For musicians, confidence is absolutely essential to performing well. For educators, it is very important to instill confidence in our students. Many times, the turning point is when a leader shows more confidence in group members than they have in themselves. I often encourage my drumline to "get over the hump" in terms of memorizing music and learning a show. One technique I use is a confidence scale. I ask them, "On a scale from one to ten, what is your confidence level?" If, for example, the bass drum line is at a seven, they immediately become aware of the gap between where they are and where they want to be. Another technique is to have the drumline play a phrase "clean" four out of five times. If they can do this, they will become confident in their ability to play clean consistently and feel like there is an excellent chance of playing clean in performance.

CONSISTENCY

“Excellence is not a singular act. You are what you repeatedly do.”—*Phil Jackson, head basketball coach, Los Angeles Lakers*

When I was in drum corps, I vividly remember my instructors saying, “Good job. Now play it that way *every time*.” Although I understood the intent, I did not believe this was realistic. To play something the same way hundreds, even thousands, of times did not seem possible; however, making the effort to try taught me the importance of consistency. Baseball great Willie Mays said, “It isn’t hard to be good from time to time...what’s tough is being good every day.”

Striving to play at a high level in every warm-up, rehearsal, and performance throughout the season is an important step to becoming an excellent drumline. Whenever I start to sense a lack of effort or focus with my students, I tell them, “You are not a faucet. You can’t turn it on and off whenever you feel like it.” Like confidence, consistency is a mind-set. Instead of my students being surprised when they play well, they are surprised when they do not. If a drumline plays “clean” only one out of five times in rehearsal, the chances of playing clean in performance are not very high. Football coach Marty Schottenheimer says, “You have to set the expectations as high as they can possibly be. Even if you fall short, the pursuit of it alone will make you a better player.”

COMMITMENT

“Perform at your best by choice rather than chance.”—*Gary Mack, author and sports psychologist*

People’s commitment, or lack of commitment, will always make or break an organization. Because commitment is a choice, extraordinary things happen when everyone on the team makes a decision to buy into an organization’s goals and vision. Committed people finish what they start and do what they say they are going to do. They are people who can be counted on, depended on, and trusted—especially in times of adversity.

In a marching percussion ensemble, students make a commitment in a variety of ways. They must demonstrate good attendance, show up on time, be prepared for rehearsals, and embrace

the time commitment marching band requires. They must make a commitment to each other and put the group ahead of themselves. They must also make a commitment to the goals and philosophies of the organization. Although students may say they are committed, in reality they may not be. Head Colorado football coach Gary Barnett says, “We know what a person thinks, not by what he tells us he thinks, but by his actions.”

ATTITUDE

“Your attitude is a choice.”—*John Maxwell, author and founder of Injoy, Inc.*

When I think of someone who has a positive attitude, I think of Lance Armstrong. His incredible story of overcoming cancer and winning the Tour de France four times was largely a result of his positive attitude. Many people mistakenly think that one’s attitude is a result of circumstances that happen *to* you. In reality, attitude is a choice. We have the power to decide how we respond to a situation.

I have found that when an attitude problem arises in a drumline, it is usually the result of selfishness. For example, if students choose to have a negative attitude about audition results, musical difficulty, or being a team player, I make it clear that the best interests of the group will always be put first. A positive attitude and the ability to get along with others are very important to becoming a member of the drumline as well as evaluating people for potential leadership positions in the band. John Maxwell states, “Good attitudes among players don’t guarantee a team’s success, but bad attitudes guarantee its failure.”

LEADERSHIP

“The performance of an organization is the ultimate measure of its leader.”—*Colin Powell, U.S. Secretary of State*

Leadership is the ultimate responsibility. It is not based on position, seniority, or title, but on character, competence, trust, respect, and communication. Leaders lead by example and care about the people they work with. They are optimistic, organized, passionate, loyal, dependable, selfless, committed, and consistent. They set the tone and get people to work together toward a common goal. They are connected to the vision of the organization and are committed to excellence.

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According to Maxwell, "Look at any team that has achieved success and you will find that it has strong leadership."

In a marching percussion ensemble, leadership should not be based on talent alone. The best players are not always the best leaders, because a player's chops and musical ability cannot measure one's attitude, character, and work ethic. Section leaders in a marching band are people who can separate their professional leadership responsibilities

from the personal relationships with their friends. Powell says, "Good leadership involves responsibility to the welfare of the group, which means that some people will get angry at your actions and decisions." To truly provide effective leadership in a drumline or marching band, student leaders must share the same philosophy as their directors and buy into the vision of the organization.

TEAMWORK

"Teamwork is not a matter of persuading people to set aside personal ambitions for the greater good. It's a matter of recognizing that your personal ambitions and the ambitions of the team are one and the same."—*Pat Summitt, head basketball coach, University of Tennessee*

Teamwork is the willingness and ability of a group of people to work together to accomplish a common goal. It is also the desire to belong to something bigger than ourselves and achieve something we cannot achieve on our own. Teamwork requires people to respect and support each other, be responsible to each other, and deal with conflicts constructively. Team building is a challenging and ongoing process. According to peak-performance expert Jeff Janssen, "Each team and each new season is different...because of the continual influx of new players, the departure of past players, and the maturation of current players."

In order for a marching percussion ensemble to reach its potential, *everyone* on the team must buy into three concepts of teamwork. The first concept is appreciating each person's role on the team. Each individual must feel important and that he or she is contributing. Nothing will destroy a drumline faster than treating snare drummers like kings and others like peasants. The second concept is putting the team ahead of individual agendas. To look at the big picture and do what is in the best interests of the drumline or band requires maturity, sacrifice, and selflessness. The third concept is buying into the vision and embracing a common goal. According to Pat Williams, Senior Executive Vice-President of the NBA's Orlando Magic, "Those who aren't rowing are dragging their oars in the water—and a dragging oar pulls the entire boat off course. Everybody's oar must be in the water...everybody must be rowing in sync."

In his book *Championship Team Building*, Jeff Janssen presents an exercise called "Strung Together." The purpose of this exercise is to help players understand, accept, and appreciate their roles. It also demonstrates that the success of the team will depend on everyone's willingness and ability to do so.

Have everyone sit in a large circle. Hand a ball of string to a player. As this

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person holds one end of the string, have him or her toss the ball of string to a teammate. Have the first player answer the following questions about the teammate now holding the ball: "What does this person bring to this team? What do we need from this player in order to reach the goals we have set for ourselves?" Continue tossing the ball from player to player (with each person holding on to his or her end of the string), defining and appreciating everyone's roles until the entire team is holding the string. Then, ask the team what would happen if a connection is cut or a person lets go of the string.

FOCUS

"Once you reach a certain level of competency, the mental skills become as important to performance as the physical skills, if not more so."—Gary Mack

Focus and concentration are mental skills one must master to attain high performance. Focus is the ability to concentrate on the task at hand without being distracted. It means being aware, paying attention to, and noticing what is happening *while engaged* in an activity. Some examples include driving a car, reading a book, hitting a baseball, or playing a musical instrument. Basketball great Michael Jordan says, "Focus looks like a laser, not a flashlight." Other mental techniques such as visualization and imagery can also help sharpen one's focus.

It is true that the atmosphere surrounding a college football game is not the optimum environment for making music. However, if members of a marching band can stay focused on their musical performance in the midst of thousands of screaming fans, a Jumbotron screen, award presentations, bad weather, and football players kicking overhead, they have clearly developed the mental skills of a champion.

The primary focus technique I use with my drumline is to make them aware of the visual, auditory, and kinesthetic channels of learning. At different times throughout a warm-up or rehearsal, I will ask them to focus their awareness on how they look, sound, and feel *while they are playing*. This immediately focuses their attention and they are less likely to become distracted.

CONCLUSION

In order for a marching percussion ensemble to reach its full potential and achieve a high level of excellence, the players as well as the instructor(s) must adopt all nine lessons. A drumline that works hard but has members who are not committed will not achieve its goals. A drumline that prepares well but has members with bad attitudes will not achieve its goals. A drumline that has strong leadership but has members who are unwilling to work together as a team will also not achieve its goals.

Although many of these lessons are interconnected and depend upon one another, each lesson can be presented, discussed, and taught individually. Since every drumline and every situation is different, the lessons can be addressed at different times throughout the season or with certain individuals. A drumline that works hard, prepares well, plays with confidence, is consistent and committed, demonstrates a positive attitude, has strong leadership, works together as a team, and knows how to stay focused can expect to achieve the goals it sets for itself.

Bruce Brown concludes, "Don't leave it to chance. (Coaches) cannot make the assumption that simply being part of an (athletic) experience will ensure that the participants will learn these lessons. Like anything else we hope to accomplish in our sport, we must plan for it, and teach it if we want it to happen."


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