

THE UNSTOPPABLE FORCE AND THE IMMOVABLE OBJECT

The History of the Toronto Optimists by Vern Johansson

On a brisk September afternoon in a small town 60 miles west of Toronto, a group of very determined young men stepped off the line into history.

The year was 1958 and the Canadian drum corps scene consisted of three words: Preston Scout House. They were completely immovable, the reigning national champions and so famous, even America knew of them. The idea of anyone threatening their majesty was completely laughable.

Even the newly formed Toronto Optimists were not too optimistic about their chances. Yes, they had been closing the gap all year, but still...

The Optimists consisted of a hardscrabble bunch of kids, most of whom hailed from the "wrong side of the tracks." They lacked musical talent and knowledge. They'd never done a marching and manoeuvring show before. They had never held their hand this close to the flame of high-powered competition.

The one thing they had in abundance was desire - an inherent ability to fight for every inch of ground, to work long after others would rest and determination to never make the same mistake twice.

Drum corps fans didn't quite know what to make of this shiny new corps. They didn't adhere to the standard practice of playing martial-type music. They seemed more suited to the Broadway stage, with big, brassy, happy tunes like When You're Smiling, Song of the Vagabonds, The Hello Song, Hail to Optimism, Big Wide Wonderful World, Wrap Your Troubles in Dreams, Hello Young Lovers, In The Mood, The World is Waiting for the Sunrise, Columbia, Gem of the Ocean, Oh Canada and "Til We Meet Again.

Some fans were sceptical. The Optimists seemed to be bending drum corps traditions to the breaking point. Others found them to be a breath of fresh air. They were perhaps seen to be a novelty and when the time came, mighty Scout House would quell the upstart.

The time came on September 13. The Canadian Championships were right next door to Preston, in Galt, Ontario. The upstart Optimists corps, under Drum Major Phil Hennings, was actually making a strong run for the roses.

In a previous meeting with Scout House, the Optimists were within tenths. They seemed to be an unstoppable force and they were doing it by scoring higher in all execution captions - bugling, drumming and marching.

The unstoppable force went on first, followed immediately by the immovable object and, when the dust had settled, Bob Mannhardt of Drum Corps World had this to say: “Sept. 13, Galt, Ontario. - Today the Canadian drum corps world was stood on its ear and shaken to its foundations when the previously invincible Preston Scout House was defeated on their home field by the fabulous Toronto Optimists in the annual battle for the Canadian Junior National Championship.

In accomplishing what had become to be thought of as an impossible feat, the Optimists firmly established themselves as the ‘miracle corps’ of the year, because just one year ago, this corps was a class B standstill unit. They have reached the pinnacle of success, achieving in their freshman year of marching and manoeuvring a victory that is nothing short of fantastic.

“I venture to say that no corps in Canada looks forward to the coming year with greater eagerness or enthusiasm than the Optimists, but whatever glories are to be theirs in the future, none will ever eclipse or outshine that thundering moment when the P.A. system announced, “...in second place, Preston...”

Toronto Optimists	81.61
Preston Scout House	80.11
De La Salle Oaklands	77.09
Grantham Boys	75.42
Skyraiders	73.33
Royal Knights	66.97

THEIR HEARTS BELONGED TO DADDY

Like all overnight successes, it actually took years. The Optimists actually began life as a Boy Scout band. A Toronto District scouting commissioner by the name of Al Baggs woke up one morning in 1955 and saw the writing on the wall. Most of the scouts in the band would be aging out of scouting. Baggs decided that the scout band needed to be reorganized with a new sponsor to help march into the future.

Baggs was the kind of man everyone would naturally call “Mister.” He commanded respect and led by example. To the boys in the corps he was known as Daddy Baggs and each member believed in him with all his heart.

He believed strongly in discipline, hard work and fair play. And he foresaw that drum corps had an attractiveness to it that went beyond scouting. So at the end of 1955, he went to the Downtown Toronto Optimists Club with a proposal. He offered to manage a

new drum corps, which he believed would be a perfect fit for the club's objective of providing interesting activities for boys.

His proposal was rejected. He wrote a letter asking the club to reconsider. He pointed out that the operating costs, which seemed to be a concern, could be controlled with prudent leadership. He also suggested that a parade corps would generate a lot of publicity for Optimism and offer musical training as part of their youth activities.

He cited the example of the Madison, WI, Optimists who co-sponsored a scout band in which more than 1,000 boys had received musical instruction since 1938.

The club reversed its decision.

In 1956, Opti-Corps went out into the world with new uniforms of blue and gold and ended their first season by winning the novice championship at Canadian Nationals.

In 1957, they moved up to junior B and capped the year with another Canadian title. In two short years, Baggs and his charges had met with nothing but success and naturally his eye gazed steadily on the holiest grail of all: the Canadian Junior A Championships, a perch occupied by the all-powerful Scout House. The next step would determine whether Opti-Corps would soar like an eagle or sink like a stone. And Baggs was not the kind of man used to sinking.

He realized he could not achieve this step alone. He had two problems that needed fixing. He needed more members and more instructors. The answer to both existed in a high school on the other side of town.

The Danforth Crusaders were already a junior A corps. They were organized as part of the music program at Danforth Technical School and they were under the guidance of a man who had started his drum corps life playing a plastic bugle. Barry Bell was a quiet, thoughtful man who was deeply in love with the idea of drum and bugle corps.

He and his good friend Lorne Ferrazzutti, were horn and drum instructors for the Crusaders, both having arrived there from Western Technical School, where they ran a similar program.

They went to Danforth because they were given free-rein to develop a drum corps from an Air Cadet marching band. But, as the saying goes, "nothing in life is free" and the school administration was impeding their progress. By the time Baggs came calling, Bell and Ferrazzutti were more than ready to listen.

Bell signed on with Opti-Corps as bugle instructor and drill teacher. Ferrazzutti would instruct drums. Many Crusaders made the leap with them. At first rehearsal, it looked like a high school dance, with Opti-Corps members on one side, Danforth Crusaders on

the other, staring at each other, eyes shifting and darting, wondering who would be the first to ask for a dance.

Baggs got the dance off on the right foot by informing this new group that the objective was to be Canadian junior A champions within two years. This bold plan was an aphrodisiac to members of both corps.

In 1958, the new Toronto Optimists made their first appearance at an indoor show at the University Armouries in Toronto. They wore brand-new uniforms designed by Bell - green satin blouses with a white diagonal stripe, black pants with white stripe, white shoes, a cummerbund of white and green and white shakos with green trim and white plumes. By the end of the year, they were Canada's new champions, achieving in one year what they'd set out to accomplish in two.

ARE THESE GUYS FOR REAL?

During the off-season, Baggs, Bell and Ferrazzutti decided to keep most of the musical show from 1958. Bell was keenly interested in what was going on in the drum corps movement in the United States and was determined to evolve the Optimists into an American-style corps with more complex arrangements and more diversity in musical styles. Ferrazzutti was equally determined to advance the style of drumming. As an organization, they also decided the corps' level of performance would benefit from direct competition with American corps.

In their earliest American performances, they were amazed at the reception by American drum corps fans. Prolonged standing ovations greeted each appearance. The judges didn't agree. The fact of the matter was, the Optimists were being beaten like a rented drum.

In his "Rochester Drumbeat" column in the Chicago-based Drum Corps World magazine, Mannhardt wrote, "The talk around town in the early part of June was about the results of St. Patrick's contest at Jersey City. People were wondering how such high scores could be racked up so early in the season and how there could be such wide spreads among the scores.

I listened to the tapes of the contest and it seems incredible that the Toronto Optimists could be over nine points behind the leaders, especially when eye witnesses stated enthusiastically that they had the best precision of any corps, senior or junior."

To avoid a collapse of morale, the instructors continually pointed out that this was a valuable learning experience and the rewards would come with time.

That time came in August 1959 at Rome, NY, when the Optimists defeated the Garfield Cadets by almost four points. Garfield, later that month, came seventh at the VFW National championships in New York City.

Fuelled by the learning in the United States, the Optimists returned to Galt, Ontario., and retained their Canadian title by a considerable margin over Scout house.

ON, MARCH ON

In the fall of 1959, Baggs made a decision that would have a lasting impact on the future of the Optimists. He decided to form a feeder corps. They would be called the Bantam Optimists and marching members of the junior corps would instruct them. This would provide the junior corps with a way of replenishing membership. To demonstrate the depth of consistency throughout the Optimists' drum corps organization, the Bantam Optimists, in the summer of 1960, captured the Canadian Novice Standstill title.

The Optimists rolled through 1960 unscathed, capping the season with their third consecutive Canadian title. They added Meadowlands, a powerful new opening number, to their basically unchanged repertoire. Corps member Glen Durish took this song, added lyrics and it became the corps song which was sung before each performance.

MAYBE THIS GREEN MACHINE HAS TOO MANY MILES ON IT

The 1961 season was one of newness: lots of new members from the Bantam corps; a lot of new music, including Cockeyed Optimist, Mr. Jones, Presentation March, Holiday for Lovers and Manhattan Beach; a new drum major, Al Morrison; a new drill writer, Doug McPhail; a new drill instructor, Ivor Bramley; and a new director of public relations, Don Daber.

Daber was a commercial artist who was simply attempting to write an article on Toronto's drum corps scene for a local newspaper. Baggs, however, had something else in mind. He asked Daber what he would do to promote the Optimists in particular.

Daber answered the question with a dizzying array of material, including crests, buttons, records, Optimist money, pennants and a selection of corps action photos for use in media and for sale to loyal fans. He also produced a corps newsletter that was to

gain legendary status throughout the North American drum corps movement.

“Green Capsule Comments” was written, produced and distributed by anyone in the corps who cared to contribute. It became one of the most oft-quoted and reproduced newsletters in the activity. It was a lively, funny, argumentative collection of inside information, gossip, contest results, corps activity, cartoons and contest reviews.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, one would have been hard-pressed to find a drum corps that had more public exposure than the Optimists.

There was something else new in 1961 - losing. For the first time since 1958, the Optimists lost a contest to a Canadian corps. De La Salle, another Toronto corps that would be the Optimists’ most ferocious rival for the next 15 years, achieved the feat.

At the Canadian National Championships in 1961, the Optimists fought their way back to the top and won their fourth consecutive title by a heart-stopping .05.

“YOU BETTER BLEED ON THAT FINISH LINE”

The 1962 and 1963 seasons would prove to be the most successful, creative years in Optimists history. Bell took the horn line to a new level with rich, sophisticated arrangements by Truman Crawford. The 1962 repertoire included Big Wide Wonderful World, Let Me Entertain You, St. Louis Blues, I’m in the Mood for Love, Down by the Riverside, Taboo, I Believe and The Party’s Over. To front his decidedly Broadway show, the corps featured a new drum major.

Jim McConkey arrived in Canada with a dream resume that included stints with Blessed Sacrament Golden Knights and the Archer-Epler Musketeers.

There were three crowning moments in the 1962 season. The corps bought new uniforms using the same colour combination, but the green blouse now shimmered under the lights like a jewel. The first appearance in these dazzling new uniforms was in Rome, NY. In that contest was a corps the Optimists had never beaten, the Blessed Sacrament Golden Knights. At night’s end, Blessed Sac marched past the corps in salute. The final crowning moment of the season came in Waterloo, Ontario., when the Optimists won their fifth consecutive national title. On the record of the performance, right after concert, you can distinctly hear McConkey say, “You better bleed on that finish line.”

The summer of 1963 was most notable for Optimists drill writer, Doug McPhail. He was a quiet, shy man with extraordinary creative gifts. Articles he wrote for “Green Capsule Comments” are among the best literature ever created about drum corps.

His drill for 1963 was so unique, most of the judges did not quite know what to make of it. There was a wedge off the line and circles and dance steps and asymmetrical forms and straight lines that gave way to curved shapes. It was a vision of things to come.

For the first time in the history of the corps, they competed in the Midwest. Crowds were awestruck at the visual presentation of this unknown corps from Canada. And in one of the rare moments of crowd/judge agreement, Optimists were awarded high marks in general effect.

This visit to Illinois and Wisconsin was also the start of a long friendship between America's "Green Machine" – the Chicago Cavaliers - and the Optimists. During retreats, they marched on together as one great big green machine. In Canada, the Optimists captured their sixth consecutive championship with the highest score in their history, an 89.

HOW LONG CAN THIS MACHINE LAST?

The thing about a winning streak is knowing that at some point it will run out, but not focussing so much on that point that you bring about an early demise. In 1964 and 1965, Bell and Crawford made further explorations into popular strains of music. Instrumentation was also changing with the recent introduction of mellophones, euphoniums and contra bass horns.

Bell and Crawford made use of all those voices in bold arrangements of Who Will Buy, It's Legitimate and Latin-themed material such as El Cumbanchero. Attention was also paid to big band swing in songs such as Big Bad Bill and Mandy.

In 1964, two new drum majors arrived. Andy Henderson moved up from guard captain and Vern Johansson moved up from the Bantam Optimists.

The corps captured its 7th and 8th consecutive Canadian Championships.

The consistency of the organization had always come from the top down. But changes were now occurring. Baggs, such an instrumental force in the corps' success from the beginning, handed over the reins to Daber. Bell and Ferrazzutti remained firmly in place, with Bell adding former star soloist, Joe Gianna, to the instruction staff and Ferrazzutti adding former individual snare drumming champion, Ron Kaiser, to the drum staff. During 1966, Ron Kaiser wrote the drum charts and Crawford still arranged the horn charts.

THE FIELD IS STILL GREEN, BUT THE SKY IS CLOUDY

The 1966 season started with an amazing surprise success. At the “Shriner’s International” contest held in Toronto in June, the Optimists defeated the reigning VFW, American Legion and CYO National Champion Chicago Royal Aires.

Success continued through the year with Optimists defeating St. Joseph’s of Batavia for the first time since 1963. The musical program included Food, Glorious Food from “Oliver”, Eager Beaver by Stan Kenton and a concert medley of Sweet Georgia Brown, Georgia, Thoroughly Modern Millie and Thank Heaven for Little Girls. Jack Roberts wrote the drill.

The corps seemed to be on cruise control coasting into nationals. They didn’t see the pothole until it was almost too late. A new Canadian corps had hitched itself to the competitive ladder. Cadets LaSalle, an Ottawa corps with an amazingly exciting show, was roaring through the pack and by the Ontario Championships had replaced De La Salle as No. 2.

The national championships were held in Montreal and, pushed by a huge, supportive crowd at prelims, LaSalle did the unthinkable. They beat the mighty “Green Machine.” Prelims and finals were held on the same day, which didn’t leave the Optimists much time to repair the damage.

The drum line started practising right after prelims and didn’t stop until it was time to dress and head for the stadium. The efforts of the drum line inspired the rest of the corps and just before the finals performance, huddled under the grandstand, Joe Palancia, who was aging out, spoke of what it meant to be an Optimist.

In the stands that evening were many members of other drum corps and many former Optimists. Every one of them I’ve spoken to about that evening says exactly the same thing. It was the most electrifying performance they had ever seen.

The Optimists earned their ninth consecutive title by more than three points.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY CANADA

In 1967, it was Canada’s Centennial. In the nation’s capital, Ottawa, they decided that hosting the Canadian Drum Corps Championships in September would be a good way to keep the national birthday party rolling right through the summer.

The Optimists were ready. They fielded the largest corps they’d ever had and offered a collection of superb Truman Crawford arrangements, including Born Free, Battle Cry

of Freedom, Temptation and Old Devil Moon. Kaiser's drum line was an executional masterpiece, with amazing complex rhythms and time signatures. It seemed nothing could stop the corps' drive toward their tenth consecutive title.

At the "Shriner's International" contest in June, Optimists placed third, but were a mere 1.5 behind the winning Chicago cavaliers. The nearest Canadian corps was 12 points behind.

Throughout the summer, the corps remained on top, but once again watched Cadets LaSalle creeping ever closer and, at nationals prelims, they defeated the Optimists again. On the starting line at finals, the corps was greeted with a rousing, relentless chorus of "boos" that rolled through the crowd all through the performance. They were, after all, in LaSalle's home town. The judges, however, weren't booing and the Optimists captured their 10th consecutive title.

SMALL, BUT MIGHTY

At the corps' drill camp in May 1968, the corps roared to the starting line with 18 horns. A furious round of phone calls brought the number up to 26. They would eventually start the season with 30.

Fortunately, the drum line was very, very strong. Kaiser had developed a friendship with Jerry Shelmar of the Boston Crusaders. Kaiser used Shelmar's idea of horizontally mounted, tuned bass drums to add more voices to the line.

The drum line never lost a contest all year. But the corps did experience a series of defeats at the hands of the newly resurrected De La Salle, the Optimists cross-town rivals. They achieved this by hiring former Optimists as instructors.

One thing held the Optimists together: a desire for self-improvement that had been preached by all their instructors through all the years. They simply hunkered down and worked harder than they ever had before. One week before nationals, they caught De La Salle. In Kingston, Ontario, the next weekend, the corps won its eleventh consecutive title. It was quite possibly the sweetest victory.

THOSE WERE THE DAYS

Aside from 1967, the 1969 Optimists corps was the best and biggest in their history. And for the first time ever, they would be playing a show completely arranged by Bell, including Hang 'em High, A Place to Stand, Temptation, Aquarius/Let the Sun Shine In, Those Were the Days and San Francisco.

The drums continued exploring unique time signatures with a drum solo based on Blue Rondo Ala Turk by Dave Brubek.

The season started with a loss to De La Salle and that's how it ended. The corps kept gaining on their rivals each contest and perhaps if the season was one week longer, maybe...but on a cold evening in Ottawa, a new champion was crowned. The spread between the two corps was .05.

The string of consecutive national titles was stopped at 11. On retreat, the corps marched off with a wistful arrangement of Those Were the Days.

The next two years were spent in the wilderness, competitively. Concerns arose as to whether the corps could ever right itself again. Losing takes its toll and feeds on itself. Morale suffers; confidence is shattered.

Bell, at the end of 1969, realized that perhaps it was time for new blood that would generate new enthusiasm and ideas. He turned control of the horn line over to Paul Thompson, a long-term marching member with a strong teaching background.

One of the best accomplishments of the corps in the early years of the 1970s was the resurrection of the feeder corps system. Al Tierney set out to start a kiddie corps from scratch. This man's executive and planning abilities were so extraordinary that on registration day there were more than 250 kids signed up.

Not to be outdone, Dick Brown, a man with an incredible wealth of drum corps experience, started a second feeder corps on the other side of town. The Optimists Cadets and Optimists Lancers were the new foundation and by 1972 they were feeding a steady supply of members to the Optimists.

The 1972 edition of the corps was the best ever fielded. It was also the first time that females marched in the "Green Machine" and they marched incredibly well. The corps presented a big, brassy sound with arrangements by Larry Kerchner and drum charts by Kaiser. The show generated non-stop excitement, with a rousing opener, Paint Your Wagon, the theme from "Patton", a bold rock sound to More & More, a big band concert medley of Caravan and Moonlight Serenade and a sweet exit of Superstar.

The year ended with an upset victory over De La Salle at Canadian Nationals. The

margin of victory was .05. In three separate years, the difference between these two great corps was one half of one tenth!

The 1973 season should have been a very strong one. It wasn't. Internal conflicts burst into the open and many key members left. The corps was still reeling in 1974 and finished behind Seneca Princemen at nationals and 34th at DCI in Ithaca, NY.

But the Optimists were a very resilient drum corps. Nothing proved this more than 1975. Peter Byrne took over as horn instructor and the horn line took on a much more sophisticated sound with show-stopping arrangements by Wayne Downey and Ray Roussel, including a Judy Garland medley, Indian Lady and Soulero.

At DCI in Philadelphia, the Optimists made the largest improvement in placement ever recorded moving from 34th to 16th. Their performance at Canadian Nationals in Kitchener, Ontario., left the crowd breathless. It was the last Canadian Championship appearance ever of the Toronto Optimists.

TORONTO OPTIMISTS AND SENECA PRINCEMEN

1 + 1 = 1

At the end of 1975, Al Tierney was named corps director. Tierney was determined to become a DCI Finalist corps. At an Ontario Drum Corps Association meeting, he jokingly suggested to Wolfgang Petschke, director of the Seneca Princemen, that they should merge their corps. Little did Tierney know that Petschke had been trying to retire as director, but couldn't find a replacement. The merger was arranged.

The Seneca Optimists created their own identity with brilliant yellow cadet tunics and black trim. The new instructional staff was almost as large as some of the horn lines fielded by the Optimists in the late 1950s.

Byrne and Myron Melnyk taught the arrangements by Wayne Downey. Sam Kays, Al Murray and Pat Irvine instructed percussion. Drill was designed by Gary Czapinski and taught by Greg Oxenham, Tom Furiano, Doug Coull and Gilles Paquin.

Colour guard, which was a great strength of the Seneca corps, was instructed by Marie Czapinski, Wendy Paquin and Debbie Miller.

At DCI in 1976, the corps made finals, placing 10th, still behind Oakland Crusaders, but their objective had been achieved. In the process, Toronto became the only city to ever have two corps in DCI Finals.

In 1977, Seneca became, in the eyes of many, the greatest Canadian drum corps ever fielded. The musical program of Mahler's Seventh Symphony, Children's Dance, selections from "West Side Story", "Pippin" and Road Ode was anchored by a spectacular drill move involving a black and white parachute.

The corps finished ninth at DCI and became the only Canadian corps to win the US Open. They also won the Canadian Championship. It would be the last waltz.

The summer of 1978 was the final year of existence for this proud Canadian organization. It wasn't a very good finish. The corps had lost a massive number of members at the end of 1977 and the spark was gone. They finished 24th at DCI in Denver and lost the Canadian Championships to L'Offensive Lions of Jonquiere, QUE.

During their 21 years of existence, the Optimists reached unparalleled heights in Canadian drum corps. To this day, their record of 11 consecutive national titles has never been equalled and it likely never will. This all happened a long, long time ago, but for those who were there, it seems like only yesterday.