
by Steve Delaney

To those who knew him, the grin on his face gave away what was about to happen. Greg Orwoll had just emerged from the Drum Corps International office at Memorial Stadium in Jackson, MS, and paced the end zone with his corps, awaiting the announcement of the score. Moments earlier, the Colts had completed one of the most inspiring performances in corps history. Having entered the semifinals contest in 13th place, there was genuine anticipation among those affiliated with the corps.

Orwoll whispered in the ear of one staffer what he already knew: the corps had tied the Glassmen for 11th place and a spot in the world championship finals the next night. He knew because he and Glassmen director Dan Acheson were summoned to the DCI office for a coin flip to determine the next night's order of performance.

Moments later, DCI announcer Brandt Crocker let everyone else in on the secret. It was an historic moment for a corps that began 30 years prior, with 38 boys in white dress shirts and black slacks, parading the streets of Dubuque as the Junior Dukes.

Considering the year before the corps placed 20th, the jump was among the greatest year-to-year improvements of any unit. The Colts' previous highest ranking was 16th, and that was in 1985. Six years before that, in 1979, the corps placed 35th, dead last, in open class competition.

Despite its popularity among drum corps fans across the country, the corps had never spent time on the sport's biggest stage, the final Saturday night on the schedule. So 1993's coming of age provides the axis upon which the corps' history can be told. Colts teams before it set the foundation by which the 1993 group was competitively successful. Teams after have frequented the Saturday night stage, demonstrating that on the field, a higher level of achievement is the norm.

Fittingly, a few weeks before that magical night in Mississippi, members from all eras -- going back to the original Junior Dukes -- celebrated the corps' 30 years of history. It allowed the corps to flashback to 1963, when Bob Buelow and a group of veterans gave birth to junior drum corps in Dubuque, a blue-collar town on the edge of the Mississippi River in Northeast Iowa.

The corps changed its name to the Legionaires two years later, after the Dukes folded, and in 1965 the corps went coed. Sensing a need to expand financially, given the anticipation of growth in membership, the corps established its Parent & Booster Club in 1966, and a feeder unit, known

Colts



Colt .45, June 1974 (photo by Thomas Faulkner from the collection of Drum Corps World).

simply as the Cadets, in 1967.

Still, both units were maintained as parade corps, which suited the influential leaders of the local American Legion just fine. Corps managers, however, entertained higher ambitions, eager to follow the path of other corps in the Midwest and enter the expanded field of competition.

Corps officials sensed a need to give the group greater definition and pondered the options. Dubuquers had taken to the performances of the Troopers on visits to the city. Influenced by that reaction, the corps adopted a western theme and, in 1969, competed as the Colt .45.

It was three years before DCI was born, and rules and competitions, especially major championships, were still the province of the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars. Winning an American Legion State



Colts, 1978 (photo from the collection of Drum Corps World).

Championship was the pinnacle of the season, and the Colt .45 owned Iowa in the early 1970s, winning four consecutive titles.

The corps lost the 1973 championship to the Waterloo Chevaliers. Corps managers were not willing, however, to immediately concede defeat. Oblivious to the happenings a few feet away as each corps passed in review to salute the new champions, Colt .45 managers gathered on the edge of the field, pouring over score sheets in search of a tabulation error they would not find.

The sting of the defeat to an in-state rival was muted somewhat a few weeks later when the corps won the parade competition at the American Legion national convention in New Orleans, the organization's first national championship award.

But the time had come for the corps to make a decision: continue to compete in a regional market or make the jump to

extended national exposure. The choice to do the latter didn't come without growing pains.

Late in 1974, the corps' first tour wound down with a stop at the "Key to the Sea" championship in Toledo, OH. Tensions mount on any tour, living a bus seat away day after day, and they exploded in Toledo, so much so that instructors refused to schedule rehearsal.

Corps Director Fritz Biver, unable to tour because of work commitments, was summoned to Toledo to extinguish the mess. He assembled the corps in a dorm lobby for a meeting. Following that session, members were dismissed and told to report back a few hours later, at which time the corps would learn its fate: finish the tour or return to Dubuque and fold.

The turmoil at season's end in 1974 was the catalyst that released the corps from its organizational bindings. By 1976, .45 was dropped from the name and the corps experimented with non-western themes. Moreover, a 1975 age-out of the Madison Scouts, Jim Mason, was hired for the brass staff, joining Steve Suslick, a Cavalier alumnus, who was already a member of the visual staff. Their impact on the corps in the latter half of the 1970s would be profound.

Prior to the summer season, the corps' color guard, under Suslick's leadership, emerged as the best in the land, winning six contests including the predecessor to Winter Guard International, the Midwest Color Guard Circuit Championship. Not bad for a rookie group.

By the summer, Mason's youthful enthusiasm kept the corps progressing through a season that saw 23 members quit, yet

culminated in a 25th-place finish in only the second appearance at the DCI Championships, that year in Philadelphia.

Mason was promoted to corps director in 1977, at age 23, and ushered in the riverboat gambler era. His wintertime guarantee of a top 12 finish fell considerably short at DCI in Denver (25th place), but placements were about to take a back seat to drum corps fans.

That winter, the corps purchased new brass plated bugles. They were one of only three corps in the land to march them. One of the sopranos was issued to a second-year member, Greg Blum.

Nicknamed "Harpo" for his blond curly hair that reminded people of the Marx brother, his ability to make his instrument sing forced those who typically milled about in parking lots until the major corps performed into stadiums early. It was routine for members of top 12 units to break from

pre-show warm-ups to catch Blum's solos during the Colts' version of *Summertime*, a tune ironically revised for that first finalist team in 1993 by then-arranger Chuck Naffier, who marched beside Blum in the early 1980s.

In 1982, Blum competed in the solo contest at the world championship, but it was baritone player Dave Lang who won the corps' first individual national championship. (Lang also placed first in 1984, the year he was given the Jim Ott Scholarship.) That was also the year a young visual instructor named Greg Orwoll joined the staff.

Mason's tenure ran the spectrum, organizationally and competitively. Financial burdens limited the corps' touring opportunities in 1979 and forced it to rent less expensive school buses for much of the summer. Such constraints had on-field implications as the corps placed last at the DCI Championships and damaged members' morale.

Mason and the corps' board managed through those difficulties, somewhat, and by the early 1980s, the corps was taking two extended tours on its own buses. Financial challenges remained, however. While touring in 1981, corps officials were told they lost the lease on the corps hall back home. No one would have guessed that 21 years later the corps would buy the building it was evicted from that summer.

The Colts languished in the lower tier of the top 25 through the first half of the 1980s. Following 1984, Mason left the corps to run the upstart Star of Indiana, leaving behind a taped farewell speech that was played to attendees of the corps' banquet. The corps found its new leader from within its ranks, as Orwoll was promoted from the visual staff.

Orwoll's first team made huge strides on the competition field, jumping from 22nd place in 1984 to 16th in 1985. Musically, the corps continued its "swing" theme and retained the four trap sets introduced the year before. It was the first corps to field a unison trap-set line.

It was also the first year foreign-born members marched in the corps, an early indication of the transformation that was to occur over the next several years.

In its infancy, the



Colts, 1998 (photo by Alan Winslow from the collection of Drum Corps World).

corps was made up of Dubuquers and travel was limited to weekends. By the late 1970s, members of other, generally smaller, teams migrated to Dubuque. The Colts were not immune to the corps-hopping, losing members to top-12 units, though retaining a membership base from the Dubuque area.

That evolved in the latter half of the 1980s and the corps became a regional draw, recruiting members from across the Midwest. By the turn of the decade, hometown membership was relegated to the Colt Cadets, and the majority of Colts members came from someplace else.

Such evolution put added pressure on the smaller cache of active local parents and Orwoll sought board members and boosters who did not have participating children. It was crucial, given the skyrocketing cost of putting a corps on the road -- much less two groups -- for the sustainability of the organization.

In 1990, Orwoll made his most significant hire up to that time, tabbing Jeff Bridges as program director. Together the two formed a strategy that was to get the corps knocking at the door of the DCI top 12 by 1995.

The corps, apparently, was more ambitious, and altered the drum corps world's expectations by placing 12th. Since then and through 2002, the corps has performed on Saturday night seven times.

Its highest placement came in 1995, which is a mere notation save for the tragedy the night before Thursday's quarterfinals. While enjoying the night off at Niagara Falls, a cook, Gary Brewer, father of baritone player Adam Brewer, suffered a fatal heart attack.

On the field, the Colts have remained an annual threat for a finalist slot while continuing to experiment with different styles of music. But as it continues to be a presence on the international drum corps stage, in recent years, Orwoll, who in 2002 marked his 20th anniversary with the corps, has returned the organization to its local roots, fittingly so as the organization enters

its fifth decade. It is one of only a handful of groups to have that longevity.

The organization has successfully partnered with Dubuque schools in offering summer musical opportunities for local children. The Colt Cadets continue to make appearances at summer celebrations in the region and compete on the field. But the organization has expanded its reach.

A youth orchestra performs at area functions and Orwoll has plans to create various small ensembles made up of elementary-aged children on numerous instruments.

The idea, he says, is to foster a love of music and performance, borrowing on the expertise of Colts personnel, among the young people of Dubuque. In doing that, he says, the corps is fulfilling its mission: to use music and excellence to teach each other about success in life.

One has to think such an endeavor would find favor with Bob Buelow and his co-founders, who gave birth to a similar vision for Dubuque's youth in 1963.



Colts, 2002 (photo by Harry Heidelberg from the collection of Drum Corps World).

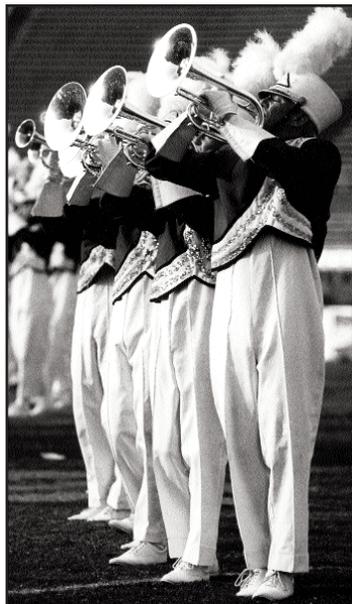


Steve Delaney is editor/publisher of the Garden City, KS, Telegram. He joined the Colt .45 Cadets in 1972 and aged out of the Colts in 1982 as the corps' tympani player. He then joined the visual staff and was assistant director of the corps from 1985 to 1987.

In 1993, he organized "The Sight of Music," which had a 10-year run of DCI shows in Burlington, IA. He also served a term on the DCI show promoters task force, and from 1990 through 1993 he operated the Championship News Service, which provided news releases to hometown newspapers for each of the corps competing at the DCI Championships.

He was elected to the Colts' Hall of Fame in 1995. After 30 years, he retired from active service with the Colts following the 2001 season.

Delaney and his wife, Beth, have two children, Hannah and Connor, who at 6 and 4, respectively, are only beginning to learn how to march.



Colts, 1993 (photo from the collection of Drum Corps World).