


Lions

by Daniel Buteau

July 7, 1979 -- The first DCI Canada regional contest in Hamilton, ONT, marked that season's inaugural appearance for DCI's newest Canadian associate member. When all the dust had settled, l'Offensive Lions of Jonquière, QUE, had topped perennial DCI finalist 27th Lancers at both prelims and finals. DCI's northernmost ever top-12 contender had just embarked on its ultimate chase for drum corps' elite status.

It all started after the 1972 season, when Denis Larouche, director of La Clique Lions du Patro de Jonquière, decided the

Offensive

neighborhoods. Larouche wanted his organization to become a big player on Québec's competitive drum corps scene.

The city of Jonquière, an industrial center in the Saguenay region of Québec, had two drum and bugle corps at the time -- La Clique Patro, as well as the Cavalières of the Fatima Parish. Larouche and the Cavalières' director, Jean Martel, merged the two, obtained sponsorship from the Lions Club of Jonquière when the Patro expressed disagreement with the merger plan and l'Offensive Lions was born.

The corps, intent on becoming the top competitive organization in Québec, quickly outgrew such a basic ambition.

For its maiden 1973 season, the corps had as an objective to defeat the Ambassadeurs of Arvida and the Victoriaville Élités, the two top Québec contenders at the time. l'Offensive Lions easily surpassed its goal by not only surpassing those two corps, but also remaining undefeated until the 1973 Provincial Championships, when the Marionnettes of Montmagny wrestled the championships honors away from the Jonquière corps.

For the 1974 season, the corps could dream of topping every other Québec corps by margins between 15 and 20 points.

The 1975 season brought new competitive realities to l'Offensive Lions. On the homefront, a few competitors such as their next-door neighbors, Ambassadeurs d'Arvida, as well as mighty all-girl powers Marionnettes of Montmagny and classy Les Chatelaines de Laval, contributed to a dramatic surge in the overall quality of the Québec drum corps movement.

On the international front, DCI had moved its championships to Philadelphia, an

big time had come for his community drum and bugle corps. The Patros, a fixture of many urban Roman Catholic parishes in the province of Québec at the time, often sponsored drum and bugle corps to provide socio-cultural activities for the youth of their

affordable distance from Jonquière.

l'Offensive Lions, fielding a full corps of 128 members, entered the DCI Class A preliminary contest and finished a heartbreaking 1.1 points away from making finals. What the corps found most frustrating was to be defeated by corps in the 70- to 80-member range.

l'Offensive also faced a major setback at the Québec Provincial Championships that year, held in their hometown, when Marionnettes took the title away from them on their home turf. This was the last time that any Québec corps would defeat the Jonquière power until it folded following the 1980 season.

While they quickly regained the Québec Provincial title in 1976, the corps had another disappointing experience at the 1976 DCI Class A championships, again barely missing class A finals. From then on, they figured its big membership rosters made it a natural for open class competition.

Despite these disappointing setbacks, the corps kept surging ahead, growing in quality and also attracting new talent on its staff. By 1977, the corps had Michel Boulanger of Quebec City's Les Diplomates' fame as its percussion caption head and the Bridgemen's Tom Pratt as its visual designer.

It was also in 1977 that Denis Larouche worked at building the corps' touring capabilities. In the fall of 1976, l'Offensive Lions had so many members showing up at its tryouts that a feeder corps, la Relève Offensive de Jonquière, had to be established. La Relève would become a title contender in class C provincial competition.

Even though the corps would have liked to travel to Denver for the 1977 DCI Championships, financial considerations prevented such a long trek. Throughout all these years, l'Offensive Lions remained a local organization, funded mostly through the efforts of the Lions Club of Jonquière and a strong parents booster club.

The corps' membership also remained local. The urban stretch of the Saguenay region, with a population of about 150,000, supported five corps with combined membership of nearly 400 in Jonquière, Arvida, Chicoutimi and La Baie in 1977.

Members from Arvida or Chicoutimi joining l'Offensive Lions were suspiciously considered as foreigners by the corps' core local membership.

The corps embarked on its first open class North American tour in 1977, traveling to the World Open, U.S. Open and American International Open. l'Offensive Lions made finals at all three shows, with Boulanger's percussion line competing head-to-head with top 12 contenders Garfield Cadets, Crossmen and Seneca Optimists.

The corps, with an average age of 18, had its first taste of competition among the big boys and emerged convinced that nothing could stop the top Québec contender from cracking the top 12.

For the next two seasons, all the corps' resources and energies were focused on the



(Top to bottom) A local Quebec show in the mid-1970s, with the crowd sitting on a hillside to watch the up-and-coming corps from Jonquière (photo from the collection of Drum Corps World); l'Offensive Lions at an Eastern show in 1977 (photo by Moe Knox from the collection of Drum Corps World); the corps' guard at DCI Prelims in Denver, CO, 1978 (photo by Dick Deihl from the collection of Drum Corps World).

new objective. L'Offensive Lions still remained active in local circuits, hosting contests featuring corps from Québec, Ontario, New York and Massachusetts in their hometown. They also traveled to parades and contests all over the province.

Crowds marveled at the corps' snappy rifle line, monster percussion contingent, showy keyboard players and pleasing repertoires that included a clever mix of classical, jazz and pop music selections.

The corps achieved two major milestones during the 1978 season, one where the whole organization gained the maturity required for a full-blown DCI tour. They gained DCI associate membership status by placing 18th at the DCI Championships, in a year when the top 16 had a legitimate shot at the 12th spot in finals.

L'Offensive Lions also became the top drum corps contender in Canada by defeating both the Oakland Crusaders and Seneca Optimists on their own turf at the Canadian National Championships in Toronto.

The 1979 season saw l'Offensive Lions performing in two grueling tours, appearing at most DCI Regional Championships and establishing themselves as a bona fide top-12 contender. The corps wore new sharp white, blue and orange uniforms and pleased crowds everywhere with a fast-paced concert of *Birdland*, a percussion feature of *Blue Rondo à la Turk* full of fancy stick work and an emotional rendition of *Fantasy* as the closer.

The corps remained in the run throughout one of the most unpredictable and competitive seasons in DCI history. The season nevertheless ended in a major disappointment, as the corps placed 15th at the DCI Open Class Prelims in Birmingham, AL, and second at that year's DCI Associate Championships, which featured corps that placed 13th to 17th at prelims.

Even though the corps' 1979 achievements would have made most drum



L'Offensive Lions at an FAMQ show in Quebec (photo from the collection of Drum Corps World).

corps organizations more than envious, the season had taken its toll on the ambitious Jonquière organization. There were many age-outs and the feeder corps had to be folded to boost the membership roster. By the fall of 1979, l'Offensive Lions had to rely on out-of-town members, with most of the brass line coming from the folding of Métropolitains of Chicoutimi.

The corps also faced major changes in its staff and management. Founding Director Denis Larouche left the organization. L'Offensive also had to make a name change when they lost the sponsorship of the Lions Club of Jonquière and the corps was known as l'Offensive de Jonquière for 1980.

Such a negative climate, combined with the tensions created by integrating a strong contingent from the corps' Chicoutimi rival, led to a challenging 1980 season.

L'Offensive remained plagued with bad luck throughout. At the corps' opening Federation des Associations Musicales du Québec contest in Montreal, the Jonquière power felt the heat from up-and-coming Arcs-en-Ciel of Montréal-Nord. The whole 1980 season was a challenge for a corps used to simply dominating their local circuit and threatening top-12 contenders.

The corps had difficulty in remaining competitive among top-25 hopefuls that summer. Bad luck followed the corps all the way to the DCI Championship Prelims in Birmingham, when transportation problems had the corps running to the starting line, beginning the show without the benefit of a warm-up.

L'Offensive finished 26th, missing the top 25 by a mere seven-tenths.

The corps still was able to finish the season in style by hosting a combined Québec Provincial and Canadian National Championships weekend in Jonquière. L'Offensive confirmed its status as the premier drum and bugle corps in the country by easily defeating Arcs-en-Ciel for the provincial title and topping the Ventures by nearly 40 points to claim national honors. Such an honorable finish to a challenging season was not enough to keep ambitious members around. Facing an exodus in the fall of 1980, management decided

it was time for l'Offensive to fold.

The Jonquière corps became the icon of its Québec drum corps generation in many ways. The 1978 and 1979 l'Offensive Lions shows were arguably the strongest ever to be fielded in Québec. L'Offensive rose along a dramatic improvement in the quality of the province's drum corps scene and also experienced the decline faced by many corps when the late 1970s gave way to the early 1980s. The 1979 season was the last time a Canadian community corps could challenge for DCI Finals. The Québec and Ontario corps to make a credible threat of cracking the top 12 afterward were, essentially, all-star type collections of members from all corners of the two provinces.

The corps' ambitious dreams inspired members, staff and management who moved to other organizations, helping in build corps such as DCI associate member Les Éclipses, as well as DCA finalists La Clique Alouette of Québec City and Les Cascadeurs de Beauport. An alumni corps, Tradition of Jonquière, also participated in parades and community events for a few years in the late 1980s.

If you ever attend a drum corps show in the province of Quebec, pay close attention to the music coming from cars driving through the parking lot. It is very likely that you'll be able to catch the sounds of recordings of l'Offensive Lions, as the glorious memories of the hungry corps from the Saguenay inspire new generations of Québec drum corps members to dream of top 12 contention.

I must extend sincere thanks to former Offensive Lions member Bruno Bergeron, whose memories helped me make the history of a true Québec drum corps giant come alive. His continued passion for his corps and the activity are testimony of the impact the great drum corps organizations of the 1970s had on those who were fortunate enough to be involved with them.

For a photo and bio on Daniel Buteau, turn to page 217.



L'Offensive Lions at DCI Prelims, 1979 (photo by Art Luebke from the collection of Drum Corps World).