

Chapter 4: 1958 – Pressure

Completion of the second half of the drill and music now took priority. This would have been the case anyway, but the premature introduction to first class competition lent a more urgent note to the whole affair. Batavia was not to be a 7-8 minute show, but a full 13-15 minute performance. We had to learn and polish the remainder of the show as well as could be done, and do it in approximately one month.

The advent of the Batavia contest provided strong motivation to finish the learning and concentrate on polishing as quickly as possible. Without this spur to our ambitions, things might not have come together as rapidly as they did.



1958: Toronto Optimists Full Corps photo (in front of De La Salle College)

Urgent as the situation seemed, it did not result in a great increase in rehearsal time. The Monday and Wednesday evening indoor sessions, and all day Sunday for drill and music combined, remained the norm. There were some extra rehearsals, but individual sections accounted for most of the time spent over and above regular practice. This practice, started now, was to become commonplace in the years ahead, as people strove to improve their performance. It was not demanded, or even requested by instructors or executive. Everyone just did it because they wanted to. It was another example of the spirit that existed in this Drum Corps.

To hold scheduled practice every night of the week and all day Saturday and Sunday was not only unheard of in those days, it would also have been impractical. There were those who would have been willing to do this, but not many. Had such a rigorous schedule been implemented, or even suggested, half of the Corps would have quit. School, full or part-time jobs, girlfriends, family, marriages, and vacations all would have been affected by blanket devotion to one activity. Already, these things were disturbed by the influence of the Corps, even during these less dramatic times. Eventually, with increasingly difficult competition, the Corps would gradually increase its rehearsal time.

In those balmy days, such dedication was not generally widespread. In speaking of this, it must be said that this attitude applied only to the Corps in general. There were those who could only be described as hard core fanatics. These were the ones who lived, ate, and breathed the Corps. Nothing got between them and the Corps, and their presence would make itself felt in later years.

Meanwhile, back at the Shell Tower in the Canadian National Exhibition grounds, learning the rest of the drill continued. As the weather improved, it became increasingly difficult to rehearse at this location. A popular place for the citizens of Toronto, this was a public area and could not be commandeered by anyone for private use. Also, the annual Canadian National Exhibition would have made this site unsuitable for summer long rehearsals. So, we had to find another location, and we did.

Driving around, searching, on a Sunday afternoon, we discovered two Corps-sized fields at the foot of Yonge Street, just south of Lakeshore Boulevard. These fields were ideal, being of the right size and far away from any residential area.



1958: De La Salle (Nationals, Galt)

That afternoon we found, to our surprise, that one of them was occupied. It was another Drum Corps, and they were wearing grey and red jackets identical to those we had seen at the armouries. This, we learned, was the De La Salle Oaklands Drum and Bugle Corps. Their story as a Drum Corps was to run nearly parallel with that of the Optimists. This chance encounter would eventually develop into ferocious rivalry that lasted for twenty years, until the demise of one of them. Because their name will appear often in this narrative, a bit of background is in order.

De La Salle, or “Del” as they became more familiarly known, had begun as a school brass band in 1910. They had achieved international stature in their field and became an integral part of the extracurricular activities of De La Salle College. This is a high school, run by the Christian Brothers, a Roman Catholic religious order, now located on Farnham Avenue in Toronto.

After a suitable preparatory period, they emerged as a competitive Drum and Bugle Corps in 1958, taking almost everybody by surprise. Unheralded, except possibly in their own circle, the first inkling we had of their existence was on that Sunday afternoon when we discovered them rehearsing.

The two fields, one of which “Del” was using, were adjacent to each other. We occupied the other one, and a situation began that endured for years. Both Corps used the fields, on the same days and evenings, for a long time to come. All this was in the future. For now, the task was to concentrate on completion of our show.

Our instructors were all home grown, so to speak, and they had to learn as they went along, as did we. In order to even attempt competing at the level that would be encountered in Batavia, everyone had to give his or her utmost cooperation. Attendance at rehearsals was very good, seldom dropping below 85%, and then only for good reasons. Fellow members would prod the few lackadaisical types that did exist, in order to improve their attitude. It was not often necessary.

With Barry and Lorne, and people from the Corps itself instructing, enough results were produced so that when the time arrived to go to Batavia, we were ready to perform a full field show.

Into the Lion’s Den

We were not expected to upset anybody at this show, nor did we expect to. This was the first time that a Junior “A” Canadian Corps had competed against Junior “A” American Corps, but it would not be the last.

The attitude was of light-hearted boisterousness as we headed for the competition. Bus trips were much more fun when this attitude was prevalent, and contrasted starkly with those of later years. Not too many years later, either. We arrived at Batavia, N.Y., prepared to do or die, come what may. There was nothing to lose and experience to gain.

We saw, near the contest field, St. Vincent’s Cadets. They were playing a concert number, standing in a semi-circle. Listening to their rendition, someone remarked that they did not sound that good, contrary to all that we had expected. Actually, they did not, and as we found out later, they were playing part of their concert for the following year 1959. This would not be indicative of their field performance

In the evening, watching and listening, we were rudely brought down to earth. The driving force of “Victory at Sea”, into “El Capitan” was enough to dispel any notions we might have formed from their previous display. St. Vincent’s were still great. Then that same evening,

who could but be amazed by the swinging skirts, precision horn and drum-line, and perfect company fronts of the Audubon girls. Later, the sweet tones of Don Angelica’s solo work, in Holy Name’s version of “And the Angels Sing”, was all that was necessary to remind us of where we were. However, out we trooped to do the best we could.



1958: Toronto Optimists

The Corps was well received by the generous American crowd, and the score sheets, though accurately reflecting the deserved scores, were not uncomplimentary. At the end of the evening, we stood in fourth place, about thirteen, twelve, and eleven points out of first, second, and third places, respectively. Audubon girls won the show.

At another time and place, this result might have been devastating, but not then. We all knew we were out of our league that night, but what in introduction.



1958: Toronto Optimists (on the field at De La Salle)

Things would not stay that way. Mr. Baggs, as he would do so many times in years to come when similar situations arose, addressed the Corps. His conservative appearance and restrained language always had the proper effect. Whether we had just been fairly annihilated on the field or, as in later years, had distinguished ourselves, his words always provided the tone of moderation to suit the occasion. It would not be too far wrong to say that his example set the tone for the image that became synonymous with the Toronto Optimists Drum and Bugle Corps. About one thing there was no confusion, he was the boss, and anytime, as did occur, his code of conduct was broken or ignored, we would be sure to hear about it. Also, when credit was due, it was forthcoming. Al Baggs, to most of us, was the rock on which the Corps was built.

Now, after that educational foray into the upper reaches of Drum Corps, it was time to get back to basics at home. We had to prepare for the Canadian Drum Corps season. The main target was, of course, Preston Scout House, the Canadian Championship, no less. Although to some this line of thought might have appeared presumptuous for a new Corps, the results of the armoury contest had opened up that possibility. We had been a solid second and had a whole summer in which to narrow, and hopefully eclipse, that four-point margin. If the rapid progress that the Corps had made since its inception in the fall of 1957 could be maintained, this goal was attainable. Other local Corps, though not far behind and true to the name of the Corps, were

encouraged to look ahead, not back. De La Salle were, as yet, an unknown entity not having appeared on the competition field and, therefore, were not included in our calculations.

We were told that in order to defeat the champions by one point, we had to be five points better. The titleholder is often perceived to have an edge, whether it is psychological or otherwise. It was felt that a performance should leave no doubt in anyone's mind when attempting to win the title. This spur to our ambition was provided by the fertile mind of Barry Bell.

Back to Work

With the end of the school year, students could now more readily concentrate on the Corps. Rehearsals were well attended and slowly we began to polish the rough edges that had to be eliminated. Like a rough-hewn piece of wood being transformed into a fine piece of furniture, the whole unit progressed to where a much-improved product would take the field at the next competition.



1958: Grantham (Nationals, Galt)

At that time in Canada, competitions were few and far between. South of the boarder, the pace was far more intense, as anyone who read Drum Corps World or Eastern Review could recognize. In Canada, every contest was eagerly awaited and prepared for. Although the regularity and degree of competition contrasted poorly with that of the United States, the intensity and excitement were easily on a par. Mixed with this, for us, was the fact that we were not in a position to lose anything. This, in contrast to later years, was an asset when going on the line. A much more relaxed attitude and feeling of, "Well, let's see how we do this time", provided a pleasant atmosphere for competition. Compared with gut-wrenching tensions of later years, it was positively idyllic. The excitement was provided by the prospect of moving ever closer to our increasingly well defined goal.

Preston Scout House had started the season strongly, having retained much of their show from the previous year. It was a show that contained many landmark features unique to Scout House and these were not easily discarded. They were probably close to peaking when they first



1958: Preston Scout House arrives for a show

appeared that year. Conversely, we were far from any peak and, therefore, improvement was easier to accomplish. There was so much imperfection. Others were, no doubt, in the same boat. Retaining one's show from the previous year, or large parts of it, was common practice much more so than today. It removed the trouble of having to learn a new show over the winter months, and the time thus saved could be spent polishing the material to achieve ever-higher scores. We, ourselves, would often follow this method.

This being our first year the whole show was new. There was nothing to repeat. The performance had received favourable comment from both Canadian and American judges that we had encountered. With further practice to improve execution scores, there was no way to go but up.

Thus came our next trial of skill. The Waterloo Band Festival was really the top event of the year in Canada. Its results were as important as the Canadian Championship. It had been a showplace for Corps for many years, and 1958 was no exception. Both Scout House and Western Tech had earned honours here, and this year the Optimists would be there for the first time. Ironically enough, Western Tech alumni led them. Although many Corps of good quality were in attendance, this narrative concerns only The Optimists and Scout House, for obvious reasons.

All of the Canadian Junior Corps of that era would be in attendance. This appearance was the first time that we had performed our full-length field show, in Canada, under competition conditions. All were very interested as to what the result would be.



1958: Some members of from St Mary's and De La Salle (on left)

When the smoke had cleared, and the scores announced, we stood again in second place. The major difference was that we were now only 1½ behind Preston Scout House. This was a 2½ point jump from the first meeting only a few weeks before. The accelerated preparation for Batavia had made its effect felt.

Practices now picked up in frequency because it was realized that we had a shot at pulling off an upset. Interest was also kindled on the local Drum Corps scene in general, as the only true challenge in years for junior dominance materialized. Scout House, who had now won at Waterloo for the tenth year in a row, were clearly in our sights. Without derogating others, it must be said that they were the only ones we were much concerned with. There were, of course, other shows, competitions, and parades to be attended, which we did. Without constant activity in this endeavour, it is easy to lose any edge that has been developed.

We also ran into other Drum Corps, the most surprising being the new De La Salle Drum Corps. They first appeared in competition at the Ontario Championships, sponsored by the Optimist Club of Toronto. We were, of course, the host Corps and performed in exhibition. De La Salle, in their debut with a full field show, jumped over other well-established Corps and placed a close second to Preston Scout House. Their horns were excellent, and lo and behold, there was another major contender on the local scene.

With the Corps now gradually improving, the more evident flaws in execution that had at first been our undoing were eliminated, some totally. Attention could now be focussed on the finer points.

As an example, we can look at our company fronts, a common formation. Many hours of practice were spent not only on company fronts but on learning how to practice them. Techniques developed for executing these, and other complex formations, were retained or discarded depending on their effectiveness. This, to harken back a bit, well reflected the school motto of Danforth Tech “Faciendo discimus”, “We Learn By Doing”, though I doubt if anybody related to



1958: Phil Hennings, Toronto Optimists Drum Major



1958: Toronto Optimists Colour Guard

this at the time. These months, haphazard as they were, produced results slower than if a fully experienced drill instructor were present. Yet, results were produced and the drill moved forward to a level that could only serve to improve our field scores. Likewise, the horn and drum lines. Their consistency and proficiency was steadily improving. All rehearsed enthusiastically to weed out technical flaws and to improve the ensemble effect of the entire unit.

Falconer

As we stumbled and groped our way to an improved Corps, it came about that we were to appear at a contest in a place called Falconer, N. Y. This was one of those nice little American towns set in the rolling countryside of upper New York State. It would be a pleasant trip, as was any to the United States. Our itinerary kept us mostly in Canada, and to cross the border was always an adventure. This contest was unusual in that it was to be a mixed junior and senior show. Categories would compete against each other. This format was not uncommon in those long ago days and was probably due to the fact that there were not that many Corps around in this region.

In Falconer itself, who should turn out to be in attendance but Preston Scout House. Their presence added a new dimension to the show for us. We had another chance to go against the champs, this time under the discerning eyes of the N.Y. State Judging Association. This was beneficial, as different eyes, minds, and score sheets would serve to throw light on our somewhat parochial outlook. If anyone else was aware of what was underway, I do not know, but Preston and us certainly were. Scout House was well aware of our ambitions and had been observing our progress. No one had given them a serious challenge for a long time, and it was possible that one was now taking shape.

Excitement ran high. The presence of Preston affected our attitude and nobody was prepared to perform at less than the level of perfection.



1958: Preston Scout House (Nationals, Galt)

Early in the evening, we filed onto the line after duly enduring inspection, nearly flawless if I remember correctly. It was one of those cool, slightly misty evenings that always seem to enhance the sound of a Corps. As the opening notes of our fanfare split the night air, and we stepped off the line, you could tell it was going to be a good one. You can feel the good ones. The whole show ran smoothly, until after the concert. Somehow, at this point, the Corps and Drum Major got their signals crossed, and we made a false start out of concert formation. This, due to nervous tension more than anything else, must have cost us a couple of points. We started again, and performed the second half of the show as well as we had the first. That false start not only cost us tenths, or more, but probably the contest as well.

When the results were announced we stood in second place again, but this time by a margin of 0.25 points. Now we knew that our goal was attainable. We had to repeat this performance without any major blunders, improve upon it, and do this in Canada.



1958: Toronto Optimists (Nationals, Galt)

Returning home, the awareness of what we had almost accomplished at Falconer added impetus to our efforts, and we resumed the march to the seemingly elusive goal. You only got one chance at it, the Canadian Championships, and it was now only two months away. Practice time became more imperative, but would still not compare with the time spent in modern Drum Corps. To put in the time required by today's top Corps would have been considered odd to say the least.

We carried on in the more easy going fashion of those days, cleaning up tenths here and there, sometimes visiting other Corps to observe their progress. We were not the only ones who wanted to capture the title. De La Salle was a strong Corps and capable of giving anyone a run for their money. We knew that we had the best chance of pulling off an upset and were being mostly watched by those who were interested. Preston had remarked, in a magazine column, on how we had been closing the gap, but were, of course, still behind.

The Nationals

Then, as time slipped away, came the day of the Championship contest, September 13, 1958. It was held at Dickson Park, in the town of Galt, Ontario. Today, the towns of Galt, Hespeler, and Preston have been rezoned into one community now known as Cambridge. This shows how close they were. It meant that the contest was more or less in Scout House's backyard, and this added more drama to an already pregnant situation. The weather was co-operative, and on a fine Saturday morning, we climbed aboard the bus to go where all the truth would come out in the wash.

On the bus itself, utter chaos ensued. Everybody had a ball, without a care in the world. At times, the melee got out of hand, and Mr. Bell had to enforce discipline, sometimes physically. Had he not done so, nobody would have been in any kind of shape for a contest let alone attempting to win one.



1958: Toronto Optimists (Nationals, Galt)

Thankfully, it was not a long trip, and we arrived at Galt still capable of functioning. We had arrived early because the junior division of the show was to be held during the afternoon. The winner in this category would give an exhibition after the senior contest, which was to be held in the evening.

Considering the importance of the occasion, the whole day was handled quite matter of factly. Despite the fact this was the one time of year that mattered more than any other, a calm businesslike attitude prevailed. The instructors and executive, including Mr. Baggs who was on

hand providing stability and confidence, engendered this. In this case, we had come so close to Scout House, but in the U.S.A. Now we were attempting to do what nobody had done for years. Defeat them at a full-length field show, at the championships no less. Had we done this earlier in the season, the atmosphere surrounding the affair would not have been so electric.

Rehearsal, relaxation, recreation.

Time to go.

On the line.

The crowd was quite large, no doubt swelled by the expectation of a true challenge for the title.

Off we stepped, and, for the next fifteen minutes, nobody thought of anything else but their part to be played. When the last note sounded across the finish line, everybody knew it had been a good one.

It was done. Nothing major had gone wrong. Marching off in single file to prolonged applause, we took positions on a nearby hill, under a tree, to watch the other Corps perform. These included Scout House, De La Salle, Grantham Police Boys Band, and others. After the whole performance was completed, the tension began to rise again as scores were tabulated. Came the moment of truth and all pretenses at relaxation were abandoned. What was done, was done, and nothing could alter it now. Apprehensively, we stood as the voice of the announcer droned over the P.A. system.

Royal Knights . . . 66.97
 Sky Raiders 73.33
 Grantham 75.42
 De La Salle 77.09

Then, as announcers do, the second place score was given as 80.11. A nerve-wracking pause ensued; then the words "Preston Scout House" echoed across the park. The green-shirted group under the tree exploded in a frenzy of youthful exuberance and had to exert the utmost self-discipline in order to hear their score. It was 81.61. We had won by a margin of 1.5 points. A solid victory that had been accomplished by wins in the execution captions.

Everybody straightened up, adjusted uniforms, and formed up in single file. We marched down the hill to bask in our newly won glory, and also to endure some verbal brickbats from disgruntled rivals.

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Toronto Band Takes Title From Scout House

BAND FESTIVAL COLORFUL EVENT

Canadian Junior Honors Won By Toronto Optimists

By ROY FRANCIS

Colorful marching pageantry, borne by the rocking blazes of brass and trumpets, brought rounds of applause from almost 15,000 Galt district supporters at Dickson Park Saturday during the 1958 Canadian Single and Trumpet Band Championships.

In the junior championships, a new ruler was crowned, Preston's famed Scout House Band, personal victors, took second place to the green-shirted Optimists, the Toronto Optimists' Club Drum and Trumpet Corps.

Senior musical loss and astounding melody gave the senior St. Catharines' "You know the champs, the Marching Ambassadors, a first-place edge over the Padagogic Jolly Jesters and Gault's rising Royalaires.

One of the largest crowd thrills came late in the day, when Scout House Drum Major Paul Bauer staggered away from the presentation desk under the weight of two king-size trophies. All senior bands, with the Optimists, were lined up under the lights for the final presentation, with Toronto CJBIC announcer Bruce Smith being a most able master of ceremonies.

Optimists beat Scout House in the afternoon and held chief inspector Judge Hugh McKean, of junior bands have the most trouble." He asked why. "Well, they won't eat—bitterness, you see." In other words, nervousness and heat often before selection.

TORONTO JUNIORS DEFEAT SCOUT HOUSE BAND

District band supporters have cheered for years if any junior band could defeat the now-famous Scout House band. The Toronto band won 81.61 points to 80.11. A result announced widely by a large Toronto contingent. About 10,000 people jammed the Galt park at night for the 1958 senior contests, won by Canada's Marching Ambassadors, a collection of musical masters. Close to 4,500 crowded the park in the afternoon as well. Durham's High School Girls' band won the feminine prize once again. (Reporter Photo)

1958: Toronto Optimists win Nationals

The Deed Was Done

In one year, from fresh beginnings to the 1958 Canadian Junior Champions! The repercussions were immediate. Lorne Ferrazzutti, our drum instructor, who had to work on Saturdays, was driving up to the show and heard the results on his car radio. He was as shocked as anyone. This, according to plan, was supposed to have taken two years and, even then, was not a foregone conclusion. He arrived near where people from the opposition were gathered. Some were crying, and all were downcast. Scout House was a local institution, and Canada had been their territory for years.

Eventually, as was Preston's way, the trauma would subside and give way to generous good sportsmanship. The disappointment, though, was not easy to cover. The members of the band itself, executive included, were quite philosophical about it, saying that it had to happen someday. This stance, had we but known it, was in the future to apply equally to the Optimists.

As for us, being the winners, there was still an exhibition to perform after the senior competition in the evening. This was done, performed as well as was the afternoon show, to prove that the contest result was no fake.



1958: Eric Burton with Optimists' first Nationals Flag



1958: Optimists on cover of Drum Corps World

After the senior show, the trophies were awarded for all categories of Bands and Corps that had competed on that eventful day. As the Toronto Optimists Drum and Bugle Corps was named the 1958 Junior Canadian Champions, everyone was aware that an era had ended. No one knew, as yet, that a new one was about to unfold.

When the day's proceedings had come to a close, we boarded our bus for the trip home. There had been no parties laid on in expectation of victory, as we were not really prone to

overconfidence. We just went back to Toronto, now champions, enjoying a happy if uneventful bus ride. We were told that rehearsals would continue on a regular basis, as our season was not yet over.

The following week we had to do an exhibition at the International Contest in Toronto, and the week after that was the St. Catharines Grape Festival Show. This was another annual affair, and we cemented our position somewhat with another victory over Scout House. The same day, in the evening, we appeared at a standstill contest in Buffalo, N.Y. Although we placed third, behind two Senior Corps, our show, for some undefined reason, really caught on with the audience. A prolonged thunderous standing ovation was our reward, along with many shouts of “encore”. This had never happened before and the effect was to send us home tired but happy. The show provided a fitting conclusion to what had been an exciting, successful season.

That was the way it was!



1958: Championship Crest

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