

Chapter 11: 1962 Winter – From Rags To Riches

After the conclusion of the previous season, nobody was seriously considering the future. They were just happy that we had survived intact and were still considered the number one Corps. The higher your get on the ladder, the harder it is to keep your balance. Eventually it is bound to take a toll somewhere. It did, in a rather subtle fashion that gradually crept up and took hold.

A comparison of this year's Corps to that of the last year would definitely favour this year. The six new playing members compared most favourably with the over twenty of the previous year. Also, these new members were experienced at the business, all but one coming from full-fledged Drum Corps. The one, drummer Ron Kaiser, was a graduate from the Optimist Bantams. He had marched with us in parades, exhibitions, and rehearsals, and so had some experience and would fit in easily.



1962: Toronto Optimists Full Corps photo (Varsity Stadium)

The people who had been novices the year before were not new anymore. In one year of marching and playing, they had become veterans. Some of them had become as good, or better, than those who had been in before them. There were still a few left from the original 1958 Corps, and everybody else in between had degrees of experience ranging from one to four years. In Canada, this was not a common situation and was to have uncommon results.

There were no vast music programs in school to draw people from nor any widespread interest in, or knowledge of, Drum Corps. Most Corps people came from other local Corps, which could be detrimental to the whole Corps scene. The enticing of players from one Corps to another had been going on for years and sometimes resulted in the building of one Corps at the expense of another. We had not had to do this but still had come up with that rarity in Canada, a fully experienced Corps. So, it would be thought that with everything seemingly going our way, everybody would be chomping at the bit and raring to go. In fact, as things developed, they moved in exactly the opposite direction.

A completely new show

The Corps management, realizing the extent of its miscalculations of the previous year, threw out the entire show. This had never, ever, been done before and was like wiping the slate clean and starting over. It was a good move, and, as the new music came in and was revealed, everybody appeared enthusiastic about it. The new show was in the process of being learned but, at the same time, the effects of constantly striving for the top began to subtly creep in. It took the form of a lethargy that settled over the Corps. Spirit and unity sagged to an all-time low. People came to practices but were less inclined to do anything. Fewer people came to practices and gradually, what was left of the Corps began to wonder if it was worth keeping it going. With the prospects for the coming year initially being as good, or better, than ever before, there had to be a reason for this.

It was a classic case of burnout. Possibly, it was a combination of things. The same people, same old faces, doing the same things year after year had to have something to do with it. Even armies in wars get regularly relieved, but not Drum Corps, year after year, pounding out the drills and music. There has to be a reaction somewhere, and, in this case, this was it.



1961: Participants at Optimists Rally Night

Also, the tension endured during most of the previous season probably caused a backlash. This might have dissipated if, say, a one or two month respite had been taken. With Corps, of course, you finish one year and immediately begin the next, so any reaction intrudes upon the Corps itself.

Lorne kicks us in the butt

So here we were, a Corps in a situation that it had never been in before. It was bursting with talent and experience, yet seeing its ambition and potential dribble away in a debilitating torpor. This could not last and had to go one way or the other.

It came down to one miserable practice, and everybody, instructors and members alike, were at their wits end to produce a solution. A meeting was called of all those who were present. It was held at the back of Jarvis Vocational School, in the school yard. Barry Bell conducted the session, and the unspoken thought in everybody's mind was "Is this it? Is this the end of the Corps?" Nobody really wanted that! Barry asked what it was that the Corps wanted, almost despairingly. People replied with their various suggestions until the whole resembled a cacophony of whiners. It was probably the lowest point, morale-wise, that the Optimist Drum Corps had ever seen.

Then, like a bolt from the blue, came a voice, edged with steel and tinged with scorn. The speech, lasting only a short while, touched everyone in attendance, as its derisive words found a target in every heart. When it was over, everybody was shamefully silent, digesting the scornful message, knowing it to be true. That speech was the turning point, and anyone who was at that meeting could say that it was indirectly responsible for ensuing events aside, the whole episode proved that the Optimists were, after all, only human.

Whatever, the Corps was kicked out of its junky mood and, from that moment, we never looked back. Lorne Ferrazzutti, by the way, delivered the speech, ad lib.

The New Repertoire

With that nonsense out of the way, things began to move in leaps and bounds. What helped was that the new music, all of it, found hardly any disfavour in the Corps itself. It was a good mixture of Broadway, classical, jazz, ballad, folk, Latin, and popular music, in other words, a well-rounded show with contrast and variety.

Because this repertoire was so apt and partially responsible for the outcome of this season, we shall list it in its entirety.

- ▶ *Let Me Entertain You* – from the musical “Gypsy”.
- ▶ *Asia Minor* – a classical excerpt from a larger movement.
- ▶ *St. Louis Blues* – a jazz contribution.
- ▶ *In The Mood For Love / Down By The Riverside* – two contemporary concert pieces, one slow, one fast.
- ▶ *Tabu* – a Latin inspired offering.
- ▶ *I Believe* – a cheer inducer, as it was presented. Later to be described as having religious overtones.
- ▶ *The Party’s Over* – a self-explanatory closing number.

These selections appealed, in one way or another to almost everyone in the Corps. This was, and is, an important factor; and, just as vital, would prove to appeal equally to judges and fans alike.

It was apparent, early on, that this year’s version of the Optimists would be like no other.



1961: Andy Henderson with the guard

The musical arrangements, both horn and drum, were the most difficult that we had been expected to play until now. This would be a major factor in the year to come, combined with the fact that this year we could play them. Because of the depth of talent in all departments, the new material was digested in double-quick fashion. This left more time for the perfecting of the music, both in section and ensemble practice.

A good horn line can be recognized by almost anyone, whether possessed of Drum Corps knowledge or not. To a layman's ear the recognition of the music, played with no obvious blunders, would qualify a line as good. To someone with a bit of specialized know-how, other things play a part: power, range, dynamics.

The Drum Line and Rifles

A good drum line is a bit more difficult to assess without some knowledge. This line, even apparent to those not in the know, was shaping up to be outstanding. The snares, Victor Krukliis, Ronn Prokop, and Ron Kaiser were showing signs of being the best we had ever had. Prokop had now been with us for two years, going into his third. Krukliis, who had come to us the previous year, from the Knights of Columbus Corps, had gained the reputation of being able to "play anything". The newest member, Ron Kaiser, had practised so much that it was a simple matter of minor adjustment for him to fit in.

Among these three superb drummers, Ronn Prokop more or less gravitated to a leadership position, if only by personality, technical ability, and seniority. Not surprisingly, his talent and drive would take him a long way in the music business, long after the Corps. He was part founder and drummer for the Paupers, and the more renowned "Lighthouse" rock bands.

Although he was a leading figure, the line was still under the control of Lorne Ferrazzutti, who guided its various talents and moulded it into a top competitive unit. Prokop, this year, wrote much of the drum music for the show, the first time that Lorne had allowed anyone to do this. Talent cannot be suppressed. This was to be proven again, years later, in another department.



1962: Toronto Optimists on retreat (Rome, NY)

Three excellent, veteran riflemen, Al Miller, Bill McNabb, and Andy Henderson highlighted the colour guard, fully versed in showy, but military, routines. Their twirling and tossing routines, done with rifles equipped with bayonets, were to catch the eye of many a crowd and judge. In a nutshell, this corps had potential in all departments, and all could see that the future looked bright.

To the outside world

To the outside world, of course, we were still the Corps that had barely scraped through the previous year, retaining our title by the merest of margins. So it was to be expected others would think that the coming year would be a repeat of the past.

We shall see.

Because the Corps was progressing so well and so rapidly, it was a favourable situation for early learning of the drill. The only obstacle to this ambition was the lack of an indoor place to rehearse. Due to politics, a somewhat indistinct affair, the details of which are long lost, the local armouries were not available to us. This delayed early learning of the drill but proved to be only a minor setback.

One major step forward, technically, was the acquisition of a complete set of bass horns, twelve in all. They replaced the ordinary baritones that we had been using until now, and we were the first Canadian Junior Corps to use them. These horns, an improvement on the baritone, were the precursor of the modern contra-bass. Incidentally, all of our instruments, drums and bugles, were still of pre-1958 vintage, hand-overs from the old Optimist Trumpet Band and varied sources. The new bass horns that we acquired this year were the first new instruments this Corps had seen since its inception.

There was to be a change in the uniform this year. New blouses and cummerbunds were on order. They turned out to be a definite improvement, with trimmings that would enhance the overall appearance on the field, but without altering the basic design. When they arrived, it was decided to save them for a certain, important event. The results of this event were to justify this measure, making it that much more a “special occasion”. So, for the first part of the season, the original uniforms, in their entirety, would still be used, going into their fifth year. This situation is not uncommon in Drum Corps. Uniforms and instruments are expensive items to replace, so you try to make them last as long as possible.

Another Corps that had green blouses, St. Vincent’s Cadets of Bayonne, New Jersey, folded this year. One of the best and most famous of the US Corps, they had been one of those that we had first competed against in 1958 at Batavia, New York. The other two at that contest, Audubon Girls and Garfield Cadets, we had since defeated, but not St. Vincent’s. “Vinnies” as they had popularly been known, were another Corps sometimes called “The Green Machine” or “The Big Green Band”. Their disappearance left a big gap on the American scene, especially New Jersey.



1961: relaxing in a dressing room

In Canada, De La Salle were reported to be red hot and raring to go. This was hardly surprising considering their performance the previous year. They were still the major contender for top spot and were not to be taken lightly.

This year, the situation differed in that we were not down and were looking and sounding, even in January, like nothing that had ever come out of Canada before.

On another plane, “Green Capsule Comments”, our Corps paper, could not keep up with the demand for it. The mailing list grew too big for the supply available and had to be curtailed. This was in line with a statement in “Illinois Info”, a column in the February 1962 issue of Drum Corps World. “The Toronto Optimists easily have the best publicity set up of any Corps in the country”. This included Canada and the United States and was a tribute to the imagination and dynamism of Don Daber. He was incomparable. And he was Ours!



The 1961 rifles, Ivor & Len, with two of the 1962 Rifles, Al and Andy

The arrival of Jim McConkey

Something happened during the off season that nobody would have ever thought could, or would, happen.

One night, in the hallway of Jarvis Vocational, a young man was seen sitting on a bench. He was dressed in a raincoat, self-consciously reading, while often glancing up nervously at the people passing by. To some of us he was vaguely familiar, and we all eventually learned who he was. This was Jim McConkey.

We had only ever seen him before, flamboyantly marching in front of some of the best drum Corps in the business; namely, Blessed Sacrament Golden Knights and the Archer-Epler Musketeers. These two Corps were both among the top in their leagues, and both had been majored by Jim McConkey. He was among the best in the business. What, then, was he doing here? Well, it turned out he had come to join up with us.



1962: Barry Bell and Jim McConkey

Some of us were a little bit in awe at first, if only because of his reputation. Although being perennial Canadian Champions and having a decent name in the United States, we had never yet equalled the calibre of Corps that he was used to leading. What had brought him here?

His presence caused debate that went on for some time, and no

stone was left unturned. All this controversy had its effect, which showed when Jim finally majored the Corps for the first time at a Sunday rehearsal.

Visibly nervous, he directed his first number in front of the corps. From the first note, his superb showmanship took command, all tension disappearing as Corps and Drum Major performed as one. At the end, most of us were aware that if we did not use his offered talents, we would be crazy. We were not crazy and James McConkey became our Drum Major for the year of 1962. It was a decision we would not regret. To cement this relationship and make him quickly feel at home, it was decided to throw a party for him. This was a “Get McConkey in the Corps” party and was held at a downtown tavern. It was a place of dubious reputation but where one could put tables together and let one’s hair down. We preferred places like that. The party was a success, and McConkey was “in”, not only officially but as one of the boys. We were almost ready for our 1962 debut.



1961: Optimists Rally Night

Regardless of the uproar at the 1961 Canadian Championships, Al Baggs was still Chief Judge of the C.D.C.A. and still our Corps Director. This situation, with its potential for conflict, could not last forever and eventually something would have to give.

NY State assigns 45 points for G.E.

One development that would have consequence for us concerned New York State. The New York State Chapter of All-American Judges had decided to use score sheets opposite in value to Official Legion National Sheets. What this meant was that score sheets in New York State would allow forty-five points out of a hundred for general effect.

The execution captions would now allow fifteen points for bugles, fifteen points for drums, and twenty-five points for marching and maneuvering. The general effect captions would allow fifteen points for bugles, drums and M & M. Although this arrangement would only apply in New York State, it was to have an affect on our fortunes, and later in the story we shall see how.

During the winter months, someone had suggested the formation of a mini-corps. It was brought into existence and consisted of representatives from each section of the regular Corps. They learned music that was played by other, well-known Corps and played it with great panache. First displayed at the Drum Corps Convention at the Sheraton Brock Hotel in Niagara Falls, Ontario, they caused a minor sensation. The quality of their performance gave a clue to perceptive people of what to expect from the main Optimist Corps this year.

Jim McConkey, who was staying with Mrs. Nonie McKolskey-Beer, was the first one to suggest the idea of a Corps yearbook. The idea, though it had merit, was rejected. It was thought that Green Capsule Comments was already fulfilling any purpose that a yearbook might serve. The idea, though, was not forgotten.

Green Capsule Comments, started from scratch, had snowballed and was now accompanied by a host of other items. These were all for sale to the members and displayed at shows to the public, by our tireless Ladies Auxiliary. Some of these items were:

- ▶ Corps Pennant. 50¢
- ▶ Corps Calendar.. . . . 50¢, 10 photos of the Corps
- ▶ Jacket Crest. 75¢
- ▶ Corps Button. 25¢
- ▶ Booster Decal.. . . . 25¢
- ▶ Toronto Optimist “Junior International Drum Corps Competition Button” 25¢

The last item is significant because it was representative of our first contest this year. It goes without saying that all of these items were creations of, who else, Don Daber.

Proving to be a creature of varied talents, Jim McConkey started a column in G.C.C. called “Personality Profiles”. In each issue, a few people and their characters were outlined in some depth, until the entire outfit had been covered. This frill was interesting, learning about one’s fellow Corpsmen. This fellow was proving to be a valuable addition to the Corps in more ways than one.

Finally, a winter indoor drill rehearsal area was acquired. Someone had cracked the wall of bureaucracy and got us an armoury. This enabled us to put the drill together earlier than usual, but not quite as soon as we would have liked. However, as with the music, the all-new marching formations were learned and executed faster than usual, all due to the experience of the Corps.

The coming year

We were ready for the field, and capable, much sooner than in previous years. Yet, paradoxically, we would not this year be going to the Preview of Champions in Jersey City – the year when we would have been more ready for it than ever before was to see us staying in Toronto. However, we were not upset because there was a top-notch contest in Toronto on the same weekend. This was the previously mentioned “Junior International Drum Corps Contest”. It had a better than average line-up of Corps for a Canadian show, and we were committed to appearing in that one.

Sadly enough, when the Corps was undeniably looking and sounding the best it had ever been, the schedule that lay ahead was not ideal. Out of twenty-two appearances that the Corps would make this year, twelve would be exhibitions rather than contests. In fact, our first eight dates were exhibitions. For a competitive unit, this is not good; but one can only accept what one is invited to, and last year’s performance could have had an effect on this, Champions or not. Doing exhibitions is better than doing nothing, or possibly rehearsing. So we did them. One reason for the high standards of the New Jersey Corps was their constant, high calibre competition. In Canada, and other regions, the few contests available made it harder to ever achieve the same standards. It did, though, happen. An occasional Corps would come from a

region of lesser activity and beat everybody. Chicago Cavaliers were a good example of this. In the future, St. Kevin's, Boston Crusaders, and most amazingly, the Casper Troopers, would bear out this observation. It only changed when the centre of gravity moved from Jersey to other regions.

The first of the exhibitions that led off our appearances was none other than the good old Ice Follies. This show was actually the product of an agreement between the Optimist Club, Ice Follies Management, and Maple Leaf Gardens. All the proceeds of that evening went to the Optimist Club, in support of their good works, part of which was, of course, us!

We often did special appearances for the club, knowing that without them there would never have been a Corps. Their support was, considering the relatively few people involved, quite expensive and would become more so as time passed. What they got in return was fairly extensive publicity and a sure crowd-pleaser when needed, for special occasions. Whether the Corps now embodied their original ideal of helping young people is debatable. It had certainly been eroded somewhat. The true purpose of a Drum Corps is to win contests, not be a charitable organization. This Corps had fulfilled that condition and would continue to do so. If in the process it steered wayward individuals onto the straight and narrow, so much the better.



1962: Toronto Optimists (Quebec City)

The Ice Follies debut was at the end of January, and from February through May seven more exhibitions were performed. Most were in Toronto, but others were in Kitchener, Peterborough, and Quebec City. In March, we played at the show put on by our Bantam Corps, which was still a going concern.

For now, the trip to Quebec City saw us use, for the first time, two buses. Compare this with today's top units, most of which use three, usually four, busses and a large vehicle for equipment. So, before our first contest we had fairly wide exposure until, at last, the first competitive activity approached.

In past years, we had been in Jersey City; now, Varsity Stadium in Toronto beckoned us to the "Junior International Drum Corps Contest". The Optimist Club, acting independently of the Corps sponsored it, so we could compete in it. The line-up of Corps was above average for a Canadian show and we waited, more curious than anything else, to see what would happen.

Nobody could guess what was in store.