

Chapter 10: 1961 – The Challenge

Inevitably, of course, the season came upon us. We were not very concerned. After all, we were the Optimists, and, having survived other misfortunes, we were confident that we could accept and manage any more that came our way. This attitude, presumptuous as it may seem, was a major factor in getting us through the year ahead, which unknown to us contained many nerve-wracking moments.



1961: Toronto Optimists Full Corps photo (Ottawa)

Before all this, there was another Silver Ring Dance. These rings were attractive, silver in colour with a green crest. They became a mark of seniority for those who had them.

This was in April, and we were more heavily into outdoor rehearsals, although our first Canadian contest was to be an indoor, standstill affair. Held at Leaside Arena, and featuring most of the local Corps and out of town rivals, it was a harbinger of things to come.

Although throughout this story only the Optimists, De La Salle, Grantham, and Scout House have been mentioned, there were other good Drum Corps around. The Midtowners, St. Mary's, and Leaside were three of them, and they were at this contest, putting on fine competitive performances.

Prior to this show, the Optimists and De La Salle drum lines had begun their own separate rivalry, as distinct from the two Corps themselves. The individuals in these lines were familiar with each other, and it was a friendly though intense rivalry. Some members?

Optimists Snare.. . . . Prokop, Williams, Krukliis
Optimists Tenor. Burak, Bignall, Hedworth

De La Salle Snare.. . . . Mosley, Jacko, Voytek
De La Salle Tenor.. . . . Kelly, Newman, Altilia

The rumours of the improvement of Del's drum line proved to be well founded. Reports from individuals who had attended some of their rehearsals confirmed the fact that our hitherto large spread in drumming scores would not be easy to maintain. This had come about largely due to a young man named Paul Mosley. He had come up through the De La Salle school organization, as did all of their personnel. Upon joining the Corps, he saw what was needed and proceeded to put it into effect. The results of his efforts and those of his colleagues would become evident during the competition season.



1961: Optimists Tenors (Orest Burak, Colin Hedworth & Dave Bignall)

Leaside Show

Everybody was eager to see how things would turn out and even more interest was created when a fifteen dollar wager was made between the drums of Optimists and those of Del, whichever topped the caption, won the money.

Held on May 14, at Leaside Arena, it was packed with spectators, such was the interest. It was strictly a standstill affair of seven to nine minutes duration, which accounted for the ensuing high scores.



1961: Toronto Optimists (Leaside)

When the last note had sounded and the dust had settled, we were still unbeaten in all Canadian shows since 1958, although by a very slim margin. A final difference of 1.475 over Del, and 1.775 over Grantham was a close shave and no doubt a great incentive to our competitors.

Included in this score was a win in the drum caption by the Optimists line, but only by a margin of two tenths. We collected the fifteen dollars but were forced to realize that things would not be so easy this year.



1961: De La Salle (Leaside)

We had been invited, yet again, to the Preview of Champions in Jersey City. This time, we were a bit apprehensive, aware that the early date combined with our less than perfect condition could lead to a major debacle. However, Mr. Baggs did not pull us out of this one and away we went, determined to do or die.

After two weeks of long, hard practices, we climbed aboard the bus on a Friday and took off once more for the lion's den.

Phillipsburg and the Preview

First on the agenda was a contest in Phillipsburg, NJ, where again we ran into Blessed Sacrament. Mr. Baggs had made sure that he was present on this trip, lending moral support when he knew it would be needed. His presence was always reassuring and instilled confidence, a quality that was not in abundance at this time.

Our fears were confirmed. Under the intense but fair scrutiny of the Mid-Atlantic Judges Association, the Golden Knights to the tune of thirteen points bested us. To paraphrase modern lingo, we were back to square minus one. All the hard won gains of the past had evaporated, and we no longer took the liberty of comparing ourselves with the best. This state of affairs would change, but talk about coming down to earth.

The next day, after a parade in Hoboken, New Jersey, where we were now an annual favourite, it was into the "Big House", Roosevelt Stadium. Needless to say, our position remained as it had in the past, last place, far out of contention for any honours. The surest indication of our condition was the crowd reaction. American crowds, always generous when merited even if the scores were not always high, were also good judges, especially this one. The polite applause that followed our performance was a far cry from the tumultuous standing ovations of previous years. So it was.

Back to Canada and regular rehearsals. Score sheets were minutely analysed and the conclusions acted upon. Improvement comes slowly and the Canadian Drum Corps season was short, so time was of the essence. The drum line, realizing that its local dominance was threatened, put in a lot of extra time. Those who were new this year, Bramley, Burak, Bignall, and Kruklis never complained and proved themselves more than worthy. Their abilities with their instruments gradually improved to the point where they eventually reached the necessary level of proficiency. Among all the new people, some would, in the space of the year, surpass those of long standing. If this attitude had not prevailed, this Corps would have gone down the drain in short order.



1961: Toronto Optimists (Phillipsburg, NJ, SAC in background)

In June of this year, the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry Drum Corps sponsored a Senior International Contest in Hamilton, Ontario. We had been invited to appear as the exhibition Corps, which gave us an opportunity to display our full M&M show to an audience before having to compete with it, in Canada. The more shows we did the better, as each one gave the new people more experience. Although Al Baggs was now the Chief Judge, he served at this show as a G.E.



1961: Toronto Optimists (Windsor)

M&M Judge. The sponsoring Corps, the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry, were soon to follow in the footsteps of others. Severing their links with the army, they became the Hamilton Viscounts. This was just another step in a continuing trend.

Ontario Junior Drum and Bugle Corps Championships

Coming up soon was the annual Ontario Junior Drum and Bugle Corps Championships. We had never entered this contest before, the reason being that the Optimist Club had always been the sponsors. This year, the Marching Ambassadors had taken over full responsibility for this affair, thus enabling us to become a contestant. It now became a true Ontario Championship.

It was our first full field show against local rivals, so interest among both fans and members was at a peak. All the top Junior Corps in Ontario were in attendance, and the results showed how things were shaping up for the year. Some Corps, who had earlier showed promise, were seen to be slipping when a full field show was required. A summary of the scores demonstrates the scene as it stood.

1st	The Optimists.....	80.690
2nd	De La Salle.....	78.625
3rd	Grantham.....	71.920
4th	Midtowners.....	70.690
5th	Scout House.....	68.010
6th	St. Mary's.....	58.760

So we had won our first Ontario title and were still perched at the top of the heap. The margin was about where we had left off the previous year. Marching and maneuvering and drums had done the trick for us, along with general effect, which was very close; however we lost Field Bugles by a sizable margin.



1961: Ivor Bramley, Glenn Copp and Frans Rood

De La Salle had a very pleasing show that became, as they improved, to be classed as “electrifying”, and it was at this show that considerable booing was heard due to the results. We had been booed before and would be again when the crowd disagreed with a judge’s decision. Also, we were now sometimes booed just because of who we were. There is a streak in human nature, often admirable, that becomes palled with constant success. It then associates itself with the underdog. Long having ceased to be underdogs, at least in Canada, we were now sometimes the recipients of this phenomenon. Its most obvious sign was scattered booing when we appeared, or when our name was announced. This attitude could often be reversed if a performance was excellent, which was harder to do this year.

Anyway, at least we now knew where we stood in relation to our competitors.

Within the corps

Other things were now happening around the Corps.

Eric Burton, who was one of the original instructors, left the Corps and moved to Rochester, New York. He had many friends there, and Rochester, at that time, was almost as much a hive of Drum Corps activity as was New Jersey. He was the first of our instructors to leave behind a legacy of hard work and good colour guards. Ivor Bramley, who had been instructing the guard temporarily, had become a bass drummer because one was needed. Mike Layton who was already the guard captain, and thus was familiar with its priorities assumed Eric’s position. Carrying on where Eric left off, he continued the quality tradition that had been established. This was to prove, among other things, decisive later this year.



1961: members of Optimists drum line look like bellhops for the Daffodil Parade

As mentioned in the previous chapter Ivor Bramley had, by this time, become thoroughly immersed in the affairs of the Drum Corps in Oakville. Now called the Trafalgar Patrolmen, they figure in this story because their activity attracted more than a few members of the Optimists to their rehearsals. They had a lot of good people of their own and just seemed to need a spark to get them moving. This had been provided by Ivor. Five members of the Optimists were now involved

in instructing, writing, and arranging for them. These included Ronn Prokop, Ivor Bramley, Robin Weatherstone and Al Morrison. Robin, who lived in Oakville, was another former Scout House man.

Along with the contributions of their own capable people, they were really beginning to make progress. Optimist involvement, all unofficial, would sometimes see as many as twenty or more people in attendance at their practices. Quite a few friendships developed out of this,

and, coincidentally, much wild and riotous partying. This Corps, Trafalgar, had an attractive female colour guard, so it is not surprising that four marriages eventually ensued from these circumstances.

The four couples were:

Len Perrin and Nancy Roy
Mel Dey and Judy Gasson
Chuck Clutterbuck and Pat Folland
Peter Burton and Shirley Anne Brown

It was a good Corps relationship but got so intense that the Optimist management felt it necessary to comment on it. They hoped, they said, that this development would not interfere with the operations of the Optimists themselves. They were assured that it would not. The only adverse things that developed were rumours that the Trafalgar guard was being used to try out things before being adopted by the Optimist colour guard. Whether this was true or not, both Corps benefited from this association, as later events would bear out.

First organized in 1960, and being somewhat less than a cohesive group, this year the Ladies Auxiliary really began to come into its own. Mrs. Nonie McKolskey-Ber, a prime initiator of this bunch, was titular head of it. She considered herself to be just one among many, nearly all of whom were ladies who had a son in the Corps. (We had no girls in those days).

Organizing a Christmas Dance and the previously mention Silver Ring Dance were just the first of their accomplishments. Along with this, they raised money that was contributed



1961: Toronto Optimists step Off The Line (Windsor)

towards the purchase of practice flags for the colour guard. Any excess was put into a Corps fund. From this were bought gift parcels that were given to any Corps member who became ill or were hospitalized. They added a veneer of civilized amenities that had previously been lacking.

All the items dreamed up by Don Daber, pennants, buttons, crests, etc., were now displayed openly at shows on a booster table. The ladies set this up at all events, selling what they could to raise money. They even took it to the Quebec Winter Carnival, the following year, a long trip. Often in attendance during long hours of rehearsal, they provided sandwiches for the Corps to consume, and even streetcar fare for kids who did not have the means to get to practice. Their services, at first a welcome addition, became almost indispensable and seldom did the Corps do anything without their participation. The Ladies Auxiliary, many times over, earned the gratitude of the Optimists.

Green Capsule Comments, the Corps periodical produced by Don Daber, now contained many regular columns, some written under mysterious pseudonyms. Sadie MAU MAU, the Magnet, and the Winner, were some of them, and an issue this year contained a letter from a Tom Kelly. He just happened to be the guard captain of De La Salle, and it was a fair and open comment on the De La Salle – Optimist rivalry. This was timely because this year was to see that rivalry reach one of its peaks. There was, of course, rivalry with other local Corps, but, on the field, it was Del who were uppermost in our minds. More than likely, the same situation in reverse existed in their camp.



1961: Toronto Optimists (Rochester)

Things were tightening up and heading for a climax. Again we went to Rochester, New York, and again successfully defended our New York/Canadian Championship title. The challenges were increasing all around as the Corps strove to maintain its standing. It was not easy, but the results of our efforts revealed themselves at Rome, New York, later on.

This show had always seemed to be a good one for us and served to indicate any progress that had been made. This year was no different. There were usually only one or two Canadian Junior Corps in this contest, the others being American Corps of good calibre. We were only three points out of first place, which was taken by the Garfield Cadets. Second was Blessed Sacrament, in one of their rare losses. They had defeated us by thirteen points at the beginning of the season, and so we could measure our progress by this result. Progress had assuredly been made but would it be enough for continued success back in Canada. Only time would tell.

Although we had not won this contest, we were very pleased with the results, which were actually better than we expected.

When we did win a competition, anywhere, we had adopted the practice of parading from the contest field to the dressing room. This was done playing at full volume and usually occurred anywhere from 11:00 to midnight. Nobody ever thought to ask local residents, many no doubt being rudely awakened, what they thought of this habit.



1961: Toronto Optimists on the line (Merritton)

Now, after Rome, it was back to Canada to face the challenges of restless competitors.

Not everything was nail-biting competition. In Windsor, Ontario, there was the Emancipation Day parade, a gala affair usually concluding with exhibitions by the participating Drum Corps.

What was helping the Corps to survive this year, still in first place, was the fact that for the first time we had a full-time drill instructor. Doug McPhail had come through the ranks of the Corps, learning the business as he went. The intricate drills he wrote and taught had proven to be adequate and were helping to keep us in contention. The season was drawing to a close, and, although we had been able to remain undefeated in Canada, there were still some stiff contests remaining. Our rivals had smelled blood and were not about to let up. So, when the next competition rolled around interest among fans and Corps alike was at a high. This show would see us defending our Canadian National Exhibition title, which we had held since its inception. We knew it would not be easy and so it turned out.



1961: Doug McPhail and Bernie Beer

CNE

There was a large crowd for this one, doubtless stimulated by the first meeting of top Junior Corps in Canada for some weeks. We had improved since the start of the season, but our rivals had not been standing still.



1961: Opti & Del waiting for scores (CNE)

The show we put on was, we felt, the best we were capable of at the time. Due to the small size of the stadium and large crowd in attendance, it was not possible for us to watch the other Corps perform. Waiting for the results, we mingled with the crowd around us that were enjoying the exhibition, unaware of the drama unfolding on the little field. Finally, all the Corps trooped out on the field for the retreat ceremony. Tension slowly rose as the announcer ran through the scores, and Corps, from bottom

up, until there were only two remaining. Tenths separated the two top positions as the scores, unavailable now, were given first, and then the Corps.

In second place, from Toronto, “The Optimists”. It finally happened! For the first time since mid-1958, we had lost a field show in Canada, to a Canadian Corps. Mixed cheering and booing greeted the result, with first place going, of course, to De La Salle. They had earned it and were jubilant. To cap it all, our drum line was beaten by a very slim margin, by the same Corps, although they dropped down to two snare drums to do it. No matter, a win is a win is a win however you do it. This saying was shortly to be proven again, emphatically.



1961: Barry Bell and corps after loss at CNE

So we had lost. So what! Nobody dropped dead, and life would go on. It did not take long to sink in, along with the realization that the Canadian Championships were only two weeks away. Here, now, was where the often mentioned Optimists Corps spirit showed its depth. One of our members, much concerned, approached Barry Bell, the chief instructor, and asked if the Corps could practice the rest of the weekend, all of the following weekend, and every weeknight between now and the championships. Although such hours were still unheard of in those days, consent was given on the condition that the guys would come out. Going back to the corps, this individual (I might as well admit it) announced the proposal, citing the fact that we were in real danger of losing our Canadian title. Nobody said much, just packed up and went home. Not much had to be said.



1961: Toronto Optimists on retreat (CNE)

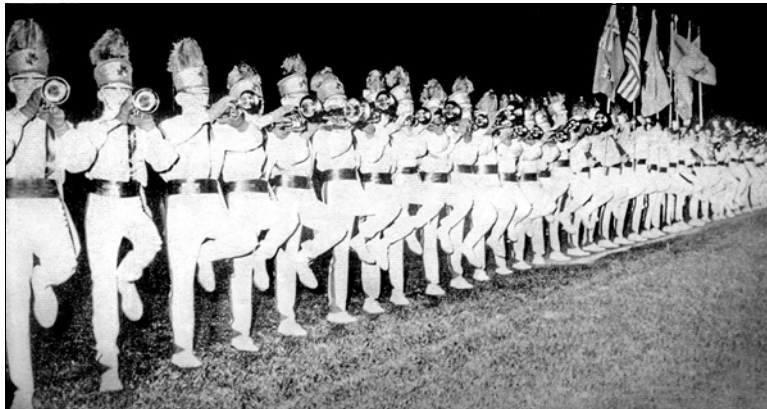
The next day, everybody showed up for practice. And the next day! And even the next!! Nobody intentionally missed a rehearsal for the next two weeks. It was possible that the loss was a blessing in disguise, as our subsequent activity was to have some effect on events.

The two weeks that we had in which to polish up our show were not wasted. Too late in the year to make major changes in drill or music, little things were attended. Difficult music parts were eliminated or changed, to save a tenth here and there. Likewise with drill patterns. Ivor Bramley,

who now had some experience teaching drill, took off his bass drum and concentrated on drilling the drum line. This definitely paid off, as the line was less than perfect in this category. Everybody gave it everything they had for two weeks and, at the end, felt that we could not have done much more than we did. All now was in the hands of fate, and the chips would fall where they would.

1961 Nationals

Came the day of judgment and off we went to Waterloo, Ontario, where the 1961 Canadian Champions would be crowned. Considering the situation, things were very light-hearted and no gloom and doom was apparent. This would change.



1961: De La Salle Off The Line (Nationals)

Many were on hand to see this show, where it was now expected that these Optimists would finally get their comeuppance. Believe it or not, many of us thought this way too.

The preliminaries, held during the day, only served to strengthen this attitude. Again, we put on the best show we thought possible; and, this time, due to stadium layout, we could watch the other Corps.

There was no doubt about it, De La Salle were “electrifying” and pulled out all the stops in their ceaseless quest for victory. They defeated us by a margin of 2.375, winning all captions but drumming. Now all they had to do was repeat at the night finals and there would be a new title holder. Gloom and desperation settled over our dressing room. Was it all to end? A scheduled practice was delayed because nobody had the inclination to do it, let alone not being sure what to do. Anybody observing this scene would have thought the end of the world was at hand. To us, it was.

Then, as so often happens in a crisis, no matter what the occasion or activity, fate intervened in the form of Bernie Beer, the Assistant Corps Director. He administered a tongue-lashing that instilled the spirit necessary for one last stab at snatching victory from the jaws of defeat.

There must have been only about four or five hours before the final showdown, yet, gathering what zeal



1961: Toronto Optimists (Nationals, Waterloo)

was left, we went off to do what had to be done. The measures adopted were those of desperation. These entailed yet again taking out any hard bugle parts, replacing them with simpler passages. Actions such as these are risky so close to a show, especially one so important. There was not enough time to rehearse changes until they become second nature. The original parts had been played all year, and the risk was that some would forget the changes and play the old parts. However, that is what was done, and, with some confidence restored by these Band-Aid measures, we prepared for our return to the arena. There was not much to do but wait, and tension subsided, only to build up again as the climax approached.

Being the defending champions, we were on last in order of appearance, therefore, being able to relax a bit longer. We did not watch the other Corps perform, for obvious reasons; and then, finally, it was our turn. Trooping out on to the starting line and performing the preliminary ritual of dressing the line, we stood there, waiting for the command to begin.

When a Corps is on the line, all the crowd sees is a solid line of faceless, uniformed figures. What is going on inside those uniforms is a different story. Tension ran through the line like an electric current. Some were compelled to express their feelings in muted “side of the mouth” comments, and visible nervous tension was rife. No matter, the clock ticked on and away we went. The long green line took off down the field, and, horrors, it has a big curve in it. Normally supposed to be ruler straight, white-faced instructors and fans deduced that the affair was blown right there; however, it straightened up as training and concentration asserted themselves. From then on, according to eyewitness reports, the drill was as precise as it had ever been seen before. The Corps picked up, and it became obvious that everybody was giving it everything they had. One thing was certain, this Corps was not going down without a fight.

At the end of the show, we filed off the field, satisfied that we had given it our all, aware that the die was cast. Nothing could be changed now.



1961: Toronto Optimists (Nationals, Waterloo)

The Retreat

This retreat ceremony, where all the results are announced was probably the most tension packed one that we had endured. More so than when we had first challenged for the championship, because then we had nothing to lose. Although results are supposed to be known only when announced on the field, there had been a leak. Some of our people were aware of the outcome, and, win or lose, were not tense, like everybody else.

After the Junior B and Girls classes were announced, it was the Junior A's turn. Starting from the bottom up, the scores were reeled off, one by one, until only second and first place remained. The crowd and Corps were waiting with undisguised impatience for the last two results.



1961: Toronto Optimists at Inspection (Nationals)

The scores were given first.

2nd Place, the score was 83.50

1st Place, the score was 83.55

Then, in second place, with a score of 83.50,

From Toronto (both were from Toronto)

De La Salle!

We had done it. For the fourth year in a row, we were the Canadian Junior National Champions.

The crowd reaction, though mixed, was decidedly, not in our favour. Del had performed brilliantly, but we had also given our most capable effort, enhanced by the striving of the past two weeks. The score sheets would tell the story.

They had won all the general effect captions, but we had come out on top in execution drums and marching and maneuvering. Our drum line, which had really exerted itself during the

previous two weeks, along with the drill of the entire Corps, had put these captions back within our grasp. Our bugles, although not winning their caption, were extremely close and had held up their end. The new people had come through, as they had all year, and the last minute changes had been executed well. We had only won by five one hundredths of a point, and one more mistake would have finished us. The scores of drums, bugles, and drill, both execution and general effect, when added up, were very close; however, we would have lost if those were the only things that counted. What tipped the scales in our favour was the colour guard. Our guard had received a one tenth penalty but Del's guard had been penalized for three tenths. Without this, they would have won. The controversy raged from the beginning, and, in some circles, still rages today, over thirty years later.

Protests were immediately lodged with the judges, as they usually are in the case of penalties, if they are decisive. In this case, they were.

They claimed they had been penalized for the varied heights of their people, and the other side claimed it was for uneven flagpole heights. No guard has people all exactly the same height. Flagpole slings have to be adjusted to compensate for this. It never was resolved to the satisfaction of all, even though the judge in question stated he had warned them about it before.

A judge who awards such things is not aware of the rest of the unit he is watching. He concentrates on his specialty and does not know if his judgments have a decisive impact on the overall result, especially one so controversial. Therefore, when protests are lodged, he is often required to leave the final decision to a higher authority. This happened here, and that higher authority was none other than Al Baggs, the Chief Judge. He was also, of course, still the Corps Director of the Toronto Optimists, so this was akin to pouring kerosene on a fire.

If he had ever foreseen the development of such a conflict of interest, when he accepted the Chief Judge's position, is not known. He was, however, intelligent and must have known that one day it could lead to criticism. This, obviously, was the day. No matter where he came down, he would be exposed to censure. He was between a rock and a hard place.

As it turned out, he opted to support his judge and uphold the penalties. If he had not, one possible side effect could have been a loss of confidence in him by other judges and Corps. This also meant, among other things, that we remained in first place and were still champions. It also meant that any future shows we won where he was presiding would be seen to be influenced by this. This was completely unfounded, as we repeated wins in the United States under totally neutral judges.



1961: Toronto Optimists (Titusville)

The judges were no doubt relieved, and all the Optimist fans were happy, especially the hard line ones. De La Salle was a different story! Who can blame them? To this day, among some people, Al Baggs' name is still greeted with derision, sometimes almost hatred.

Del was a Corps that had given their best, and many felt they should have won, including some of our people. Showing their character, they saluted us on the field and took it like the men that they were. Afterwards, one of their members came over and said, “we threw everything we had at you, and you still won”. This was true, and, if we had not, the future of Canadian Junior Corps would not have continued as it did. We knew they would be back, and this sportsmanlike attitude can only be applauded in the face of a result that even we had only dared to hope for.

Grape Festival

After this nail-biting experience, anything else left in the season was a definite anti-climax, and it showed. At the Grape Festival contest in St. Catharines, we lost again to Del, by two full points. This meant that, including the preliminaries at the Nationals, we had lost three out of the four contests in Canada to De La Salle. Had the year been averaged out, things would have been fairly even, but that is not the way things are done. Like the Stanley Cup, or the World Series, people usually only recall who won the championship. We had won it, however close, and callous as it sounds, that was all we cared about. Anything after that was not of great consequence.

Things slowly wound down. Robin Weatherstone, a horn player, and our second ex-Scout House man, took over the writing of our Drum Corps World column from Ed Nanni. As we entered the month of October, the official release month, we again faced the dilemma of people leaving.

October, under the C.D.C.A. rules, was the only month when you could leave a Corps to join another one without any protest or action from the original Corps. Optimist policy was to give anyone a release, anytime they wanted one, no matter what time of the year it was. If somebody did not want to be there both parties are better off. It turned



1961: Toronto Optimists (Grape Festival Parade)

out that this fall we were to lose only five horn players and one drummer.

St. Mary’s Drum Corps folded at the end of this year. Some of their horn players came to us and filled out the horn line. Among this group were two brothers, Hans and Richard Boehnke. Richard was to eventually have a larger impact than just being a horn player. The vacancy in the drum line was filled by Ron Kaiser who, though having been with the Corps for some time, would not play in it until he could play snare drum.

So without having to abide the same large turnover of the previous year, we could hopefully look forward to better prospects in the year to come. Whatever the future held, there as only one way to sum up the season just past – Phew!