

UMass Amherst's version of Big Ben: 300 band members perform like clockwork

Taken from the UMass website; posted on Oct. 2, 2003

Over the past four decades, the Minuteman Marching Band has turned into one of the best performance units in the country. Not to mention the world's biggest alarm clock. The drum rolls each August signal that another summer has slipped away and an intense autumn, full of tuneful gigs, is about to begin.

The clockwork nature of the first band practice has never been lost on the residents of nearby Hadley. As one official recently rhapsodized while the big sound wafted into a town meeting: "Well, it's great hearing the band, but I just wish they'd finish playing the song."



This remark, of course, refers to the orchestrations of the resident perfectionist, icon, and leader of the band, George Parks, now in his 27th year as the band's director. During practice sessions, Parks rarely lets his 300-member troupe finish a piece without interrupting the music to get it just right. Each practice is just one more whistle stop on Parks' permanent pilgrimage toward perfection.

In case your ears have been plugged up, the opening week of practice is known as Band Camp. The camp amounts to an intensive preseason workout for the marching band, during which, as Parks notes, “We bring the kids in and teach them everything they’ve gotta know to perform like crazy.”



Yeah. Crazy like a fox. The band has gone crazy earning many prestigious honors, including the Sudler Trophy as the finest marching band in the land, which puts UMass permanently in the same league as much larger universities such as Michigan, Ohio State, and UCLA.

Band Camp is a crash course in the choreographed culture of marching band. To drum this agenda into the performers, practices go from 8:00 in the morning till 11:00 at night, with a few breaks for nature and nurture along the way. The object, of course, is learning this year’s new musical numbers and their accompanying drill designs. The usual camp routine is learning the formations in the morning, practicing the music in the afternoon, and putting it all together at night.

“It’s an intense week,” says senior sociology major Zoe Reid.

But Band Camp is just the prelude to a long season, a rhapsody of brilliant performances proving that practice makes perfect.

“By the time we do our first show,” says Reid, “I get to the point where I’m marching along and not necessarily thinking about it. The act becomes second nature.”

What would inspire band members to go through their preseason boot camp, then spend every weekday of the fall semester practicing for 80 minutes each afternoon?

Bonding is one answer. “My main motivation is all my friends in the band,” says Andy Whalen, a sophomore computer science major who’s played in bands since the fifth grade. “These are people I want to stay in touch with for the rest of my life.”

New numbers for this year include two Chuck Mangione songs, the Manhattan Transfer composition of “Birdland,” and “Get It On!” by trumpeter Bill Chase. The band has to learn all the music and formations for a tough performance schedule that, among other events, covers seven home football games, one away game, and the Bands of America high school competition in Bridgeport, CT, on October 25th, when UMass will be one of the exhibition bands.

On road trips the band doesn’t necessarily travel in style. After a long bus ride, the band members usually occupy a high school gym, where they camp out on the floor and dine on such delicacies as pizza and subs.

The Spartan life of the marching band has its own peculiar rewards. “I enjoy being with the people,” says Reid, “I enjoy performing, I enjoy the music and the learning. It’s all such an incredible experience. It also gives you a lasting sense of teamwork and leadership, because you are responsible for your music and where you are on the field at all times, but you’re also part of a larger section. If you don’t perform perfectly, the entire unit falls apart.”

Whalen sounds an emphatic note about the strict regimen that has allowed the band to parade lockstep to its place in history. “Band forces me to organize my life,” he says. “It creates a structure for my practice, my studies, my classes, and everything else I have to do.”



Remember all that when you hear the drums roll across the practice field every weekday afternoon this fall. Band is more than a commitment. It's a lifestyle.

So saying, let's pause here for a moment, while Parks tunes up his 300-person instrument and rewinds the world's most melodic clock. As usual, the Minuteman Marching Band is a phenomenon that has all its elite members marching in concert to the beat of a different drum.