
by Tom Peashey

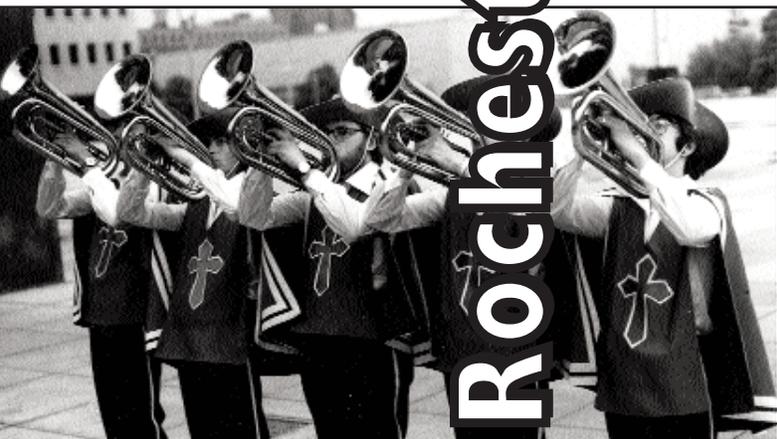
Part of the backbone of the “old line” Northeastern senior corps that make up Drum Corps Associates is the Rochester Crusaders. Their history spans more than 50 years of continued excellence.



Rochester Crusaders, 1971, at the National Dream (photo by Ron Da Silva from the collection of Drum Corps World).

One of the many corps founded after World War II, the Crusaders were actually started as the Hilton, NY, Fire Department Drum and Bugle Corps in 1947. Their first director was Paul Rood, who immediately brought in a young drummer and upstart marching and maneuvering instructor named Vince Bruni.

The next 30 years might be



Rochester Crusaders, 1976 (photo by Alan Winslow from the collection of Drum Corps World).

called the “Bruni Dynasty.” Under his leadership, this small firemen’s corps grew to become a superpower in the activity.

Adopting the Crusader name in 1952 and with Bruni as director, the corps grew from parade to full competitive corps in only a few years. By the second half of the 1950s, they were competing every weekend in the senior arena.

It is interesting to note that throughout those early years, the corps had a female guard and even was led by Anne Stevenson (Jennejahn), their long-time drum major.

In 1958, the Crusaders followed the lead of

most of the veteran’s corps and became all male. Females were not allowed in senior corps until the gender barrier was breached in the late 1960s.

The Crusaders’ green busboy jackets and familiar Gestapo hats with Maltese Crosses became well-known throughout the country. At corps parties, a tune that began “All Crusaders look like waiters and we don’t give a _____” was heard across the nation.

The 1960 season brought a significant change for the Crusaders as they moved from rural Hilton to the larger Rochester suburb of Irondequoit. They arrogantly changed their name to the “Fabulous” Crusaders of Irondequoit, but lived up to their name and quickly took the lead in Upstate New York senior corps over such renowned corps as the Syracuse Brigadiers, Geneva Appleknockers and Grey Knights.

Brass arranger/instructor Dr. Edward Mizma created the sounds and often shared the leadership. Collin Campbell created a legendary drum line that once included world famous drummer Stevie Gadd on snare.

That summer the Crusaders also formed one of the first independent drum corps associations in the country. United Drum Corps encompassed not only the Fabulous Crusaders, but also started the junior Ridge Culver Statesmen, the Alpine Girls and even a feeder corps called the Pardee Pacers.

All of the UDC corps were run by the Crusaders’ management team and set organizational precedents that were copied when such organizations as Drum Corps Associates, the Combine and finally Drum Corps International were formed.

The early 1960s saw the corps emerge as a national power. First they defeated the Brigadiers and won their first American Legion State Championship. Then their rise to preeminence was capped at the last show of 1964 in Syracuse, NY. At “Music in Motion,” they met the undefeated all-time powerhouse of senior corps, the Hawthorne Caballeros. It was definitely a case of “David meets Goliath.”

The unheard of occurred: Caballeros, 76.0; Crusaders, 77.8. The Crusaders were now not only in the national arena of drum corps, but on top of it. Ironically, after winning three New York State Legion Championships in a row from 1961 to 1963, the great 1964 corps was narrowly defeated for the state championship by the Syracuse Brigadiers.

In what might be known as the “it’s a small drum corps world” theory, playing contra for Crusaders on that warm September night in 1964 was a young college student named Pete Bishop. Bishop went back to New Jersey and spent decades with



Rochester Crusaders, 1988, at Colonie, NY (photo by Dale Eck from the collection of Drum Corps World).

the Hawthorne Caballeros and is currently director of the Caballeros Alumni Corps.

The success in 1964 saw an opportunity for senior corps in Rochester that could not be passed up. The Grey Knights were a strong corps, but they had been overcome by the Crusaders in the early 1960s after dominating throughout the 1950s.

In the fall of 1964, the Grey Knights and Fabulous Crusaders merged and became the Grey Knight Post Crusaders for 1965. Affectionately known by many of us who performed with them as the “super corps,” this group was not only large in numbers for the time (50 horns and a large drum line and guard), but they were also intimidating on the field.

The 1965 season culminated with the Crusaders flying to Portland, OR, for the American Legion Championships. After almost a decade of dominating the American Legion, the Grey Knight Post Crusaders defeated the Caballeros, 83.66 to 83.58. It was less than a tenth of a point, but the corps was again the nemesis to the Cabs and was the 1965 American Legion Champions.

That year also saw the beginning of the newly formed Drum Corps Associates. Along with the Caballeros, the Crusaders shied away from this fledgling organization. The summer of 1966 saw the Crusaders (already having dropped the Grey Knight name) defended their Legion title at RFK Stadium in Washington, D.C. This show was indeed one of the most controversial in drum corps history. Many believe it was the beginning of the end for the Legion Championship.

DCA members Hurricanes and Skyliners traveled to Washington to take on the Crusaders and Caballeros. Much to the surprise of the DCA corps, Caballeros regained the title and Crusaders finished a strong third behind Hurricanes.

This put the Crusaders smack dab in the middle of one of the most bizarre nights in drum corps history. Tossed trophies, thrown drum sticks, name-calling and blocking stadium exits all punctuated this

controversial night in front of many of the nation's top politicians.

Competition sometimes breeds close friendships and the Crusaders and Caballeros had grown quite close -- off the field. While other corps carried on, Crusaders set up an honor guard with their entire corps to congratulate the Caballeros.

This gesture so impressed the Legionnaires and politicians that the Congress of the United States awarded a special "Outstanding Sportsmanship" award to the Crusaders.

Following that incident, there were several meetings of the powers that be. A compromise was born that brought the Caballeros to the second DCA Championship in 1966 and then not only brought Crusaders into the fold for the 1967 season, but also saw Crusader Director Bruni immediately elected president of DCA.

It was from the ashes of turmoil in Washington, D.C., in 1966 that a politically united and strong DCA emerged. Bruni went on to lead both the Crusaders and DCA for the next decade.

Another important change occurred at the beginning of the 1970s. Brigadier arranger Al "Corky" Fabrizio was brought in to revitalize the Crusaders' brass. This created a

strong 1971 DCA top-five Crusader corps and led to a significant number of former Fabrizio brass players migrating to Crusaders for the 1972 season.

Most Crusader veterans recognize the 1972 corps as perhaps the best one the Rochester group ever fielded. A huge brass line, solid drum line and excellent guard created a corps that was destined to take back its Legion title from the Caballeros at Soldier Field in Chicago. It's interesting to note that this was just two days after the first-ever DCI Championship in Whitewater, WI.

One of the more memorable evenings in



Rochester Crusaders, 1999, at DCA Prelims (photo by Alan Winslow from the collection of Drum Corps World).

corps history actually happened the day between the two championships. An all-exhibition show was held in Racine, WI. Some of the juniors and several of the seniors headed for Chicago performed in exhibition, but the most interesting part was the audience. It was full of junior corps members and fans making the short drive over from Whitewater. The audience response to everyone that night was memorable, but for Crusaders, it was legendary.

The reaction of the junior members to the 1972 corps was a tremendous boost to the organization and a major part of their performance the next night.

The 1972 season concluded with what was arguably the best DCA Championship ever. Certainly it was the most competitive, as any of five corps, including the Crusaders, could have won. The win went to the Caballeros, but that night the real winner was the audience

at Jersey City's Roosevelt Stadium. All of the competitors were absolutely phenomenal.

Crusaders tied for fourth with Hurricanes, having been bested by the Buccaneers, Skyliners and Cabs. All five corps were true champions. The Crusaders remained a perennial DCA finalist throughout the 1970s.

The summer of 1979 concluded the Bruni directorship and a huge part of Crusader history came to a close, but the corps continued. With such a major leadership change, some struggle could be anticipated. The period 1982-1984 marked the first three seasons the corps did not make DCA Finals, but they were still competitive. In 1985, the corps was back in finals and improving rapidly. For 1986, the corps jumped back into the top five for the first time since 1972.

The third-place finish in 1988 was officially their highest placement in DCA Finals. It is no coincidence that Fabrizio was back that year and for the next few.

The directorship changed often throughout the 1980s, but the list reads like a roster of the Crusader Hall of Fame. Dr. Vic Genberg, Ed Wackerle, Bob "Sully" Sullivan, Norm LeFrois, Tom Meek, Rick Bucklin, Karl Essler and Pete Fox all had the leadership.

To begin the 1990s, I was director for four seasons. After 11 years as a performer and instructor, it was my honor to hold the directorship of my alma mater. Strong DCA



Rochester Crusaders, 1995, at DCA Finals (photo by Sid Unser from the collection of Drum Corps World).

finishes of fifth, fourth, eighth and fourth are definitely fond memories and years I will forever cherish.

For 1994, the corps was led by Jeff Magocs, followed by Jim Highsmith and the return of Meek for 1996 and 1997. In 1998, a reorganization took place under the new leadership of Mike Linton. Their 11th-place finish barely missed finals and marked the fourth and final time the finals would go on without them in 36 appearances. Continuing strong into the 21st century, the corps is a model of stability and longevity.

The 2002 season brought the executive directorship of Linton and the emergence of Dave Seeley as corps director. The corps prides itself in its democratic approach to drum corps and feels strongly that the member's needs come first.

Recognizing 30 years ago that corps could no longer survive on contest appearance fees, candy bar sales and membership fees, the Crusaders were one of the first drum and bugle corps to venture into charitable gaming -- a fancy name for bingo -- to fund their efforts. Certainly, they were the first senior corps to augment their income this way.

Financial stability and independence, strong leadership, dedicated membership and a 57-year history of tradition and success all bode well for the Rochester Crusader organization of the new millennium. The corps now has a strong alumni corps and its own Hall of Fame. The corps also sponsors Crusader Youth Music. This subsidiary has organized youth activities in the area including winter guards and inner city music programs.

For 2003, Crusader Youth Music has actually evolved into a junior parade corps with students aged 10 to 16. This is the first official junior corps for the Crusader organization since the break up of the Emerald Statesmen in the late 1960s.

Rochester has long claimed to be the drum corps capital of the world. If that is the case, then certainly the Rochester Crusaders are the cornerstone that capital was built upon. From the Hilton Fire Department Drum Corps to the Hilton Crusaders to the Irondequoit Crusaders to the Grey Knight Post Crusaders to the Rochester Crusaders, for 57 years they have been a large part of the history of drum corps.

For a photo and bio on Tom Peashey, turn to page 31.



Rochester Crusaders, 2002, at DCA Finals (photo by Harry Heidelmark from the collection of Drum Corps World).



Rochester Crusaders, 1992, at DCA Finals (photo by Sid Unser from the collection of Drum Corps World).