

Chapter 20: 1970 – A New Decade, A New Beginning

The morning after the 1969 Canadian Junior Drum and Bugle Corps Championships, the world went on as usual. Outside of Canadian Drum Corps circles, some in the United States, and some media, the rest of the world was unaware that the Optimists were no longer Canadian Champions. This is not to diminish the efforts of all involved, but to help put it in proper perspective.



1970: Toronto Optimists (CNE)

For the first time since 1958, the Optimists had to contemplate their future without the benefit of championship status. If this would take a while to get used to, it would be done and the Corps would survive. Many Corps had not survived similar happenings.

However, though the Corps was defeated, its spirit was intact. There would just be an absence of all the things that go to champions. That was now the choice of De La Salle.

One noticeable aspect of this situation was the lack of information abroad concerning the Optimists. The explanation was simple. They were now out of the spotlight. Most eyes were on, and most news about, the new champions. All this became glaringly apparent when researching this story. Only five pages of notes could be compiled from available information. So, maybe this is a good time to explore, for a while, other aspects of the Corps, and the Drum Corps movement in general.

Drum Corps in the 1960s

The decade of the sixties produced some outstanding units. Also during this decade, Corps rose from obscurity, sometimes of long standing, and others disappeared. A few rose to great heights and then disappeared. This phenomenon occurred in both junior and senior ranks but here we are concerned with the juniors.

Overall, the rise of the juniors surpassed that of the seniors. Organizational changes in Junior Corps would soon alter the scene much more. The fastest rise in Canada had to be the La Salle Cadets, who in less than three years had almost won the Nationals. The days when a Corps could do it in one season were



1970: Toronto Optimists triple-bass (indoor show)

long gone. Also gone was the supremacy of a single Corps. This had been helped along by the formation of new Corps, thus cutting down available talent. Some had risen from the ashes of former Corps; other had totally new beginnings.

One of the former had recently become a member of the Western Ontario Junior “B” circuit, now in its second year. They were the Etobicoke Crusaders, formed from the now defunct Michael Power Knights. The western circuit of “B” Corps had anywhere from six to eleven members, which was good for Corps in general. A lot of people were learning the ropes, at their own level. These Corps could survive and flourish if they were not sucked dry by others seeking to fill their ranks. Unfortunately, maybe inevitably, this did happen, often with devastating results for the small Corps.

Other News

Growing in popularity, another guard circuit was formed. The amount of activity in this field had grown to the point that it could support another circuit.

On the Canadian judging scene, Vince Macciochi now became the Chief Judge of the Canadian Association. He had been a judge for a long time, serving as such under Al Baggs.

At the C.D.C.A. convention in Montreal, it was decided that this year’s Nationals would be held in Toronto, on September 12th. It might turn out to be an interesting contest, as the Optimists were intent on regaining the title. Towards this end, they were having closed rehearsals, keeping things under wraps.

This year’s O.D.C.A. Individuals took place at Cedarbrae Collegiate, in Scarborough. It again saw a record number of entries, over one hundred and twenty-five entrants. As a result, the evening finals took over four and a half hours to complete, longer than many full Corps competitions. The Optimists did well in solo boys’ rifle, baritone and rifle duet. They had excelled in these captions before.

The Scarborough Firefighters were changing from Junior “B” to Junior “A” this year. Starting in 1961, they had gradually worked their way up. To cement this new ranking, they became the newest members of the “A Junior C” circuit.

Closer to home, the Optimists announced the scrapping of their triple drums in favour of tympanis. The Nationals general effect score may have had something to do with this. Also, it was a conforming to trends that had begun during the sixties.



1970: Some corps members after a Christmas parade

Other changes that had occurred, in a general fashion, were the introduction of a rotary valve on horns, contra-bass bugles and mellophones. Corps horn lines had grown from a standard twenty-seven to around forty-five.

Drum lines had grown from a standard nine to as high as twenty-four. This figure was to increase again in the future, as were horn lines, until Corps reached the size of today.



1970: Singing the corps song (Woodstock)

If the Optimists were hoping to regain their title this year, fate had decreed that it would not be easy. Out of seventy-five members in the Corps, thirty were new recruits. A turnover this size makes it hard to hang on to anything let alone regain a title. At least they were willing to make the attempt, showing that there was still spirit.

In order to maintain and bolster this spirit, another tradition was created. This was T.A.S. night. “Tradition, Allegiance and Spirit” was a creation of Don Daber. Something like this was needed, and it would eventually prove its worth.

The purpose was to foster spirit and, if there were sparks, turn them into flames. A night was set aside for this, and it was a good way to make a guy feel at home. After one of these sessions everyone, new and old would know each other better. All would truly feel themselves to be Optimists. It also served to renew feelings of any members who may have been flagging in enthusiasm. If there were any, it would not have been many.

The serious side of all this was to promote and foster the spirit needed for regaining the Canadian Championship, making the Optimists number one in Canada again. It was a worthy goal, but one that no other Corps felt the need to attain quite so much. Vince Lombardi would have felt right at home here.

Behind all this, the years of pressure, the work, the victories, lay another Corps that we have barely glimpsed... the fun Corps.

Pictures from those years show happy smiling faces, not grim, serious ones. People happy with what they were into. When girls entered the picture, this was even



1970: Toronto Optimists (CNE)

more evident. Their presence had a good effect. This momentous change was not far off, beginning in the colour guard and spreading throughout.



1970: Toronto Optimists Guard (Shrine Parade)

The picture of grim dedication painted so far, year after year, in pursuit of victory after victory, was partially true; but it was also a lot of fun, for all. Most intensity and grimness was reserved for the field. Win or lose, the high spirits could not be contained for long. Had it been any other way, it would have ended long ago.

For some, leaving the Corps could be a major blow. Aging out, as it is often called, sooner or later affected everyone. If the Corps was one's foremost preoccupation. Leaving the corps could leave a big gap in one's life. Those who had other interests did not find it so disastrous. Most people adjusted well and fitted into their place in society, which would have been their norm, Corps or no Corps.

This year was to produce some upsets that were totally unexpected. The Optimists were aware that it would not be an easy year for them (or anyone) but were not prepared to lie down on the job.

The Shriners International

As was now commonplace, there were lots of contests this year. The first one of which we are aware is the Shriners International. In its sixth year, this had now become a major event, not just in Canada but in North America. It was still held in the CNE Stadium in Toronto, drawing crowds of many thousands. Here, this year, one of the major upsets took place. In fourth with a score of seventy-five, were the La Salle Cadets, who defeated De La Salle, in fifth place, by three points. Sixth, seven points back of La Salle, thereby, four behind De La Salle, were the Optimists. That La Salle was on top and the Optimists on the bottom, by a big margin, was the upset here. The top Americans, Racine Kilties, 27th Lancers, and St. Josephs had scores of 78, 76, 76, respectively, not that far ahead of



1970: Toronto Optimists

the surging La Salle Cadets. One might think that these results would set the pace for the year, but it was not to be. Changes would come.

Overage Members

De La Salle, this year, was to fare better against the United States Corps than any Canadian Corps had ever done – including the Optimists in their heyday. With a powerful Corps, they were to place eight tenths behind Chicago and 1.6 behind the awesome Casper Troopers. Regardless of this, they were still to experience some difficulty in Canada, in two areas. One was on the field and one was the use of overage people. This issue had often arose in Drum Corps and usually caused bitterness and hostility. It was to do so now.

It began before the Shrine Contest, when the Optimists made the C.D.C.A. aware of their suspicions. No action was taken until a later date, at the North American Invitational, to be exact. At this time, the Optimists received a reply to their enquiries to the C.D.C.A. After the Invitational, the Optimists went over to De La Salle and picked out all the overage members of whom they were aware (five in all). Someone must have done some research. The matter was then brought before the C.D.C.A. for resolution by trial.

Del was given two choices. Pay a fine or forfeit the right to compete in the Provincial and National championships and leave the association. An added penalty was giving up prize money won at the North Americans, as well as relegation to last place in the standings of this event. This would put them in seventh place, behind the Optimists. That they chose to pay the fine is shown by the fact that they did compete in the two contests mentioned. After this, relations between the Optimists and De La Salle, already bad, became worse. Many letters were written to Drum Corps publications concerning this matter, and they were not unanimous in their conclusions.

De La Salle also filed counter charges against the Optimists, which were investigated and thrown out.

Of the many letters written, pro and con, one of the most telling was from a Claude Brisebois of La Salle Cadets. He was an ex-director of this corps and freely admitted that they had used overage members. He maintained that they could not have survived without them. It must be said that such open statements were skirting danger and may have been linked to the fact that he was an ex-director.

With this, the matter came to a close. It can aptly be summed up in a slightly altered version of an old adage – “All’s fair in love and war and, it seems, Drum Corps”.



1970: La Salle Cadets (Varsity Stadium)

Back in the real world of Corps activity, La Salle Cadets won the Provincial Championship. This was a first. Del was two points back and the Optimists another five back, in third. The chances for their regaining the National title did not appear good.

The earlier mentioned lack of information regarding this year now comes into play. Research conducted from an Optimist perspective would not reveal much because not much was being said, or written, about them. One aspect of not being champions or, as it now seemed, even contenders. What happened during most of the season as far as the Optimists were concerned remains unrecorded. Enough is known to be able to say that their drive to regain their title petered out. In fact, it never picked up enough steam to be a serious threat to anyone.

Nationals

De La Salle won the National title, for the second year in a row, edging out La Salle by 0.85. La Salle, though, had given them much reason for concern during the year. The Optimists had not.

The goals that the Optimists had set were maybe a little too high, but in striving for them, they had achieved something. They were still in existence. They hadn't folded up. They weren't in the basement. They were still respectable. There was a good foundation on which to build, and again, aim for the top. They would always do this.



1970: Toronto Optimists (Nationals)

Corps Banquet

The 9th Annual Awards Dinner was held at the Knights of Columbus Hall in Scarborough. The K of C and Optimists were, it appeared, hand in glove. The affair was sponsored by the Optimist Club of Toronto and was opened by Al Baggs. He had been a member of the club since he had persuaded them to take over the Corps in 1955. For the club, this was a momentous occasion, more than just a dinner. It was a farewell. They were giving up their sponsorship of the Corps and for sound reasons.

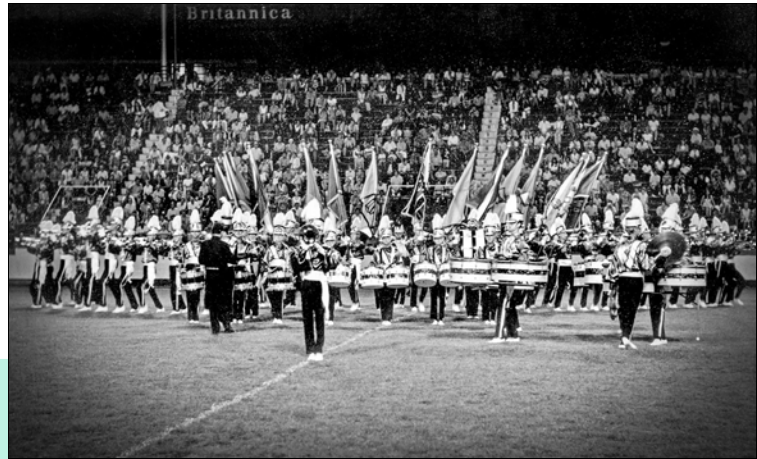


1970: Toronto Optimists

Downtown Optimist Club stops sponsoring the Corps

As a sponsor, the club had been flawless, and the fact that the Corps was no longer the champions they had once been, had no bearing at all on their decision. Anything the Corps had needed to keep functioning had been provided without question. Yet direct control had been minimal. Just one person from the Corps was required, once a year, to give an accounting to a club member. Occasionally, a club member would show up at a Corps activity, only to see what was going on. All direction and instruction of the Corps was left to those responsible for it. Many professional sports organizations would envy such a situation.

What had brought this decision to relinquish the reins, of course, was that the Corps had become a victim of its own success and longevity.



1970: Toronto Optimists

In 1955, and even 1958, trips were far less frequent and much less distant. Many shows were local, requiring no buses or other expenses. The growing success and renown of the Optimists, combined with parallel growth of the Drum Corps movement in general, had changed all that. Financial support was now necessary to a degree that the Optimist Club was no longer prepared to underwrite. An activity that, in light of other club activities, was truly a minor endeavour, was becoming a major financial drain. This and this alone was the reason for giving up the sponsorship.

Setbacks, blunders, almost anything you could think of had happened to the Corps in the past. The club had, without fail, always remained stalwart in its support. Such drastic changes are usually not the result of a snap decision, or effected overnight. As early as the month of May 1970, steps had been taken, in the knowledge of



1970: Toronto Optimists

the club's decision, to provide an alternative. Without these plans being made, the club decision to pull out would have meant the end of the Toronto Optimists Drum and Bugle Corps.

Creation of The Optimist Club of York-Toronto

The Corps had build up a lot of supporters, friends, and allies, over the years. These now, voluntarily, came into play. A new club, "The Optimist Club of York-Toronto" was formed. Its sole purpose was to support the Corps, which at this stage was enough.

The new club was given an official charter in May of 1970 and even admitted into the ranks of Optimist International. These actions, though adding legitimacy, in no way had a bearing on the function of the new club, which was to solely support the Optimist Corps and its offshoot, the Optimist Cadets.

The new sponsor was at first composed of Corps executive, parents, and alumnae. A field representative of Optimist International, from St. Louis, came up to help organize and select a name. To make it all nice and proper, the new club purchased the Corps from the old club for the princely sum of \$1.00. The first president was Al Tierney. Under his direction, it would flourish, as would the corps. All this, too, without missing a beat, so to speak.

Back to the Corps Banquet

Having digressed some, we are still at the 1970 Corps Dinner. The guest speaker, always someone of note, was Mr. Tom Kendall, President of Kendall Oil of Canada. He received a thank you from the Corps.

The next speaker, now a major player, as he had been for a while, was Mr. Al Tierney. He gave Corps rings to Vern Johansson and George Tamaki, for years of sticking it out. They had, through thick and thin. Another award, most deserved, was given to Al Baggs for outstanding service to the Corps. For anyone who had read this far, there is really no need of explanation.

Bob Barnes, Don Daber, Joe Gianna, Paul Thompson, and Ron Kaiser all gave out membership certificates to their respective sections. Don Daber gave three rookie pins to three new equipment managers. Unsung heroes all, their names repose in the hidden recesses of someone's archives but not mine. Mr. Daber also mentioned a possible sponsorship connection with one of the boroughs in a couple of years. Strangely enough, this would come about, but not in the way he had in mind at this time.

The evening ended with the announcement of a new Drum Major for next year. Mike Arsenault. Gord Robinson wished all good luck and the Corps song was sung to close the festivities.

For the Corps itself, there were more money raising functions such as the College Bowl, and Santa



1970: Toronto Optimists (Woodstock)

Claus and Grey Cup parades to perform. The first one included the Optimist Cadets. The last one, all Drum Corps of note in the Toronto area. Finally, at a Santa Claus parade in Barrie, appeared the Optimist Lancers. The Optimist Lancers? Yes, it was a new Optimist feeder Corps, based in Etobicoke, that had been initiated under Al Tierney and the new Optimist Club. For them, this was the beginning of an unusual existence. These events really signalled the end of activity for the Corps in 1970.

Because the Corps was no longer tops in their region, nor even close to it, they were more or less left out of it. Yet, it was possibly the biggest upheaval in Junior Drum Corps since the introduction of the one valve bugle. It would eventually embrace all Junior Corps, including the Optimists. This, of course, was the founding of Drum Corps International¹⁶, or D.C.I. It was the creation of a number of the best Junior Corps in the United States. Its story, foundation, and development are best left to detail in another story. Enough to say here that it would change the face of the Junior Corps forever. Nobody who wanted to get anywhere could, now, disregard D.C.I. It was to become the ruling body. Drum Corps in the United States and Canada had originated from different roots so the C.D.C.A. did not cease to exist, nor did the American Legion, or V.F.W., in the U.S., those most affected by the rise of D.C.I. They just became less relevant and, in Canada, subject to conformity, as, indeed, they had been anyway.

The Optimists were not invited to be a founding member of the organization but De La Salle was. They were the current Canadian Champions and also on par with some of the founding Corps. Because past glories mean little, except to the record books, the Optimists were ignored. Rightly so! They now had no official standing, other than that of the striving contender. And not really considered a very serious one at that.

How have the mighty fallen. Would things stay that way? We shall see.



1970: Toronto Optimists Montage by Randy Cochrane

¹⁶. *Drum Corps International was founded in 1972.*