

# Secrets of Success from Top College Drumlines

Wisdom from the PASIC 2009

Marching Committee

Panel Discussion

By Paul Buyer

At PASIC 2009 in Indianapolis, the PAS Marching Committee hosted its much anticipated panel discussion, "Secrets of Success from Top College Drumlines." Panelists included **Gary Hodges**, former DCI adjudicator and current drumline instructor for The Ohio State University; **Jon Weber**, Instructor of Percussion at Michigan State University and drumline instructor for the Spartan Marching Band; **Matt Henley**, Assistant Director of Athletic Bands and drumline instructor for the Sudler Award-winning Pride of the Mountains Marching Band at Western Carolina University; and **Paul Rennick**, Director of the 15-time PAS Champion University of North Texas Indoor Drumline and Director of Percussion for the Phantom Regiment.



The purpose of the panel discussion was to ask some of the top college marching percussion instructors how they achieve excellence. This panel came together in a unique way. In fall 2007, I was on sabbatical and had the opportunity to visit seven of the top college marching bands and drumlines around the country, and I had a chance to interview the four gentlemen who subsequently participated in the panel. In addition to visiting Ohio State, Michigan State, Western Carolina, and North Texas, I also spent time at Alabama, LSU, and Arizona. I wanted to find out how their drumlines achieve excellence, and I wanted to know their secrets of success.

The result of that experience is a new book, *Marching Bands and Drumlines: Secrets of Success from the Best of the Best*, published by Meredith Music. The book is a true team effort with the four panelists featured here, PAS Marching Committee chair and University of Alabama drumline instructor Neal Flum, and all of the outstanding band directors they work with. The goal was to bring these great educators together at PASIC to talk about how they do what they do so the rest of us can learn from them.

I first asked the panelists to talk about some of the secrets of success they feel are important to achieving excellence in a marching percussion ensemble. The following edited transcription represents the best of what was said at PASIC 2009.

**Hodges:** As instructors, I think as we get into working with groups, our tendency is to work on the negatives: flams that aren't right, rolls that aren't together, balance, musicality, etc. Now, those need to be corrected. But looking for the positive things students do can sometimes get overlooked.

I talked a little bit in the book about trying to make every individual on the line feel like part



As instructors, our tendency is to work on the negatives, but looking for the positive things students do can sometimes get overlooked.

—Gary Hodges

of that line. They may do 10% of it, they may do 50% of it, or it may come down to a sectional where you're going down the line playing something; it doesn't have to be the section leader that sets the style for a particular figure, it might be a very talented freshman. Just think how important it makes that individual feel when [he or she is empowered]. When that person has ownership, and you can get all the members to feel that the show they just finished was because of *them*, they're going to be more productive. They're going to come to rehearsals feeling better, and they're going to feel better about themselves.

We sometimes think of our students as people who play, instead of people who are people. It's important to look at the individual and work on the mental side of [how they approach performing] as well as the physical/technical aspects.

The other part of it is communication. I make sure the students are on board and know what's going on. After every rehearsal, we have a meeting to go over what's good about the rehearsal, what needs to be corrected, and any scheduling details. We put a very big emphasis on communicating those kinds of things. Non-verbal communication can also be a powerful tool. During full band rehearsal, I tend to stay back if things are

going well, and if they're not, I get a little bit closer to the line. I also communicate individually, as opposed to the whole section, if an individual is having a problem. I also try to create a team atmosphere by insisting that they set their drums down together in an organized fashion. And when we put that drum on, we're in performance mode. That's the level, that's the expectation. It's not out of the norm; it's something you just do.

**Weber:** Everyone has to have the same common goal for a group to really achieve. The goal for the Michigan State Drumline is to be the best drumline possible. Everything relates to that goal, and everything else is secondary to that. The premise that the team is more important than the individual is the basic idea behind that.

Consistency is very important. Whenever you have a group that's working on such precise stuff, you're talking about incredible precision and the consistency has to be there. That goes for everything. Anything that you can control is a factor: tempo, balance, sound quality, equipment, your sticks, and the tuning. Every time we play, everything's got to be the same; it's got to be consistent.

And then *efficiency* is a big one for us. Right now, the Michigan State band is doing their seventh show of the year, and I try not to write anything where you would realize it's the seventh show of the year. I try to make it challenging for the players and fun for them to play, and fun for an audience to listen to. So efficiency is key.

Everything starts with individuals being prepared; then the ensemble can achieve and rehearsal can be what it needs to be. Every piece I write is on our drumline Website in pdf format and also as an mp3 with *Virtual Drumline*.

Another thing with efficiency is student leadership. At Michigan State, it's really important for the students to take charge of what they're doing. Tom Izzo, our men's basketball coach, says, "A player-coached team is always better than a coach-coached team." That's something we try to instill, and in the book, Neal Flum talks about his leaders being role models. If the leaders are role models and extensions of the instructor and director, that makes a huge difference.

The last thing is responsibility and accountability. At Michigan State, it's the ability to bring



The Ohio State University Marching Band



Demanding and expecting a certain level of excellence is very important.

— Matt Henley

every single player up to a level. When you're talking about a snare line, it's got to be every player at the exact same level. In a bass line, if you have one weak bass drummer, it can obliterate a musical gesture. So it's really a matter of getting everyone to that same level.

**Henley:** Something I try to do—it's the kind of thing you can't expect to just happen—is to create a culture of excellence. I firmly believe that you will get what you expect. A lot of college drumline instructors have a fear they will demand too much, and in reality, quality and students feeling good about themselves and their accomplishments are the best reasons in the world to keep those students around long term. So demanding and expecting a certain level of excellence is very important.

Another thing I try to do is have high individual responsibility to also create that culture. When students are expected to be on time, to have the gear that they need to be successful, to use correct marching shoes, to stand in the arc with their shako down ready to play at the correct time—those seem like simple things, but they're not. It is expected in the group. *That's what we do; that's the Western Way.* And that's what you have to focus on a lot of times to develop that culture I'm talking about.

Another important aspect of Western Carolina is that we are focused as a music education school. That is why we try to make our marching band a laboratory for our music education majors. A lot of my section leaders are going to be drumline instructors or band directors, and it is a pretty extensive program. We have a drumming session one night a week from January through April. Our section leaders run that. I don't just say, "Go run that"; it takes a lot of time. I meet with those guys and gals every Monday, they show me a lesson plan, we discuss it, I trim it down if necessary. We talk about how we are going to express something. How are we going to talk about this? What terminology are you going to use? It takes a lot of time, but it's worth it because those students are getting real, hands-on experience teaching, and it's paying off. It's pretty amazing to watch, and I've been really lucky in that regard to have some great students through the years. We don't have snare techs, tenor techs,

etc. It is completely on the section leaders to own that and make it good—or not.

Another thing is that they have to buy into the vision of the group. They've got to buy into the overall *personality*, if you will, of the group to be successful. To be truly excellent [as a member of] a band or a team, leadership must turn into ownership, just like Gary was talking about. They have to own the problem; they have to feel like it really is theirs. We don't have a parent group or drum instructor coming behind them to tune their drums. I quit tuning drums a long time ago. Why? Because it is *their* responsibility.

I firmly believe that competitive auditions are a must to have anything of quality. Having an audition process, even when you know every kid is going to get a spot, is still very worthwhile. Why? Because it gives them goals early, it sets the standard of what's going to be asked of them technically, and it's highly important to holding them accountable early. When they make that spot, that's a personal accomplishment; that's a goal a student accomplished before you ever have your first show. If someone gets behind, then sometimes we make a switch, and it's amazing

what that does to keep people on task and working towards their individual goals, and also to maintain. You cannot just cruise and be in our drumline. You have to continue to work.

Rehearsal time: you have to be real about what you can and cannot accomplish. We practice six hours a week total, and because we are a music laboratory for our music education students, we believe in the one-show concept: doing something fairly difficult, and trying to do it really well—cleaning through the season and including our student staff in that entire process. So we have to be real about what we can and cannot do. [Those decisions] come from the number of notes they're going to play, the number of sets they're going to march, and we try to maximize that through very efficient time management of those six hours.

You've got to keep it fun. Sometimes we, as percussionists, take ourselves a little bit too seriously, but I think you can have a balancing act: you can achieve both. We have a saying, "Hard work and good times go together; it just so happens hard work comes first."

Goals—sometimes a staff or a group has goals, but they don't tell anybody. A lot of directors go out and teach and they work really hard, but don't actually tell the group what the goal is. Often, goals are the first step to achieving excellence.

**Rennick:** It's interesting to know that every one of us does something a little different. My association with the marching band and the indoor drumline is a little divided, but it is associated. I think one of the important factors for everybody, especially young teachers, is to cultivate and develop relationships with the people that affect your life. The other thing is the amount of rehearsal time, which tends to be misperceived. The indoor drumline [at UNT] actually rehearses less than the marching band. The indoor drumline



Pride of the Mountains Marching Band at Western Carolina University

rehearses twice a week for an hour and a half at a time. I definitely believe in having more short rehearsals than in having fewer lengthy rehearsals. More often, with more focus and intensity, and fewer hours, works for us.

My teaching philosophy can be considered more content-based. The more I know and the better I know my content, the more respect I'm going to get from the players, and the more willing they are to do something I want them to do. I don't believe in the "just because I said so" message. I definitely explain to the players *why* we do things, and that eliminates a lot of problems in terms of rehearsal and people being on the same page. If they trust the content of what I know, that's priceless.

I think in general smarter kids make better players. A lot of times I'll work on the kid. I'll work on *his* knowledge and *his* content through the music, and I won't rehearse just that show over and over again. A lot of it is long-term decisions and investments in what they know.

The first point is time management. Despite how little or how much time you have, instructors are well aware that it's a race against the clock. Our indoor drumline rehearses twice a week, the marching band rehearses three times a week, plus Saturday games, plus a sectional on top of that. There's a lot of time commitment from these players, but since [the year] 2000, it's gotten less and less every year. The more the instructor has his or her act together, the less time it takes from the players.



Michigan State University Spartan Marching Band



Everything starts with individuals being prepared; then rehearsal can be what it needs to be.

—Jon Weber

I'm very adamant about this point: we never discuss other groups in a negative way—ever. There's a trap that kids can fall into, and therefore we don't try to make ourselves seem better by making other people seem worse. Saying what they did was not as good as what we did is a waste of time. We focus on ourselves, we focus on the positives, and if we are discussing another group, it's in a positive way—what they do well.

Long-term investing in technique and musicianship [is important]. A lot of decisions are being made [in marching percussion] that tend to be very trendy, and are short-term decisions. Something that takes time and effort and a lot of thought, that's the way we do it—long-term goals. We don't take too many shortcuts, and we invest some time in what's going on.

Students respond really well to directors who know what they want. If I was uncertain about what I wanted them to do, there would be a general vagueness and an uncertainty in the group. The clearer I am, the more proactive, the better it is. My philosophy is not the same as everyone else's, but it's consistently "non-punishment based." If they don't achieve something, I don't punish them for it. About 12 years ago, I decided I was going to try to not use any variations of the words "not" and "no" in my teaching. Many rehearsals I would just tell them what I wanted them to do rather than describing what they just did wrong. That was a huge shift in the way I taught. It's another time-saving device as well, just telling them what you want them to do, rather than describing their mistakes to them. A lot of mistakes players make are not intentional. They don't *try* to make a mistake. Once you accept that, it's a much more positive experience.

I work more on their desire levels than on the stuff they're doing. I tap into trying to make

them *want* to do it more—the idea being it's not work, it's fun, and they'll enjoy it more.

The last thing is that good design is really important and can save you a lot of time as well. For example, I've seen a lot of good groups play music that was fairly questionable, or it didn't sound that good, or it didn't fit. Good writing and good design transcends performance. In other words, they'll learn something from that, and they're going to appreciate it, they're going to feel better about it, and all those other things we're talking about usually fall into line as well.

**Audience member:** What's the most significant adjustment you have had to make in your teaching in the last ten years?

**Henley:** Speed and tempo in terms of writing. Style of writing has changed along with the rudimental demands. Totally different touch, different feel, as well as the visual demands.

**Rennick:** Some of the fundamental things don't change at all. You can look at the generational changes. Some of the trends that exist are so pervasive. They occur everywhere, like the story of the triangle player using a 3-inch, 6-inch, and 9-inch method was crazy to me. That's generally the knowledge that every kid comes in with now. It's almost like the kids have the keys to the Ferrari but they didn't get their license yet. They can do things from a speed standpoint that are great, but the warmth and the personality and some of the musical things that go along with it are maybe one step removed.

**Henley:** To follow up on what Paul said, kids get extremely excited about playing the latest and coolest hybrid rudiments they saw on the Internet. Unfortunately, they don't really have the skill set yet, much less the technique, to play those things. You'll have a kid who can play some crazy dog-dut-cheese lick, but has no idea what a ratamaque is.

**Rennick:** Now that I think about it, the main thing that has changed in the last ten years is *duts*. The acceptance and the forgiveness and the [ability] to ignore that is amazing to me. I just judged a show where the whole line duted as loud as they

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—Paul Rennick

could to count off silence, where no one played. Then one person in the pit played. From a cult-like standpoint, I think we don't even hear that anymore; it becomes part of [the performance]. Can you imagine the Chicago Symphony dutting the attack to Beethoven's 5th? There are some things that are accepted in our environment that are not accepted in others. It becomes part of the sound and it seems normal to the players. If your inspiration is taken from other types of music and music as a whole, I think these things would not be as inbred [in marching percussion].

**Audience member:** Can you comment on recruiting?

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**Hodges:** We send out videos on our marching style, we have summer sessions where students come in and work on their technique, we present off-campus concerts, we come out with recordings every couple of years. During the summer, we put a lot of the recruiting responsibility on the squad leaders to make phone calls.

**Weber:** We put on a Day of Percussion every year where we bring in guest artists, we do at least two clinics every year somewhere in the state of Michigan, we have the Website, and hopefully some of the best recruiting that's done is our playing, and if it's on YouTube, that it's good enough that somebody might be attracted to the program. And finally, as Gary mentioned, when our students do drum corps, winter drumlines, etc., people become attracted to Michigan State through that vehicle.

**Henley:** I think quality is your best recruiter. The better you can be, the better players will gravitate to you. That seems simple, but you also have to make sure that the quality players can see that. We try to go off campus as much as possible, go to where the good groups are and play for them, do clinics and/or performances, etc. Our springtime sessions are open to any high school student who would like to come. Media

development is also a big deal; kids love that stuff. Getting everything out there and online, hoping that it's good.

**Rennick:** One underrated recruiting tool that I find works really well is asking the current players to get some people to come in. They're doing it, they know what it takes, and they know the level of their friends, and they know how to supply their group with more of their friends. It surprisingly works, and you can get a lot of people that way.

**Hodges:** We started a "Drum Pad Club," and it's student run, and any high school or middle student can come to the university for two hours on Monday nights [and participate]. This gives students the opportunity to come in and work with our students. The beauty of that is that it isn't run by our squad leaders, but by other members of the section who want to develop their leadership and instructing capabilities.

**Buyer:** In addition to the quality of the product, the quality of the experience is as important, if not more important. Whenever I'm meeting with a student and his or her parents, I tell them about the program, but what I really do is I send them to my students. The students are going to tell the recruits why they want to be a part of this—why they are doing it in the first place. I can say that, but they're the ones who really know. I think they're our best recruiting tool—the kids we have.

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University of North Texas Indoor Drumline

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