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Power & Class Marching Minutemen makin' lots of noise

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The noise! Ohhh, the noise!

Take a walk behind the University of Massachusetts' Mullins Center this season just about any afternoon, and that's what you're likely to walk away saying.

Each day during the school week, hundreds of members of the university's Marching Band haul their instruments down the dirty, steep sides of the Mullins Center's practice field, forming numerous ensembles that during practice sessions can become downright deafening.

Tubas compete with trumpets for sonic supremacy. Flute notes fight the noise of chattering students in an attempt to distinguish themselves on the afternoon air.

It's an environment in which it takes dedication to practice day after day - to put in the time to prepare, learn and fine-tune the performances it takes to be a part of the "Power and Class," the nickname the band has earned over the years.

"There's nothing really easy or logical about doing ! this," said Thomas P. Hannum of Hadley, the band's associate director. "You have to do it because you love it."

Organized in 1935, "Power and Class" has become a force to reckon with over the past three decades, developing to the point where it was honored in 1998 with the Louis C. Sudler Intercollegiate Marching Band Trophy, an award bestowed on one of the nation's top marching bands every year.

"It put our band on a list with Michigan and Michigan State and UCLA and Illinois," said band director George N. Parks, noting some of the preeminent powers in the collegiate marching-band world.

"It's kind of a feather in the cap of the band that it has grown the way it has without having (the support structures at some of the larger universities)."

The reasons the band has succeeded on such a high playing field are many, band members said, beginning with the bubbly enthusiasm Parks and his staff have for the craft they teach.

"George Parks is an incredible director," said Amanda M. Woolley, 18, flutist from Point Pleasant, N.J. "He's like the god of the marching-band world."

Director of the university's marching band for 28 years, Parks has built a national reputation with his energetic leadership, and was recently tapped to lead the Bands of America Honor Marching Band during the 2005 Tournament of Roses Parade in Pasadena, Calif.

Hannum, a member of the Drum Corps International Hall of Fame, is also key to the success of the "Power and Class," band members say.

"I like how Thom has kept it old school here," said Heidi K. Stults, 19, a sophomore from Carlsbad, Calif. "He tries to make you individually a better drummer, rather than just having a clean line (where everyone's timing is the same)."

Numerous students in the program said that watching the UMass Marching Band perform at events such as the Bands of America Grand Nationals, a gathering of some of the brightest high school band students in the country, is what attracted them to the university.

"Just watching the guys in the drum line got me really excited and inspired to apply to school here," said Olin R. Johannessen, 21, senior member of the drum line from Portsmouth, N.H.

Hannum and Parks, who played together in a drum and bugle corps at West Chester University in Pennsylvania, believe their smaller band can do things people in a stadium of 100,000 people would never be able to pick up or appreciate.

"We're able to be more subtle," said Parks. "We're able to play things that are softer and prettier, and we don't always have to hit people over the head (with what we play)."

(COLOR PHOTOS 1) George N. Parks

(PHOTOS 2; 3; 4; 5 & 6) Freshman Sheri Chase, top left, 19, of Northampton sounds off on mellophone during UMass Marching Band practice behind Mullins Center, above, at the Amherst campus. Drummers and cymbalists, below, follow the beat set by Thom Hannum, bottom right, associate director of the band that has come to be known as and respected for its "Power and Class."

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