

# BATTLE OF THE BANDS

As the summer winds down, scores of teens take to the field—not for football or soccer, but to follow their own beat in an all-American tradition. **THE HIGH SCHOOL MARCHING BAND** → →

Parade prep: The Cascade Sound lines up in Auburn for the annual Veteran's Day Parade



By Todd Matthews → → photographs by Kevin P. Casey



**AT 4:45 ONE MORNING LAST FALL IN LEBANON, OREGON, 121 TEENAGERS FROM EVERETT ROUSE THEMSELVES FROM A COLD GYM FLOOR.**

A short while later, wearing the sweat pants, T-shirts and hooded sweatshirts they slept in, the students climb aboard three charter buses for a 30-minute drive to Oregon State University (OSU) in Corvallis, where the Northwest Marching Band Circuit Championships will determine which band is the best in the region.

Upon arrival at OSU, the temperature is a painful 32 degrees, and every corner of the campus is covered in thick fog. Behind stoic faces and stiff postures, several students shiver. After changing into their uniforms—black pants, white and crimson jackets with silver baldrics across the chest and tall shako hats with swaying white plumes—and warming up for 45 minutes, these teens, members of the Cascade High School Cascade Sound marching band, make their way down the stadium's entrance ramp and onto the field. It's now 8:30 a.m.; only a few hundred people have braved the cold to watch the performance.

The band arranges itself in a scattered, diagonal splash from one end zone to the other. A judge's voice booms over the stadium's public address system: "Drum majors, is your band ready?" Three female drum majors in black satin floor-length evening gowns and white elbow gloves perform an elaborate salute for the judges. "Cascade Sound, you may take the field for competition." The drum majors hike up their long dresses and clamber up ladders to direct their band from three raised platforms. The competition begins.

Band director Mark Staley is hoping Cascade—one of 31 bands from Washington, Idaho and Oregon—will do well enough in this preliminary round to be

among the 16 that make it to the evening's final round. If Cascade Sound is eliminated, it will be a long trip for a short performance, and at a price. The trip to Corvallis—with its three chartered buses, fuel for a band-owned semitruck to haul their instruments, food and other expenses—will cost \$9,000.

As each school year gets under way, football fields across the country are filled with gridiron competitors. But at some high schools, marching bands take to the same field, with a program and competition schedule every bit as intense as football's. In Washington state, around 7,500 high school students are involved in competitive marching band programs—from Spokane's University High School to Bellevue's Newport High School, Mukilteo's Kamiak High School to tiny Mead's Mount Spokane High School. Cascade Sound is one of those bands, and—with 130 members—one of the biggest.

A LARGE MARCHING BAND is like a giant, complex organism with different parts and functions. Drum majors are the brain, providing direction with white-gloved

gestures that imperiously pinpoint important notes. The drum line—composed of snare, tenor, bass and cymbals—is the spine, giving the band its beat, and an anchor to which all the notes and melodies can attach. The stationary drum pit provides exotic and sensory sounds by way of gongs, vibraphones and timpani. The brass section adds body and energy, while woodwinds contribute subtle layers. The color guard, armed with accessories, including flags and wooden rifles, provides whimsy and bling. All of this is packed into an eight-minute performance by individuals striving to create something larger than themselves.

Cascade's complicated show—called "Nocturne"—is no exception. Marching and playing, the band creates triangles, circles, arrowheads, only to slowly dissolve and reform. The lines of marchers slither like a sidewinder from one end of the field to another before slowly breaking apart to form a few large circles that slowly spin like windmills. At one point, the band forms a giant, tightly compacted triangle, then charges toward a corner of the field as horns blare and drums crash. Meanwhile, color guard members flit between band members, switching out turquoise, teal, orange, and yellow flags, and launching white wooden rifles into the air.

At a practice the night before the competition, with evening setting in and a cloudless stretch of blue sky turning dark, Staley and his assistant director, Mitch De Grace, drive the band, hoping to master a short sequence in the eight-minute routine, but it is eluding them. Staley and De Grace see and hear all the tiny mistakes. "Here's what I'm hearing off the field," shouts Staley. "Mellophones, it's too loud

"I'M USUALLY NOT THE LEADER OF ANYTHING. I'M TALKING MORE AND GETTING TO KNOW MORE PEOPLE." —PIT SECTION LEADER MARISSA LYTTLE, 17.

"WHEN I WAS IN MIDDLE SCHOOL, PEOPLE WERE LIKE, 'ALL YOU DO IS BANG THE DRUMS.' NO WAY. NOW IT'S A STEP HIGHER BECAUSE THERE'S SO MUCH STUFF WE HAVE TO MEMORIZE. IF YOU MESS UP, EVERYONE HEARS YOU. NO ONE FULLY UNDERSTANDS THE DRUM LINE IS HARD." —PERCUSSIONIST PATRICK DINNEEN, 15.



Kevin Libby adjusts his uniform for the Auburn competition; below, students, including Alex Davies, collect instruments from the semi trailer that travels with the band. Opposite page, early-morning competitions run counter to teens' urge to sleep in





Clockwise, a marching band is sound and motion on the field; Morgan Kudlich traverses the field with flag, adding bling; hours of practice go into a show; hats topped by fluffy plumes; band members huddle; bass drummer Patrick Dinneen at the Auburn parade



at the beginning of the third song, when you answer the call of the trumpet. Trumpets, you weren't clean in the run for the opener. Woodwinds, you were perfectly clear. The work that went on with that came through. That was pretty good."

De Grace adds his observations. "Guys, we're lazy," he shouts in a tinny ring through a megaphone. "We're lazy in direction changes. We're lazy in step-off. We're lazy in timing and feet. Clear it up. It feels like we just stepped off the bus. We've got to move past that."

The evening's work has apparently paid off. The next day, after the band's early-morning appearance, Staley, a stocky figure with a shock of brown hair and a long, jowly face, says he is satisfied. "They did everything we could possibly ask of them, especially getting up at 4:45 in the morning," he says. "The color guard was fantastic. I think the horn line, just the instruments being as cold as they were, affected their playing a little bit. But I'm really proud of the kids. It's a hard time to perform, not the best situation to play at 8:30 in the morning." And a couple of hours later, Staley learns the band has qualified for the evening's final round of competition.

CASCADE'S PREP FOR those important eight minutes in Oregon began many months before. In fact, it was January when the band director and staff started to develop the theme that would be paired with music and movement to become the show. Show tunes, music from a specific genre or from popular culture and films are all fodder for band competition shows. And some shows—such as Cascade Sound's "Nocturne," which features music by Andrew Yozviak, meant to evoke nighttime and sunrise—are created from scratch.

Many bands follow a schedule similar to Cascade's: Rehearsals begin with a weeklong August retreat at Camp Casey on Whidbey Island, where students learn most of the program's music and marching sequences. By the time school starts in September, students are deep into an aggressive rehearsal schedule—two evenings per week and all day on Saturdays—and then on to a fast track of five competitions in seven weekends.

Despite the demanding schedule, for many students in this high school marching band, the hectic festival season is the school year's high point. "I love the



Cascade Sound band director Mark Staley inspects the band as it lines up for the Auburn parade

trips with friends," says Marissa Lytle, a 17-year-old junior percussionist with braces, a black ponytail and a shy manner at odds with her role as the band's pit section leader. "I love the music, definitely. Basically, music and marching band are my life."

A band is nothing without its director, and Staley is typical of the breed: someone who lives and breathes his job. During rehearsals, he paces the short stretch of track in front of the band, hands in the pockets of his black leather jacket for warmth, scanning the field, looking and listening for possible adjustments.

"I THINK MOST KIDS WOULD RATHER SLEEP UNTIL NOON ON A SATURDAY MORNING OR WATCH CARTOONS," SAYS JOSH HAROWICZ, 16. "BUT WE'RE PRACTICING OUR HEARTS OUT, DOING WHAT WE LOVE, WHICH IS WHY WE'RE HERE."

He weaves between band members and zeroes in on a specific section, or corrects a band member's posture from a tired slump to an alert post.

He can be an intimidating presence, a grizzled general whose approval the students covet. He's brutally honest in his observations. Good rehearsals yield effusive praise. When the band is sluggish and flat, Staley is bitingly candid. During one rehearsal, after an hour or so of slow, uninspired performance, Staley led them in a sprint around a high school track-and-field oval. With their blood flowing and hearts pumping, he lectured the students on playing with more heart.

Carolyn Buerk, a sophomore this year, says the experience has helped her to use

her mistakes to improve her musicianship. "It takes someone who can take criticism," she says. "It takes somebody who can understand that when someone is shouting at you, it doesn't mean you are a bad person. You're just messing something up. You just have to say, 'OK, that was dumb. Let me fix that.'"

When Staley was hired by Cascade from rival high school Mount Spokane, the news shot through the small world of Washington state high school marching bands. It was a coup—the fantasy baseball equivalent of former New York Yankees manager Joe Torre signing on with team

rivals the Boston Red Sox. Staley had coached marching bands part-time for 15 years, first as an assistant band director at Central Valley High School, and then for seven years at Mount Spokane. When Cascade's band director resigned in July 2007, the band suddenly found themselves leaderless. That same month, Staley got a call from De Grace about the job.

"I had seen Mark work with marching bands over the years," says De Grace during a rare break at the Corvallis competition. De Grace, who sports a baseball cap, earring, blue jeans and sweatshirt, is wearing the same groggy face and bloodshot eyes displayed by the other staff and boosters, who sleep little during travel



Win or lose, competitions are emotional events for band members

with the band. "His marching bands are always very clean, very heart-driven. By that I mean they play and march with a lot of passion."

For years, Staley lacked the teaching credentials that most band directors have. He dropped out of college at Eastern Washington University because of a family situation in the late 1990s, and worked as a full-time airline ticket agent while following his passion for marching bands as a part-time assistant band director.

When the events of September 11, 2001, upended the airline industry, Staley lost his job. But it was ultimately the turning point that landed him at Cascade. He returned to college for a music degree, and, just prior to graduation, got the call from De Grace and Cascade Sound.

One week later, Staley and his wife, Rochelle, and 6-month-old daughter, Simone, were headed west on Interstate 90 for job interviews—Mark for Cascade's band director spot, Rochelle for a job as a massage therapist in Bellevue. "I think Mark had always wanted to be at this high school," says Rochelle, a former marching band student and part-time marching band instructor. Both knew that openings for marching band directorships are rare, since most teachers stay with the same school for decades.

Today, it's hard to imagine this grown-up band geek doing anything else. Mention

any marching band in any region of the United States, and Staley can recite its size, director and how it's fared at competitions. It's a sign of the level of commitment and obsession required in a job that offers a modest salary and involves 16-hour days, weekend travel with accommodations that usually involve a gym floor and the dramas that come with overseeing the lives of 130 teenagers.

"You're part counselor, part mentor, part coach," says Staley. He refers to Rochelle and Simone as his "band orphans," and looks forward to those small windows of downtime when he can be with them at their apartment in Mukilteo.



IN THE SHORT TIME that he's led Cascade, Staley has put his stamp all over the band. His strict work ethic can be seen in the way the band behaves when they arrive at a competition. Students adopt a focused mind-set. Roughhousing and gossiping cease. Uniforms are carefully buttoned and zipped, brushed and polished. Students line up soberly, single file, to collect their fluffy plumes from a band booster.

Most important, though, Staley has affected the band's sound. The drum line produces a clean sizzle and pop that has become its signature. He frowns on musicians who overblow—a big band roar might reach judges in the top row of the bleachers, but it lacks soul and finesse. He believes individual sounds within an ensemble create a different kind of power.

The quickest way to win Staley's approval is to follow three rules: Perform clean, don't overblow and be better than your last performance. The last is why Cascade Sound spends more time poring over its own performance scores than those of its rivals.

"It's very clear that what we want to do is beat ourselves," says drum major Rebecca Rice, who graduated in June. "I mean, we have rival bands. But our director and staff try to encourage us to improve our own scores every time, and improve what we're doing, as opposed to focusing on other bands."

ON THE EVENING of the Corvallis competition, the entire campus of Oregon State University is overrun by high school marching bands and the air is filled with sounds of instruments tuning up. Though it's still bitter cold, the morning fog has finally lifted. Staley is finishing the band's warm-up exercises. "I want the same focus on the way down to the field," he shouts. "With every step toward the field, you get stronger! Push yourselves! Get rid of all the little things and push! Dig!"

As they enter Reser Stadium, Cascade's teens stare up at the crowd, stunned by its size. Their performance is much improved from that morning—the instruments sound full and beautiful. Afterward, band members gather by the buses to change out of their uniforms. After congratulations from Staley, the students head toward the stands to watch the remaining bands and wait for

chance to compete the following week, during Auburn High School's Veterans Day competition, which also marks the end of marching band season.

In Auburn the next week, the small downtown is clogged with activity, in preparation for the annual parade. In a picture of nostalgic Americana, Cascade Sound and dozens of other bands march and play along the downtown route, along with leather-clad Harley Davidson bikers and veterans clad in red-white-and-blue clothing waving to the sidewalk crowd.

That evening, the bands move to the field competition, where Cascade Sound performs well but is beaten in several categories by rival Kamiak High School of Mukilteo. Many students are crushed by the disappointing end to the season. Several cry and console one another;

"I LIKE WHEN WE PERFORM BECAUSE YOU KIND OF FORGET ABOUT EVERYTHING ELSE AND GET YOURSELF IN A ZONE TO PLAY." —KATIE SOLLINGER, CLARINET SECTION LEADER, 17

"YOU FEEL SO COOL BEING IN YOUR UNIFORMS, AND I KIND OF LEARNED HOW TO GET ALONG WITH A LOT OF PEOPLE BEFORE I WAS KIND OF SHY, BUT I KIND OF CAME OUT OF MY SHELL THROUGH MARCHING BAND." —SAXOPHONIST BRADLEY MOORE, 15

the final scores at 10 p.m.

In the stadium concourse, I meet two of the band's tuba players, Alex Davies and Josh Harowicz, nicknamed "Trenchcoat" because of the long black leather coat he wears when he's not in uniform. He has a quirky streak, sporting a fedora, sunglasses at night, headphones dangling around his neck. "I think we did a lot better tonight than this morning," says Harowicz. "I think a lot of us were intimidated at first this morning, which led to us making a lot of big mistakes. We did amazing compared to this morning."

"Tonight was the biggest show we've ever done," Davies adds. "The harder it is, the better it is, and the more enjoyment you get out of it."

When the scores are announced, Cascade High School beats Mount Spokane High School, Staley's former school, by one-tenth of a point. But the overall competition award goes to Southridge High School of Beaverton, Oregon. The students are visibly disappointed. They have one more

others just look exhausted. A few run to a wall behind a far set of bleachers and pull down a handmade banner with their school's name and logo, holding it up in celebration, raising their index fingers to the sky, in an effort to show they still feel like champions.

The following month, during an end-of-season party in the high school auditorium, the students are upbeat and file one by one onto the stage to receive participation awards. A video of their Auburn performance is projected onto a large screen to raucous applause and cheering.

Staley's wife, Rochelle, is in an adjacent hallway, rocking their now-10-month-old baby. In three months of prep and competitions, it is one of the few times the Staleys have been in the same room. "I knew this was the way it was going to be," Rochelle says. "If you don't know what this program involves, you shouldn't marry a band director. But he loves music, and he loves teaching kids. Honestly, I can't see him doing anything else." 5

## BAND BATTLES

WHICH MARCHING BAND IS THE BEST? JUDGE FOR YOURSELF AT A REGIONAL COMPETITION

High school marching band competitions are held during the fall, in cities across the state and throughout the Northwest. Competitions typically draw 20 to 30 marching bands ranging from Class A (30 members) to AAA or AAAA (130 members or more). The all-day affairs consist of a morning preliminary round to narrow the field of competition and a final round in the evening to determine excellence in various categories—percussion, color guard, drum major, visual effect and music—as well as overall competition. ¶ Judges score the following elements: music performance ensemble; music performance individual; music general effect; percussion; visual performance individual; visual performance ensemble; visual general effect; and auxiliary, or color guard. Each element is scored and combined to compile a final overall score out of 100. A score of 70 or less is considered average or below average; a score of 90 or more is near perfection.

### THIS YEAR'S LOCAL COMPETITIONS INCLUDE

- Peninsula Classic Marching Band Competition, Silverdale, last Saturday in September
- Cavalcade of Bands, Kennewick, first Saturday in October, [cavalcadeofbands.wa.com](http://cavalcadeofbands.wa.com)
- Puget Sound Festival of Bands, Everett, last Saturday in October (hosted by Cascade High School)
- Northwest Marching Band Championships, Corvallis, Oregon, first weekend in November
- Veterans Day High School Marching Band Competition, Auburn, second Saturday in November



One reward for a season of hard work: first place in the Auburn parade competition