

"Dad, I want to join a Drum Corps."

HUH?

When our kids first got into high school band, we lived in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Each August we went to a Drum & Bugle Corps competition, and I thought drum and bugle corps were just for college music majors-- "normal" kids need not apply. I've since learned how wrong I was. The Fort Wayne competition usually has about half of the top dozen corps in the country, certainly not the average corps. But there are many, many other corps that have much to offer "normal" kids. Let me share with you what I've learned.

There's an incredible variety in Drum & Bugle Corps, based on ages, number of current members, musical and instructional style, philosophy, and so on. But there's an even greater number of similarities. The one thing that has impressed me the most is the dedication to and practice of good sportsmanship. I've watched strong competitors encourage and assist each other in everything from playing skill and style to bus maintenance and meals.

I've heard a soloist from the Division II champion encourage one of my sons -- a Division III rookie --in his playing and marching. After the drum corps season, as his high school band went to competitions around the state, other band members asked him if he brought his own personal cheering section. No, it was just many friends he'd made from his and other corps. I have been tremendously impressed with the competition for excellence, not just trying to beat the other corps.

So just what is a Drum & Bugle Corps? A non-profit organization for kids, using music and marching to develop life-long skills, attitudes, and friendships. One corps' director has said "We use music, marching, and travel as a vehicle to teach kids about success in life." Sound a little nebulous?

Drum and Bugle Corps are divided into three divisions, based on size:

- **Division 3** has up to 60 kids. Most are much smaller. I've watched some corps compete with 15 kids, although most seem to be in the 30 - 45 range. As the smallest, Division 3 corps also tend to be the youngest. Some accept kids as young as 9 years old, although a more common minimum age is 12 or 13. If your child can play an instrument (or really wants to), he or she can be in a drum corps. Due to their smaller size, Division 3 corps usually have openings, particularly in the brass or "horn line". Some Division 3 corps are "cadets" for the larger, Division 1 corps. Generally speaking, Division 3 corps are junior- and senior-high age.
- **Division 2** between 60 and 90 members. Not surprisingly, are somewhere between Division 3 and Division 1. Some have gained enough members to push them over the line into the larger division, some stay just under the Division 1 cut-off. In 1994, two Division 2 corps were among the top 21 in the country.
- **Division 1** or "**Open Class**" corps, have up to 135 members. These are the largest and most experienced corps (the ones that competed in the Fort Wayne show). I think of these as college age and the very best high school players. As I write this, my 16-year old son has been accepted into an open-class corps; its average age this year is now up to 18. Curiously, he is now a member of one of the corps that performed at that Fort Wayne show.

Kids can be in a corps as long as they are under 21 when the season begins in June. There's a memorable tradition at the Drum Corps International Summer Music Games season finale for those who "ageout" each year. The Music Games have competition for all drum corps divisions.

Generally speaking, a corps will provide all the instruments needed. A horn player will be asked to provide his own mouthpiece. Some corps require a specific mouthpiece, but not many. But the need for uniform appearance and sound means the corps will provide the instruments themselves -- all instruments are in the key of G (most band instruments, on the other hand are in B flat, F, or C). The corps will also provide the uniforms.

You can expect a corps to provide personalized instruction. There is usually at least one instructor each for horn line, drum line, "pit" percussion, and guard. A

larger corps may have over 20 instructional staff for 135 members. I can virtually guarantee your child will be a much better player at the end of the summer than anyone in their band who doesn't "do corps". At our son's high school marching band competitions, we could always quickly identify kids who've "marched corps" by how they marched, held their instruments, and general self-assurance on the field. When my son returned from his first year in a Division 3 corps to a new high school, he was approached after a performance at his band camp by a few people. They asked, "What corps are you in?" -- they naturally assumed from his performance that he had been in a corps.

Pre-season practices are usually held from Friday evening through Sunday afternoon. It's not unusual for the kids to practice from 8 AM until 12 AM (varies by corps) with time off only for meals. From what I've seen, this is often the kids' desire and drive, not necessarily organized by the instructional staff, but expect intensive instruction and practice. These pre-season practices or "camps" are often held in a school building rented for the weekend. Most corps hold their first camp Thanksgiving weekend, a few not until early January. Some corps may hold a dozen camps before the summer competitive season; one I know has only five.

Your child should take a sleeping bag (and maybe a pad), pillow, towel, and personal needs to each camp. Typically, everyone sleeps on the gym floor like a giant family -- with guys on one side of the gym and girls on the other. Corps make sure the facilities have locker rooms and showers. Corps parents at the camp prepare and serve meals (including a late evening snack) for the kids and staff. Depending on kitchen facilities (or lack thereof) this can be easy or challenging. Every corps I've ever heard of always has peanut butter and jelly set out for finicky eaters.

Finally, summer comes, and drum and bugle corps go on tour. Most open class corps start on tour in late May or early June, and may not return until late August. The smaller corps may have a much more limited competitive touring schedule. But the essence of drum corps is the show competition, similar to what we had attended in Fort Wayne. While that show featured the biggest and best, there are literally hundreds of shows across the country that are Division II/III competitions. Some have all three.

It would be very easy to rhapsodize about the musical entertainment of a show, and to point out that drum and bugle corps shows are one of the fastest-growing entertainment events in the country. But let me just encourage you to go to one; you'll never regret it.

Competitions are professionally judged using criteria from the sponsoring parent organization. Usually, the first half of the summer is coordinated by regional organizations (Drum Corps East, Drum Corps Midwest, Drum Corps South, Drum Corps West, Drum Corps Canada) and the last half by Drum Corps International (DCI). The season culminates at the DCI Summer Music Games held in mid-August in a different city each year.

On tour, a drum and bugle corps requires a small fleet -- the size, of course, depending on the size of the corps. Often, there's 1 - 5 intercity bus coaches, an equipment truck, and a food truck or mobile kitchen of some sort. Some smaller corps may combine these. Corps are very conscious of safety and regulations. All drivers must have proper licenses and certifications for their vehicles.

No corps can operate without parental involvement. Parents do the cooking, serving, driving, sewing, cheering, some fund raising, bus and truck maintenance... You name it. If you are willing, your child's corps can use your talents in some manner. Of course, you don't have to participate in order for your child to be in the corps. But as a parent who has gotten involved. I wouldn't miss it. Corps need people to do these jobs, or the corps can't operate smoothly.

All of this takes money, of course. Lots of it. Busses. Trucks, instruments (one contra can easily cost \$5,000), uniforms, food, fuel, and so on all cost a *lot* of money. Where does it come from? Each corps has its own particular mix, but there are similarities. Typically, the largest single chunk comes from bingo games, depending on the home state regulations. Other fund-raisers are imperative, and corps are always trying different approaches. Member fees, car washes, parade and competition payments, and donations round out the financing.

Member fee structures vary widely, both amount and structure. Some corps identify separately pre-season camp fees, membership fees, touring fees, food fees, etc. Other corps assess just one all-inclusive fee. Payment terms also vary widely. Few corps will turn away a kid who really wants to perform but has

financial hardship, so don't let that prevent participation. Sponsors are *always* needed.

Each corps is compensated for its performance in competitions and parades. The amount varies by size and previous years' standing. Think of this as fuel money to get to the next show or parade. These bookings and other arrangements are usually handled by the regional or international organization. Each corps must host a show, thus providing plenty of competitive events over a season. A few of these shows that are well-established can make money for the sponsoring organization (the Fort Wayne show is a major fund-raiser for the sponsoring high school). But most do very well to just break even; the goal is to provide the competitive events.

On tour, most corps have a mobile kitchen or some provision for cooking and cleanup. Generally, "corps parents" prepare and serve three meals a day plus a late evening snack. Some corps may have other arrangements, such as having the kids responsible for themselves for certain meals. The corps my sons were in committed to providing all meals on tour.

Yes, each member should have some spending money. Cans of soft drinks, trips to the local burger joint during (rare) free time, souvenirs, jacket patches, T-shirts, etc. will all require cash -- and budgeting skills. Discuss and plan this in advance. Our sons each had a bank-machine card and a long-distance card to make it easier to call us every few days from three states away. (They also knew they would be accountable for controlling their expenses).

Dedicated staff and parents are what makes any corps able to function. They also act as universal "Mom" and "Dad" and as chaperones. However, no matter how dedicated and concerned they are, they can't be everywhere. Corps operate on the assumption that the kids are there for the music, marching, and teamwork. If your child is prone to making poor choices at home, he or she may continue to make poor choices at camps or on the road. By the same token, the communal nature of sleeping on gym floors and traveling with a group builds trust. Unfortunately, in any group of people there are sometimes those who betray that trust. While very rare, pilferage can happen, so our kids don't take a lot of valuables.

My son sometimes wears a T-shirt that says, *"Drum Corps: For those who*

understand, no explanation is needed. For those who do not understand, no explanation is possible." However, I well remember our apprehension when he first said, "Dad, I want to be in a drum and bugle corps." We would have been much more comfortable -- even enthusiastic -- if we knew then what I've shared with you now.

There is much more to the drum corps world, but I trust this will serve as a brief introduction. Across the country (and internationally) there is such a variety that, even if one corps is not to your liking (or ability) there are undoubtedly many others that are. As has been said, "We use music, marching, and travel as a vehicle to teach kids about success in life."

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