

Marching On

The Wildcat Marching Band celebrates 95 years of making music

Tuesday, November 18, 2014

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It's a cold November Saturday morning and out on the Cowell Stadium field, the Wildcat Marching Band has its hands full. Today, the band's ranks have swelled to include high school students from around the state, an annual tradition that gives high school

musicians a peek at what it takes to play in a college marching band. And so, in addition to rehearsing for their performance at the afternoon's football game against James Madison University, Wildcat Marching band members are wrangling shivering high schoolers into position and snatching up errant sheet music caught in the wind.

Once the band is lined up in rows, band director Casey Goodwin '01 '06G gives the signal and the band begins a test-run of a portion of its half-time show. In the front row, the wind section moves to the right; behind them, the horn section moves to the left. But a few high school students in the front row are having trouble keeping up with the drill and Goodwin, standing on a raised platform on the sidelines, calls everyone to a halt.

"Okay!" she shouts above the wind. "Let's try that again!"

As everyone returns to their places, a puzzled pair of high school flautists gather around a marching band member; she rolls up a piece of paper and holds it up to her lips, like a flute, and quickly demonstrates the steps in the march. Goodwin gives the signal again and this time, the high school students stumble a bit, but make it through to the end of the drill.

"I did this in high school, and this is what solidified my decision to come here," marching band staff member Risa Kapp '12 '14G says. "Someone wrote on our Facebook page this morning, 'It's just another Saturday game for you, but to the kids, it means the world to them.'"

It's a small moment in the day, but one that perfectly encapsulates the Wildcat Marching Band experience. Ask any of the thousands of alumni who've donned the blue and black uniforms and marched across a football field at half-time about their fondest band memories and chances are they'll remember a scene like this—learning complex marches and fighting some kind of inclement weather, all while having a blast and building an ad hoc family.

"I think it was best decision I made going into freshman year," says flautist Erin Lee '17. "I had immediate friends and immediate support. I set myself up for four years with something I can come back to and have a community with."

The band traces its official origin back to 1906, when the ROTC formed an official university band. It wasn't until 1919, however, that the ROTC band marched at a football game. The band later became a student-run organization and, for a while, operated under the auspices of the President's Office and then the Athletics Department. It became part of the Music department in 1923, when music faculty member Richard R. Lamont became the first faculty band director.

"The band itself has changed a lot since it started, from a military band to a ragtag student group to a fully-staffed corps-style marching band," Goodwin says. What hasn't changed is the alchemy that transforms a group of close to 100 or so students into a tightly knit family each fall. It's a sentiment that marching band members from every generation share.



“Spending lots of quality time with 120 people four to five days a week for 10 weeks will bond you, and then that bond continues throughout the year in other musical ensembles until it’s marching season once again,” says Michele Boulanger ’74. “These people saw you at your best and at your worst, sweaty and exhausted, and flying high after a great show.”

Make no mistake: playing in the marching band is not for those with faint hearts and easily tired feet. Band members return to the university every August a week before classes begin and practice for hours each day under the hot summer sun. Once the marching season is in full swing, the band rehearses three times a week, and when Saturday rolls around, the band begins preparing for that afternoon’s football game at 8 a.m.

And then there’s the weather. For every picturesque autumn afternoon, there are just as many days when the band marches through driving snow, biting cold and blinding rain. Kristina Looney ’11 remembers traveling to Salem, N.H., for a band showcase during her freshman year. In the middle of the show, a hard, driving rain began and lightning flashed across the sky. The show ended abruptly, just as the Wildcat Marching Band was set to perform.

“We had already warmed up, and as everybody was running to the buses, the trumpet section started to play,” she recalls. “Everyone joined in and we did an impromptu show in the driveway. As the buses were pulling away, kids were leaning out of the windows and cheering and the busses were honking.”

Tina Erickson ’84 remembers marching in snow so thick that the yard lines on the field disappeared. “We would try to make the forms anyway,” she says. “There was one game where it was so muddy that one of the guys in my squad marched right out of his shoes and kept going.”

Many band members go on to become music educators and direct their own bands, and others continue playing music in their own bands. Band alumni have also racked up a roster of impressive achievements: Jared Cassedy ’04 is a quarter-finalist for the 2014 music educator Grammy award, and Col. Larry H. Lang, who directed the band from 1980 to 1982, is now the commander and conductor of the U.S. Air Force Band. Marc Kerouac ’69 had a 30-year career as a music educator and band director in Massachusetts and he still plays regular gigs with The Spectras, the band he helped

form during his years at UNH. “Here I am, 43 years later, still playing with a lot of the same guys,” he says. “It never stops.”

Along the way, each generation of band members has established its own traditions and carried on others. Boulanger points to the band’s unofficial “zim zam” cheer of the 1970s (it begins “Zim zam, goddamn, who the hell are we? Wildcats once, Wildcats twice!”), while Emily Grondin ’11 recalls Wednesday evenings spent holed up in a dorm room with a few dozen other band members working on the band newspaper, “Savage Beast.” Grondin’s grandfather, Rod Grondin ’62, used to gather with fellow band members on the Thompson Hall lawn on Friday nights, psyching up for the Saturday football game. “They’d build a bonfire,” he says, “and we would just play our hearts out.”

Like any close-knit group, Wildcat Marching Band members think of themselves as a family—and some of them have gone so far as to make it official. No one has kept track of how many marriages have come out of the Wildcat Marching Band, but Goodwin approximates the number at “lots,” and she’s one of the many alums who found her future spouse there. So did Kristina Looney. She and her fiancée, Chloe Garrage ’13, met there, and the couple expects a strong showing of band members at their summer 2015 wedding, where they’ll carry on another unofficial band tradition: a choreographed dance to Meat Loaf’s “Paradise by the Dashboard Light.”

“That’s been going on for generations,” Looney says. And, if the last 95 years are any indication, it—or something like it—will be going on for many more. ~

Originally published by:
UNH Magazine, [Fall 2014 Issue](#)

Photos by Rod Grondin '62 and Lisa Nugent

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UNH MAGAZINE FALL 2014

SERIES:
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