

## Chapter 15: 1963 – A Good Corps, Again

The shows began early this year. On December 19th, the mini-Corps put on a show for the main Corps executive. They made a good impression, but maybe not good enough.

The first appearance of the main Corps was, as usual, at the Ice Follies, held at Maple Leaf Gardens on January 28th. February and March saw a scattering of appearances that were as good for exposure as they were diverse. Half-time at a hockey game in Galt, Ontario, the locale of the Optimists first ever National Championship victory, a Drum Corps show in Kitchener, followed by an appearance at the Family Night of the Bantam Corps. This date was always kept as it helped to keep the younger kids in this unit interested and reminded them of their eventual destination. It also made a good impression on parents who were eager to see what their boys were into. Parental approval was an important factor in the life of the Corps, and it was seldom found wanting. There was an indoor show, an exhibition and another exhibition in Ottawa on March 16th. A highlight of the budding season was the Jesters' winter concert. The Optimists put on a far better show here than the one a few weeks earlier at Vaughan Collegiate. It was a good thing, because the Jesters themselves were excellent. When the two Corps combined to play a single number, the audience brought the house down.

To anyone who wonders about the name "The Jesters", it has an interesting origin. They were originally the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps, when connected with the army. In their other role as a competing Drum and Bugle Corps, they wore real clown outfits as a uniform and used the name of "Jolly Jesters". Later, after severing all connections with the army, they switched to more military, but still flashy, uniforms. Along with this, they dropped the "Jolly" from their name, becoming simply "The Jesters". Always good, they were among the several colourful Senior Drum Corps of note in Canada.



1957: Jolly Jesters at Roosevelt Stadium

Also in March, the Corps had paid a visit to Hull, Quebec, to appear at the show, “Music in Motion”, put on by Les Troubadours. The growing activity in Quebec was to produce some interesting results in the future.

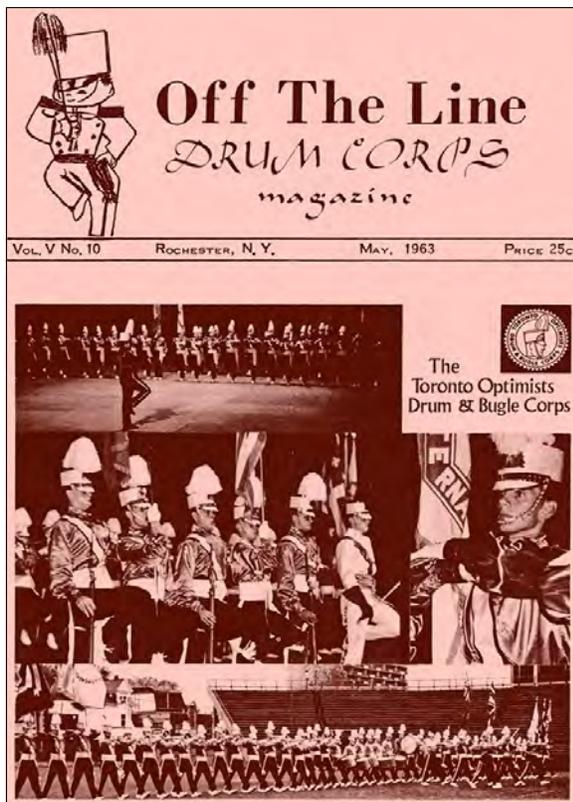
## Optimists Mini-Corps

The Optimist mini-Corps was still in operation. Although they had no permanent instructors, their quality had improved from their first year. This activity was a totally new concept in Canada, the idea having been brought from the mid-west United States. In that region, they were commonplace, and the idea had been picked up and introduced to this Corps by Robin Weatherstone. It provided an outlet for people to put their own ideas into effect without using the resources of the main Corps for this. Much of the material used was that of other, usually famous, Corps. It was novel and fun.



1963: Toronto Optimists mini-corps (Hull, PQ)

Other Corps in Canada had these units, namely, Preston Scout House, and De La Salle. It was rumoured that there would be contests in the fall between these units, after regular competition was over. This possibility was laid to rest in April, when Optimists’ small Corps was disbanded. The demands of the regular Corps, with the season imminent, required the full attention of all members.



1963: May Cover of “Off The Line”

Yet another flag was added to the colour guard. This was the Canadian Association Flag, purchased, not won or presented, but valid. Flag cases for all the flags were designed by Don Daber and Ivor Bramley and were manufactured by the Ladies Auxiliary. This year Ivor Bramley, displaying varied talents, was the drill instructor for both the corps and the guard. For a man who was totally green when he joined, he had come a long way, reflecting his drive and ambition.

The popular Drum Corps magazine out of Rochester, N.Y., “Off The Line”, had featured The Optimists on the cover of its May edition. It provided a fitting introduction to the appearance of the Corps on the field.

More shows were scheduled before the beginning of the season proper. There was an appearance at the "Sound of '63", run by York Lions. Before their demise, the mini-Corps had entertained at the C.D.C.A. convention and were well received. They also performed with the main Corps at the Kitchener-Waterloo Band Festival. However, the show of most interest was held in St. Catharines and featured the first appearance in Canada of the New



1963: Toronto Optimists at the Ice Capades

York Skyliners. To appear in any show with them is to appear with the best. They proved this by blowing the house down, although the Optimists held their end up with a good performance. This occasion was supposed to see the introduction of the new, white pearl shakos, but not enough of them were on hand. Hats were borrowed from another Corps and the show went on.

Although originally planned for 1964, the Corps was purchasing new black and white pearl drums using their own funds. St. Catharines would be the final appearance of the old, gold drums. At the first rehearsal after the show, they were honourably laid to rest and the new ones were issued. Thus was the Corps decked out properly as befitted the main colour scheme.

The slip-up with the hats, though having parallels in many fields, seems to occur frequently in Drum Corps. Best laid plans, etc. It did not affect the attitude of the Corps toward the new director, as it was apparent that all were happy with him. This is not always the case when there are big shoes to fill.

## The 1963 Contest Season

Now, things began in earnest and the Corps, for the fourth time in five years, was off to Jersey City for the Preview of Champions. Leaving from the Canadian National Exhibition grounds, they headed south with high hopes and great expectations. This was partly engendered by the performances of the previous year and the shaping up of the current version of the Optimists. The Corps, however, was never really ready for such an early show and harsh reality intruded. All hopes were dashed by a fourth place finish, eight points out of first. More serious was placing four points out of third place which was occupied by a much improved St. Josephs of Batavia.



1963: Toronto Optimists (Preview of Champions)

The Corps was stunned, expecting a minimum of third, and the result was greeted with hearty booing from the crowd. Well, what can you do? Just take your lumps and grin.

Because of a prior commitment, the Corps was not able to attend their fifth New York/Canadian Championship contest. They had won it for the previous four years, but this year would have been the hardest one to win. De La Salle had come within four tenths of taking it in 1960 but a much improved St. Josephs of Batavia would now have made things much tougher. This was a prestigious title and the Optimists record was a signpost of hard won past glories.



1963: Toronto Optimists Guard

The next major event was the 2nd Junior International contest. The Optimists, with the Corps appearing only in exhibition, sponsored it. It was strange that the Corps had competed in the first one, which was also sponsored by the Optimists. Maybe that first year there had not been enough local Corps ready at the time.

With six good Corps and one great Corps in attendance, it was a contest only among the six. The Chicago Cavaliers stood in first place, almost eleven points over the second place Corps. This result would have surprised no one but the most obtuse observers. The Optimists presented the Cavaliers with a Canadian Ensign, in honour of their victory. If they still have it today, it has become a collectors' item, having long been replaced by the Maple Leaf flag as a national symbol.

Comments on this show from the De La Salle paper, "The Corpsman", included the following:

"First Time that Scout House not given a solid round of applause on the finish line". The early date of this show probably had something to do with this.

"The Toronto Optimists: their past record speaks for itself".

In the June issue of this publication, six long paragraphs were devoted to the New York Skyliners. For the Optimists, four lines and the statement, "A



1963: On the bus

fine performance”, summed up the show. The brevity of these comments can be seen as a reflection of the attitude that sometimes existed between these Corps. Although neither of them were of the ultimate calibre in Drum Corps, they ranked pretty high. Their intense rivalry had, and would in the future, provide some of the most thrilling and suspense filled moments of competition anywhere. It could be said that each Corps thrived off the other because, for most years, they were never very far apart on the score sheets.



1963: Toronto Optimists On The Line

Picking up steam, the season moved on and the next contest was two weeks away, on June 22nd. One way or another, the Corps was working thirteen out of fourteen days to prepare for this, the Rose Festival, in Welland, Ontario.

Efforts were rewarded with a win over De La Salle and others, but only by the slim margin of two points. Del took high scores in three captions and were very close in another. They were the only Junior Corps in Canada that had consistently challenged the Optimists. Any let up in effort by the boys in green would almost certainly have seen them take over the top spot.

For the Optimists, a learning experience loomed at the end of the month, in the form of their first trip to the mid-west United States. Virgin territory for this Corps, it meant again different judges and score sheets, along with new Corps to compete against. Before leaving, a message of good will was sent to De La Salle, who were off to Rome, New York. Their horizons were also expanding, and they acquitted themselves well with a third place finish. That was on June 29<sup>th</sup>. On June 30<sup>th</sup> the Optimists were found in Mundelein, Illinois, for their first ever appearance in that region. It is always exciting to visit new places, but the gloss was dulled somewhat by a finishing score of 71.73 for fifth place. This was seven points out of first which was taken by the Chicago Cavaliers. This was their backyard, and it was no disgrace to lose to them. Even so, the Optimists took the high general effect trophy. As a sign of the goodwill that existed between the two units, the Corps combined to appear as one on the retreat ceremony. Pictures of the spectacle were used to decorate the cover of a recording of this contest, put out later this year, featuring these two Corps.



1963: Chicago Cavaliers and Optimists on retreat together (Mundelein, IL)

From this less than ideal introduction to the mid-west, it was back to Canada, Port Hope, Ontario, to be exact, the very next day. July 1st then known as Dominion Day, now Canada Day, saw the Corps maintain its first place standing over an all-Canadian field. Just three points over Del, who now, themselves, had occasion to glance over their shoulders once in a while. The “Conqueror” of Hamilton, formed only a couple of years prior, were only 2.3 points behind them. Nobody could relax in this business.



1963: Toronto Optimists

Compared to past years, this season was fairly busy for all the local Corps, not just the Optimists. This situation, fairer to all as it was, can partially explain the closer scores that made for more exciting competition. July 6th, in Brantford, provided a good example of this.

Optimists and De La Salle captured first and second places, respectively, with Scout House and Conqueror not far behind. Scout House had pulled themselves up to third place and were not yet a spent force. Their greatest handicap was a refusal to play for points, but to present a show designed to please a crowd. By retaining their unique style, they accomplished this; however, it made it that much more difficult to climb in the competitive standings. To place third was no mean feat.

Again, the following weekend, St. Josephs of Batavia, at Leroy, N.Y., dumped the Corps. Five points was the margin and St. Joes were establishing themselves as someone to be reckoned with. They were one of the first to come out with the greatly expanded horn line, and this no doubt was a positive factor. Others would follow, until the advent of today’s big ensembles.

Fortunately for morale, and the record, the Corps managed to top one contest in the United States. In Salamanca, N.Y., a win by six points plus over the second place Corps gave a boost to spirit.

The season dragged on with some hopes and expectations remaining unfulfilled. Indeed, it had become a rare occurrence now to win in the United States, and the Corps was back to trying to maintain its standing in Canada. This, itself, was not an easy task.



1963: Ronn “Skip” Prokop leads sing-along on bus

St. Josephs of Batavia were on a roll and won at Medina, N.Y., on August 10th. The Optimists were third, six points back of top spot. The Corps was still considered good, but others had improved, in some cases, greatly.

A break in the losing streak south of the border, a situation which, by the way, this Corps had not seen for a long time, came on August 17th. It was in Titusville, Pennsylvania, at one of those increasingly rare events, a mixed Senior/Junior contest. Actually, the Optimists were the only Junior Corps in a field of five.

The Geneva Appleknockers came second to the Optimists, but only by 5/10 of a point. Included in the field were the Niagara Militaires and the Hamburg Kingsmen. Not often, in the past had this Corps defeated the Militaires, who were always solid. The Hamburg Kingsmen, who were third at this show, were to become extremely good in later years. When this came about, they managed to beat some of the top Senior Corps in the United States and Canada.



1963: Toronto Optimists Off The Line (Nationals Prelims, Waterloo)

This phenomenon happens occasionally, often due to careful planning and much effort. A Corps that has been good, but less than great, suddenly blossoms and becomes a threat to all. It happened with the 1962 version of the Toronto Optimists.

It was back to earth with a bump when this Corps went down again, at Syracuse, N.Y., on August 24th, once again, to St. Josephs. This time, though, the gap was only three points, and in third place by 1.6 was the Garfield Cadets. These results indicated that the Corps was beginning to peak. Whether planned or not, this was none too soon, as the Nationals were fast approaching.

Before this major event loomed a repeat of last year's contest at the Allegheny County Fair, near Pittsburgh, PA. This is the show that had been so disastrously rained out the previous year. September 1st was to see a field of corps equal in calibre to those at the 1962 competition.

Mother Nature co-operated this time and the contest was held as planned. Blessed Sacrament took the honours, which probably did not surprise anyone, and Garfield was a very close second. Holding down a respectable third, five and a half points out of first, were the Optimists. This was a decided improvement over the earlier part



1963: Toronto Optimists playing El Cid (Nationals prelims, Waterloo)

of the season and, again, reflected a trend toward peak performance. Blessed Sacrament Golden Knights were a great Corps, still in their heyday, and it took a great Corps to defeat them.

Behind the Optimists were the Madison Scouts, one day to achieve greatness themselves, and the Audubon Girls, who were still a good Corps. The fact that local

score sheets only allowed ten points for general effect was a negative factor for the Optimists. This caption was relied on to increase totals. Those who prevailed under these rules had to be extremely good at execution.

On the very next day, the Corps was back in Canada for the Canadian National Exhibition Contest. They had won this every year except 1961, when De La Salle took it. Things would be a little surprising this year. Winning the contest, the Optimists managed to beat St. Josephs for the first time this year. Being right in the Corps backyard, results like this can lead to speculation about judging standards. When a Corps loses to another unit all year, except in its own territory, things can look somewhat strange. However, it does happen and is not really too unusual. The Optimists had gradually closed the gap that had existed earlier and were near top form for this show. Results also included a four point gap over the closest Canadian rival, which bode well for the near future. Only one week away was the Canadian National Championship, never taken lightly and never a forgone conclusion. Each year increased its importance in the eyes of the Optimists, this year seeing the Corps attempting to extend its winning streak. If they did, it would mean six consecutive Canadian National titles, the symbol of local dominance.

It was to be held, for the third year in a row, in Kitchener-Waterloo. New Corps had made their presence felt, and along with the now “old hands” helped to create an exciting spectacle.

For the first time ever, the “Conqueror” of Hamilton, Ontario, edged out Preston Scout House for third place by 0.4. The pattern of Canadian Junior Corps was slowly changing with time. What had not yet changed was the two perennial rivals hammering at each other for the top place.

Again, in the long-standing duel, things did not change. The Optimists captured title number six. For six consecutive years, this Corps had won the National Championship, this time by a three point margin over De La Salle. If this was not a record in North America, it was in Canada, although Scout House had won at Waterloo for ten consecutive years. But that was not the Nationals.



1963: Toronto Optimists Full Corps Photo (Waterloo)

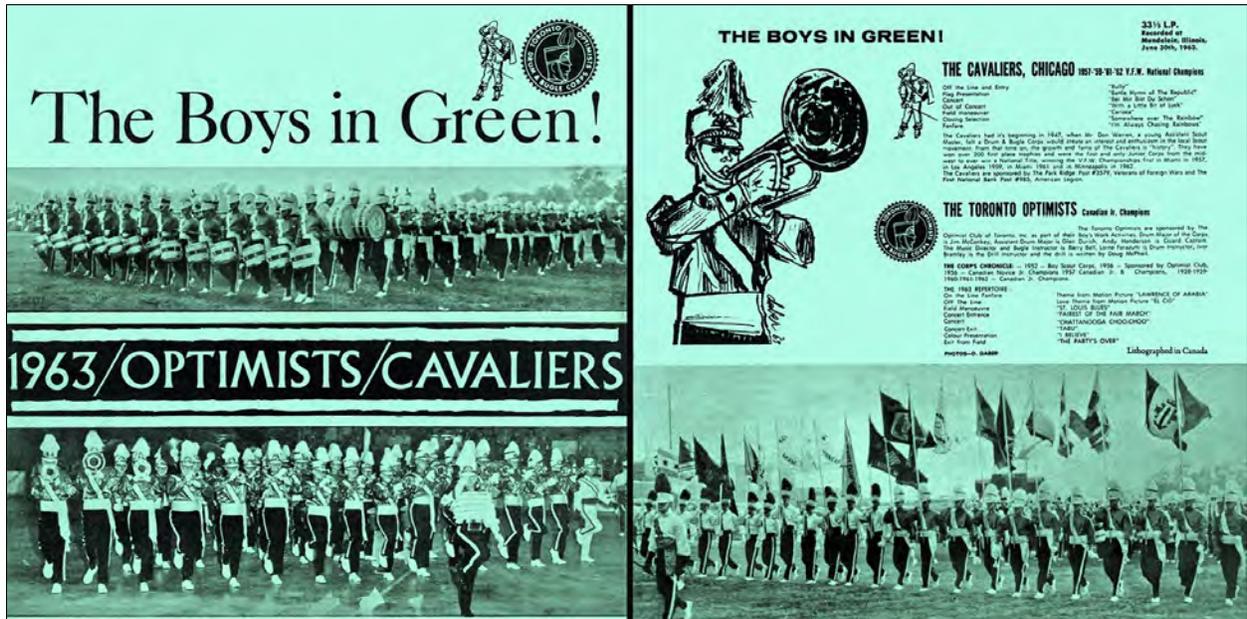
It was a good thing that Del was always challenging. If they had not been, people could have been turned off Drum Corps by the monotony. No matter what the activity, dominance by one team, or whatever, is not healthy for its overall welfare. The fact that De La Salle always provided a good challenge helped to maintain interest among fans and other Corps. Optimist success was never so great as to appear insurmountable, and the close runs by one challenger must have encouraged others. Eventually, of course, Del's unmatched persistence would bear fruit. That, though, would have to wait for a while, as the Optimists rejoiced in yet another title, another notation in the record book, another number on the crest.



1963: Toronto Optimists end of El Cid (Nationals prelim)

As usual, the season was not yet over. The Annual St. Catharines Grape Festival remained on the schedule. In the street parade category, the Optimists placed a lowly third, with Del second and Preston Scout House first. Scout House were always magnificent on parade. Even if you managed to best them point-wise, nobody could match the spectacle they presented on the street. At the night show, the Optimists upheld their forte, field shows, by another victory.

Thus, at last, did the 1963 competition season come to an end. Now followed the usual post season events, some of which had become annual affairs.



1963: Front & Back Covers of "Boys in Green" record album

The Jesters held an individuals contest at which members of the Optimists took five firsts. It was learned that the Bantam Corps would revert to a parade Corps because so many people were leaving it to go into the Junior Corps. The executive was being reorganized, and it appeared that the whole thing would have to start from the ground up.

Through permission of the executive of the Chicago Cavaliers, the Optimists released the record, "The Boys in Green". This featured both Corps, as mentioned earlier.

The Corps also gave a concert at the "Optimist International" convention, which was a "must" if it was nearby.

Jim McConkey, the flamboyant American Drum Major, announced that this year was his last. Nobody is indispensable, but no doubt he would leave a big hole to fill. It was also announced that the Nationals would be held in Toronto in 1964.

Finally, the Corps banquet was held. This had become an annual victory banquet. Sponsored by the Optimist Club, it was given as thanks for the devoted hours put in by the members of the Corps, and as a tribute to those who were leaving. Again, it was held at the King Edward Sheraton, presided over by Don Daber, who had survived his first year as Corps Director. Corps rings were presented, along with an honorary membership to one Bill Shepherd of the Whaley Royce Music Company. Unbeknown to most, if not all, was the fact that it was due to Bill Shepherd that the Bantam Optimists Corps got started. His company, Whaley Royce, donated all the drums and bugles that enabled the Bantams to get started. Also, he had been involved in Drum Corps around Toronto in many ways and was more than deserving of this recognition. Thus, with the banquet, the Optimist year was formally ended.



1963: Toronto Optimists (Optimist International Convention, Toronto)