

Chapter 18: 1968 – Down But Not Out

Well, if last year was somewhat confusing, this year would be even more so. All of the four top Canadian Juniors would be in a race for the title, a race that began at the end of last season. This group consisted of the Optimists, De La Salle, La Salle Cadets and Les Metropolitains. Mets, as they were often known were, once again, part of the quartet, remaining in the junior division. Last year's fourth place finalist at the Nationals, the Sertomanaires, were no more. They were not folding, but reorganizing, and would not be seen on the field this year.

South of the border, Drum Corps were rapidly growing in California. Corps from that region would shortly begin to have an impact on the National scene.

News

De La Salle

Locally, what was to help change things, in an already changing Canada, was the acquisition by De La Salle of Terry McKolsky as their Horn Instructor. Al Morrison had been Music Director for the year 1967, and he had done a very good job. So good, in fact, that they had wanted to retain his services. Al was also a player and instructor for the Senior Corps, Commanders. There lay the problem. Del wanted him exclusively, but he was not willing to sever his connection with the Senior Corps. Terry had been helping Al with De La Salle so, when Del and Al parted company, Terry took over. He had wanted the job, so all were happy.



1968: De La Salle

Terry wanted the job because he wanted his own horn line to instruct. Terry had started in Drum Corps with the Optimists and he had always been a worthy member; however, not being able to play as big a role as he wished, he looked elsewhere, ending up with De La Salle. They had always had a good horn line, which had improved under Al Morrison. Under Terry McKolsky, it would improve even more, with results that we shall soon see.

New C.D.C.A. Publication

A new publication made its appearance in Canada this year. It was to be the official voice of the C.D.C.A., called "Canadian Drum and Bugle Comment". Its staff consisted of:

- Vern Johansson. Editor
- Cliff Billington. Advertising
- Don Daber. Art
- Dick Brown, Bob Walker. Production
- Frans Rood. Photos

The writers were: Don Daber, Vern Johansson, Dick Brown, Clare Reid, Al Tierney and Jack Roberts. What is unusual about this list is that nearly all of these people had been, were now, or would be, associated with the Optimists. Either the Optimists had a disproportionate share of influence in the C.D.C.A. or, more likely, no one else was interested in doing the necessary work. Other Corps had just as many capable people as the Optimists, so you have to draw your own conclusions.

Green Capsule Comments

“Green Capsule Comments” the voice of the Optimists was now in its eighth year of publication. This year there was a “special” special edition, for “inside” the Corps only. It was about the Corps manual, a virtual book of wisdom. It was a recap of all the experience and knowledge gained over the years which, hopefully, would be absorbed by the present members of the Corps.

Among other things, it outlined a code of conduct that included such things as, “be superior, but friendly”, and “always behave like gentlemen”. These were tall orders, but there was far more to this book, which is what it was, than just rules of conduct. It covered almost every aspect of the Corps and its activities that could be thought of. Whether anybody ever learned, or even read, the whole thing is debatable. Certainly, if everybody had read and followed all of its dictates, this would have been the best Corps in the world.



1968: Cover from GCC

Optimist Cadets

The Optimist Cadets, now a going concern, had one hundred and forty-three boys on the roll. At the beginning of March, they were working on their third musical number. Bugle instructors were Richard Boehnke and Paul Thompson. Drums were taught by Gord O’Halloran, Rick Plonick and Vern Johansson. Actually, they had no drums yet, but would have by March 16th.



1968: Al Tierney with members of the Optimist Cadets

The Optimists

As far as the Junior Corps itself, the Optimists, they had taken a two week break after the Nationals, with rehearsals resuming on October 1st. There were many new members in the line this year, a factor that, when combined with the reputed strength of the opposition, pointed to tough times ahead. Regardless, the Corps went ahead with an entire new show for 1968: The Joker, Medley on Girls Names, Ontario, Temptation, Going Out of My Head and You Only Live Twice.

These numbers would form the 1968 repertoire of the Toronto Optimists. Bugle arrangements were by Barry Bell, with percussion arranged by Ron Kaiser.

Fund raising this year was helped out by the Optimist Club, who ran a weekly bingo on Monday nights. No matter how successful the Corps was on the field, prize money alone could not cover costs, not even combined with outright grants from the Optimist Club. Fund raising activities were as much an annual necessity as putting the Corps on the field.

This year was the forty-fourth birthday of the Optimist Club, the one that backed the Corps. On February 23rd, trophies and flags won were put on display. Two Corps members, in full uniform, were posted alongside for effect. Anyone who saw this colourful exhibition would have found it hard to believe that the Corps was really a very minor part of the club activities. This was true, proven later this year with the issuing of an Optimist Club magazine. The Corps was only given one page.

Colour Guard Contest

Colour Guard contests were becoming a popular winter activity in Canada, as they had been for a long time in the United States, where the competition was ferocious. During the last couple of years, the Optimists had entered some of these and, though beginners, had not fared too badly. Guard instructors for the Optimists were Ron Cooper, who was also the Captain, and Jack Roberts. Jack was also the Corps Drill Instructor, having taken over in 1965. They entered the guard in at least four contests this year. One first ensued, but this was “unofficial”, not having a full panel of judges. Another “unofficial” saw them 3rd. With a full panel of judges, the Optimist Guard came in fifth. Then came the 1st Annual Canadian National Guard Championship. Eleven guards were entered in this event, which played out before a full house. Many of the entrants showed their inexperience, and huge penalties were handed out all around. Partly because of this, and partly because they were no longer inexperienced, the Optimist Colour Guard won this event. Their score was 91.55, adding another star to a record already full of honours. It was the first victory for the



1968: Some guys at Grey Cup Parade

Optimists this year; however, from here on, everything would be a tooth and nail fight to the finish.

The 1968 Season

The Shriners International

An indoor show for the Optimists preceded the first big one this year, the Shriners International Pageant. The Optimist Cadet Corps, now fully uniformed and with a repertoire of three numbers, took part in the parade that preceded the show. The Shriners show proved to be a good one for the Optimists, but only as regards the Canadian side of it. None of the Canadian Corps, the Optimists included, were anywhere near the winning American units. Before a crowd of over twenty thousand, the show was won by the still powerful Boston Crusaders. With a score of 80.76, they just topped an also powerful Blessed Sacrament, who scored 80.20.



1968: De La Salle

After that, it was another contest. Racine Kilties were third, six points back, and the three Canadian entries were behind them, all within three points of each other. On top of this trio sat the Optimists with 72.98, followed by De La Salle, at 71.93, and La Salle Cadets with 69.96. For the Canadian Corps, none of these scores were decisive.

Anyway, the season was now underway. One week later the Optimists were unceremoniously dumped by Les Metropolitains. Again! This time by over two points, with De La Salle in third place by two points. At another show in June, the Optimists came back to defeat Les Metropolitains by over three points. As much as anything else, this shows what a ding dong year this was going to be.

Brantford

Early in July, a contest in Brantford upset all the careful predictions. One week before this, La Salle Cadets had clobbered Metropolitains, and thus were now considered number one Corps on the scene. They were not scheduled to be in Brantford, but somehow got themselves included. No doubt, to have another crack at their rivals. Well, they got it and more.

For the first time in seven years, De La Salle beat the Optimists at a full field show, in Canada. La Salle Cadets were stuck in third place, three points behind the Optimists who were, themselves, one point behind Del.



1968: Members of Optimists & Cadets in front of "new" equipment truck

Del was now number one. It was that kind of year and the year was not even halfway over. What would happen next?

Sarnia

A week later, in Sarnia, the scene of many an Optimist victory, three of the top four met again. De La Salle did it again, with the Optimists and La Salle second and third, respectively. Increasing their lead to almost two points, Del now had the bit between their teeth. All this was a novelty because, since the end of 1958, the Optimists had never been beaten this many times in one year.



1968: Toronto Optimists (Battle Cry)

Al Tierney, who was now the director of the Cadet Corps and who would have an important role in what it became, now turned his hand to writing. He published a long article in “Canadian Drum and Bugle Corps Comment” magazine, entitled “The Care and Feeding of a Bantam Corps”. He was, by now, qualified to write such a piece. It detailed the necessity for a feeder Corps as a reliable source of new members. It also described how to go about building one. He had assistants for this project but Al was the one who was mostly responsible. As well as holding the job of Cadet Director, he was also Assistant Director of the Toronto Optimists, themselves. For a man who had only been in Drum corps for a couple of years, he had come a long way.

The hectic scene that was the 1968 Canadian Drum Corps season continued. It was observed during these up again down again results that De La Salle played it very cool when they began to win. On the other hand their fans, after so many years of disappointment, went wild, finally having something to cheer about.

Ogdensburg

All four contenders next met in neutral territory, Ogdensburg, N.Y. Reflecting the intensity of competition, all put on their finest shows yet, each striving to outdo the other. This sort of thing was paying untold dividends for the fans, who now were really getting their money’s worth.



1968: La Salle Cadets

Here are the scores:

- 1st De La Salle. 77.450
- 2nd Toronto Optimists. . . . 74.750
- 3rd Les Metropolitains. . . . 71.850
- 4th Cadets La Salle. 71.130

The specialty awards were:

- Drum Line. The Optimists
- Horn Line De La Salle
- Colour Guard. . . . La Salle Cadets
- Drum Major. Les Metropolitains

Strictly point-wise, horns and drums were the most important captions here and do provide a picture of things as they were unfolding.

In what must have seemed a pleasant respite, the Optimists had a contest in the United States, away from the Canadian circuit. Taking second by five to St. Josephs, they were ten ahead of the third place Corps, a somewhat lopsided affair.

Back in the battleground of Canada, Del triumphed for the third time this year, yet again increasing the margin of victory. Three points down from them were the unpredictable Metropolitains, with La Salle in fourth place. What a state of events now existed, and with time passing, things did not look at all good for the Optimists. Or La Salle, who usually started slowly but finished strongly. This year they has started off well but now seemed to be slipping.



1968: Toronto Optimists Off The Line

North American Invitational

Next, loomed a major classic event. This year's North American Invitational, on August 17th, mere weeks away from the Nationals. This contest was one of the three most important in Canada, the others being the Shrine and the Nationals. It was run by Terry McKolskey and his committee. Terry was a little guy but proving to be very big on talent and ability. Organizing an event like this is no mean feat. Terry was also Music Director for De La Salle and, with their string of successes thus far this year, that alone must have been a full-time job.

Fortunately, scores and placings are at hand, so we can see the latest results in what was the most exciting season in Canadian Junior Drum Corps in years. Here are the American scores

- 1st Casper Troopers. 85.300
- 2nd De Plaines Vanguard. . . . 82.583
- 3rd St. Josephs. 81.983

Not far back, but enough that it was almost another contest, stood our three Canadian entries.

- 4th De La Salle. 77.550
- 5th The Optimists. 76.383
- 6th La Salle Cadets. 71.266

Important to us, here, is the fact that the Optimists were beginning a slow climb back towards De La Salle. The La Salle Cadets are seen to be slipping still further behind. All were still behind the Americans, though not by as great a margin as before.

After this contest and as a result of their record, De La Salle was listed as the undisputed number one Junior Corps in Canada. Not since 1958 and Scout House had that label been on anyone but the Toronto Optimists.



1968: De La Salle

Because this book is about Canada, only brief comment will be made regarding the U.S. Corps. Casper was becoming one of the best, possibly the best ever, Corps to exist. Santa Clara was part of the rise to prominence of the California Corps. St. Josephs was not only the powerhouse of New York State, they were well on their way to national prominence.

Canada now was the scene of three more major contests before the season was over: the Ontario Championship, the CNE Championship, and the Nationals. The Optimists currently held all of these titles.

Both La Salle and Les Metropolitains had seemed to fade towards the end of the season. This left only two Corps in the running, De La Salle and the Optimists.

Ontario Championships

This was the scene as, on August 24th, the Ontario Championship rolled around.

This show was held, again, at Seagram Stadium. For the first time in seven years De La Salle won a major Canadian title! This made four in a row that the Optimists had now dropped to Del, confirming in most peoples minds that there would be a new Canadian Champion this year. Besides winning this title for the first time, De La Salle was the first to beat the Optimists this many times in Canada. Ever!

Sarnia

What the Optimists thought of all this is unknown but not hard to imagine. They likely assumed that if they gave up and relaxed, their time was certainly up. Not being this way inclined, they were off to Sarnia on the following weekend. Significantly, De La Salle took the whole weekend off. While



1968: Toronto Optimists

the Optimists were very busy, the opposition was resting. Two days after Sarnia the CNE contest took place. This was the final contest before the Nationals, and if Del could win here, they would probably win the Nationals.

CNE

A Corps like the Optimists does not go down easily. If they did, they would not have been on top as long as they were. You had to beat them, and stay beating them, because they would always come back for more.

What happened at the CNE was:

- 1st The Optimists. 82.36
- 2nd De La Salle. 81.06
- 3rd La Salle Cadets. . . . 76.95

The Optimists had rebounded from a string of losses to retain this title and open the door to, once again, winning the Nationals.

On to the Nationals

The spread of 1.30 was, perhaps, not as significant as the psychology involved. If you could do it once, you could do it again. All that mattered now was the contest just one week away, the Canadian Championships. This year's Nationals were held in Kingston, Ontario. It would be a small contest, in a small stadium with a small crowd. What it was not small in was excitement, tension, suspense, and importance.

For the Optimists, a ten-year Nationals winning streak was on the line. For De La Salle, it was the chance to be the first to break it. With La Salle five points back at the last contest, this would be a two Corps competition. It was a duel every bit as exciting as it could be, for fans and participants alike. All gave of their best. It was one of those shows that nobody in the crowd, or on the sidelines, could decide. Only the judges had that power.

Reinforcing their confidence, the Optimists had won the prelims, with Del second and La Salle third. Unexpectedly, their victory was by two points, increasing the margin of the previous week.



1968: Toronto Optimists

Of course, these were just the preliminaries, a run up to the finals, where anything can happen. The boys in green had lost the prelims for the past two years at this contest, then came back to take the finals. Now, the same thing could happen to them in reverse.

As each Corps took its position on the starting line, you could hear a pin drop, and tension hung over the field like a thick fog. Even those watching could feel it. All performed flawlessly, each leaving their fans thinking that their favourite had won. Still this was, above all, a judges' contest.

Here are what they came up with:

- 1st The Optimists. 79.133
- 2nd De La Salle. 78.300
- 3rd La Salle Cadets. 73.666



1968: Toronto Optimists (Kingston)

This was not a popular decision with the crowd and much booing was heard. Never pleasant to endure, the Corps took it, most of them having heard it before.

For an unprecedented eleven years in a row, they had won the Canadian National Drum and Bugle Corps Junior Championship.

Disappointment was plainly evident in the second place Corps but, being the outfit that they were, they would be back. Many others had disappeared over the years, but De La Salle had substance that seemed without limit. Crowd opinion aside, the contest was won, or lost, on drums. The Optimists were almost two points up on drums, while De La Salle took all other captions. It was not the first time that the Optimist's drum line had swung the balance in favour of the whole Corps. However, with Del winning all other captions, these must have been very close for an Optimist victory of 0.833. It was, then, a Corps victory.

So ended the 1968 Canadian Junior Drum Corps season.

After the Nationals

That there was an aftermath shows the nature of the interest in this contest. Surprisingly, it did not arise from either of the losing Corps, but from a neutral source. It was, also, really no more than a tempest in a teapot.

The snag was that it came from a highly placed member of the Ontario Chapter of the C.D.C.A. He was the host of a Saturday morning radio show that gave out results of Drum Corps contests.



1968: Toronto Optimists (Battle Cry, Nationals)

When reporting this one, he stated that the results were received with disbelief, resulting in controversy. Such a statement implies that the results were in question, and that steps were being taken to remedy this.

First of all, the Optimists were not aware of any controversy. Had there been one, surely they would have been the first to hear about it.

Secondly, none of the other Corps in the contest lodged a protest or made the Optimists aware of any.

Finally, there was no machinery in the rules to reverse a decision of the judges. To do so would put the judges' chapter under suspicion and undermine confidence in them.



1968: Toronto Optimists in the Grey Cup Parade

A letter pointing all this out was sent, by the Director and Assistant

Director of the Optimists, to Bernie Beer, Chairman of the Ontario Chapter of the C.D.C.A. It was taken under advisement and that is all anybody, today, remembers about the whole affair. Were it really important, or valid, there would be accounts of action taken and people who remembered. There are none. It was just allowed to fade away. More likely, this was a display of frustrated personal opinion. Case closed. The Optimists were, and would remain, the Canadian Champions for 1968.

Corps Banquet

The banquet, of course, followed, with a reminder, along with awards and presentations, that next year meant that number twelve was in the works. Already the propaganda machine was beginning to work overtime during the coming year. We will get to take note of its effects.

On November 11th, 1968, the young "A Junior C" circuit elected an executive in Rochester, NY. Don Daber became Recording Secretary and Public Relations Director for this organization. In addition, Don was still the Corps Director of the Toronto, Optimists. Don Daber was a glutton for work, as he still is to this day.

From the Corps, official thanks were extended to certain people in appreciation for invaluable services rendered:

- ▶ Gord Robinson for assistance at the individuals earlier in the year. These were not discussed in this chapter due to a lack of information.
- ▶ Mr. Greg Tierney and Mr. L. Y. Poole, Grand Knight and executive of the Knights of Columbus, for making available facilities (K of C hall) for the cadets.
- ▶ Mr. Burrage, for expert craftsmanship in the making of drum harnesses.
- ▶ Mr. Joe Brunelle and Corps members for distribution of handbills.



1968: Toronto Optimists Colour Guard in Grey Cup parade (note the Argo scarf)

Earlier in this chapter, mention was made of an Optimist Club magazine published this year. It was the November issue that devoted an article to the Toronto Optimists Drum and Bugle Corps. This magazine covered the entire range of Optimist Club activity, continent wide. Reading this, one becomes aware of the total picture. The Optimist Club is a huge organization devoted to good works of every description. To relate the whole range of its endeavours would take not a book but a library. In this ocean of benevolence, the Corps was just a drop of water.

Statistics from an article on the Optimists

It was, if worthy, an expensive drop of water. The magazine included a history of the Corps, along with some statistics. These were compiled from 1960, when complete statistics were first kept.

Here are some of them.

1. During this period, the Corps has travelled some 57,103 miles. That is, I believe, equivalent to twice around the planet.
2. They had played to approximately 1,074,300 people. This, counted before the days of computers, must have taken some effort.
3. There had been two hundred and thirty-seven appearances in the United States and Canada. Over eight years, this works out to about twenty-nine appearances per year, not a bad total for a Canadian Corps.
4. During these events, the Optimists had won sixty-eight firsts in seventy-five Canadian contests. This is just over a ninety-percent success rate. If you pause to consider this, try to think of any other field where such a record can be shown. While there are some, these are few and far between.
5. This record included winning the Ontario Championship ten years in a row, the Canadian National Exhibition seven times, and, of course, the Canadian Championship for eleven consecutive years. South of the border, they had won the New York Canadian title four times.



1968: Toronto Optimists 11 year button

The Optimist Drum Corps was now an institution in Canada, and it is not hard to see why. Whatever happened in the future, they would never be just another Drum Corps.

That future was fast approaching, so let's turn the page and see what was in store for this battered, but still proud Drum Corps.



1968: Toronto Optimists perform at the Grey Cup game

Version