

SNEAKY CITY LUNCHES / THE LEAFS OF SUMMER

The City

THE TORONTO STAR SUNDAY MAGAZINE AUGUST 2

ROOTIN' TOOTIN'

The Seneca Optimists
blow their brains out

A LOT OF BRASS

Playing to win in the drum and bugle big leagues

By Ted Wood

Photography by Hal Barkley

*Originally printed in "The City" magazine, published by the
Toronto Star, on August 20, 1978.*

It's as competitive as bay street, as compulsive as Saturday Night Fever. It's war the way it might have looked if Patton had collaborated with Busby Berkeley. It's the snap, crackle and pop world of Drum Corps International competition, wholesome as apple pie, dated as a ducktail haircut, but not for one thundering moment on the way out.

If you thought it was, you haven't sat at the edge of a football field watching 128 kids, a dozen of them from the United States, working out with the Seneca Optimists, Canada's best (in 1977) and ninth in the whole world, which means, of course, North America.

There are four elements, drums, bugles—they're two-valve horns in all sizes from soprano up to contrabass, but they're all bugles in corps lingo — colours and rifles. On top of which there are 18 instructors and an executive committee of 19 more. It's not a hobby, it's a way of life.

On the sidelines today, changing the skin on his ruptured snare drum, is Allan Plumb, a 20-year-old from Portland, Oregon. He has

paid his way here and sacrificed any chance of a summer job for the sake of marching with the Optimists. (Marching is the catchall verb for any of the drum corps functions.) I was lucky, Plumb says. My old instructor is with the Optimists and he got me a chance to try out for them. The cut-off age for marchers is 21 and Plumb is anxious to play with a winner in this, his last year.

To an outsider, it's hard to see why. Belonging to a drum corps has all the individual glory of being one leg on a centipede. There's no room for stars, conformity is everything. Each of the girls in the honour guard may feel like a military Margot Fonteyn, but she'd better not get interpretive or she's out. Training is so rigid that there is no allowance for covering vacancies. If you're a horn player who doesn't know his music, you move and march and present your horn as strenuously as the rest of them. You just don't make any noise doing it.

If you're a colour guard and you just fell off your bicycle and broke your arm, you slap on a sling and go through the marching motions. Or, as colour guard instructor Wendy Paquin

explains, If you don't know your drill, your instructor will put the sling on you. It's the oldest trick in the book.

Sure enough, many of the American corps have girls in slings that are designed to go with the uniforms.

One of the honour guard drops her 3-pound dummy rifle. Instructor Lisa Avilla of Santa Clara, California is there to pick it up. Fortunately this is still in practice. Wendy Paquin says of the blunderer, "Oh, her again. She thinks she's so great. They all do, they've all got to be the best."

The best what? You wonder. The moves they make have no equivalent in a service drill book. To begin with, they aren't using rifles at all. These are mock-ups with aluminum muzzles and no moving parts.

Gord O'Halloran, the manager of the Optimists, says: "*When I got into drum corps, they used old Lee-Enfield service rifles, and they kept the bayonets on. The rifle guard was made up of 6-footers.*"

Not anymore. Today's rifle guard is all-girl. They handle their glittering dummy guns like majorettes, practising for hours every day. "*The secret is the wrist,*" confides Lisa Avilla. "*If you want a three-and-a-half-turn spin, you have to know just how hard to flick.*"

In a semicircle in front of the wall, the bugles are practising. They begin with slow scales, ending each with a coarse, flat pedal note. Then they start to play faster, spiralling up through their melodies. The rules of drum corps competition restrict them to two-valve horns, in place of the normal three-valve band instruments. Peter Byrne, senior horn instructor, says: "*These horns are harder to play but they have a darker tone. And they can play just as many notes as three-valve horns when you play in the top register.*"

They rehearse a medley from *West Side Story* and a piece called *Puttin' on the Ritz*. You expect the music to be laid down in broad, paint-by-numbers strokes. But it isn't. It's layered, with the kind of progressive sound

that Stan Kenton pioneered 30 years ago. Bill Thomas, lead soprano horn, steps forward one pace to solo the introduction to *Puttin' on*. He sways back slightly from the waist, a young Harry James, defying his audience not to groove.

Farther down the field the drummers are working out. They have congas and bongos as well as military-style drums and cymbals.

Keith Gallacher, the drum major, is watching from the sidelines. When the corps assembles to put it all together, he will be out front, standing on a podium, directing them through every step of the M & M (marching and manoeuvring) of their 11 to 13-minute presentation. Then he will stamp and wave in rigid rhythm that makes him look like a hyperactive robot. Now he's calm as he listens to a question from the colour instructor. . . . "*What was the count?*" He nods, claps and counts the beat for her as she concentrates. He's in denim cut-offs and a T-shirt and his nose is peeling. He looks like a 19-year-old Burt Bacharach.

Today, on the playing fields of Ajax, the Optimists are optimistic. They're in competition with three other local corps. One of them, the Cardinals of the Precious Blood, is a serious threat. They're a Scarborough group, proud of the fact that they are an intact corps, not like the Optimists, who are the result of a combination of the Toronto Optimists and the Seneca Princemen two years ago.

"*They may beat us,*" confides Mike Grimes, assistant drum major. "*We're still not where we should be with our music, but it's early in the season. As soon as we've practised together....*"

Sure enough, Precious Blood wins handily. The Optimists get back in their bus and leave to practise some more for their upcoming tour of Eastern Canada and the U.S., the first of two tours that most corps make each year.

A month passes and they're back in Toronto for the major event of the year, locally. It's the Drum Corps International appearance here. The Optimists are the only Canadian corps in this elite group, comprising the top 12 finalists from last year's competition. This year they

may not place so high. If not, they won't be here for this event next year.

Today, the atmosphere is strained. The past month has not been kind to them. "The first half of our show is fine, but the second half is a bit flat," Gallacher says. "*We're going to change it next week.*"

And now, more appealing in their vulnerability than they were in their optimism, they air some of the problems.

The most frank spokesman is Wendy Byrne, wife of the horn instructor. "*The American Corps have all got stronger over the winter. We didn't. We lost over half our marchers. When this season started, we took over a whole small corps, the Peterborough Krescendos. We got 40 kids from them and they've all had to learn our music and drill, from scratch.*"

And the corps members have been unlucky. They have more misfortune today. Two of the colour guard girls are involved in a car smash. They're unharmed and the tow truck drops them off at the practice ground in time for rehearsal, but the shaking aggravates an injury that one of them, Marianne Ernst, suffered on tour. She completes her practice, then collapses, weeping. The other girls comfort her.

One of them, Sherry Inches, who looks like the classical Rhinemaiden, is moving with a pronounced limp. She threw herself too enthusiastically into her drill and pulled something strategic. In the finest traditions of showbiz, it doesn't stop her strutting her stuff on the field.

Wendy Byrne explains the under-lying philosophical problem. "*Corps do better in small towns. Most of the big American corps come from really small towns. Their success is tied in with the civic pride of the place. In a city this size, nobody cares.*"

She tells how she's spent all this season to date trying to borrow a truck for the corps. City car dealers won't listen to her. At last she's found a sponsor, Hooker Motors, a tiny GM dealership near Brooklin, 48 kilometres

and possibly 300 dealers away from corps headquarters at the Seneca campus.

On the field, the horns are grouped around Byrne, who has weary circles under his eyes. While the kids take five, he talks. "*It's all a gamble every year. You write a show in the winter when you don't have the marchers, or the weather, to try it out. Then you get the kids together for the first time, in May or June, and you find the show doesn't come off.*"

To the inexperienced spectator, the show looks fine. Where many of the corps begin their presentation from a static position in front of the judges' box, the Optimists assault the field from a tight position in one corner. And their movements look realistic, unlike the prissy, pinch-bottomed, double-time marching of some of the competition. But their second half, including their pride and joy, the parachute move, fizzles.

Last year the crowds gasped with surprise when the horns passed out of sight under the big black and white parachute flaunted by the colour girls. This year, they yawn.

"*We may have to lose it altogether,*" Gallacher confides. He's worried. He has given up his part-time job and is devoted to the corps for the rest of the summer.

His degree of dedication is typical. Peter Byrne dropped out of York University five years ago at 19 for the chance to go to Santa Clara and march with the then world champions for two years. Colour instructor Wendy Paquin admits this is the first year she has held a job through the summer. "*My employment record looks like Swiss cheese,*" she says cheerfully. "*Come summer, I'm out there with the corps. But this year I have a job I don't want to lose. And anyway, maybe I'm getting past it.*" At 27 she has been involved with drum corps for 16 years.

The corps loads its instruments and drives from Lakeshore Boulevard East over to the northwest corner of the CNE, a ball park.

The equipment truck arrives first and the driver lifts down the horns and drums and the

two 60-hat hat boxes. They all stand where they are to change. Mrs. Byrne explains. *"When you start out you're really nervous. But you soon find that you don't have anywhere to change, so you get expert at putting your skirt on without showing anything."*

One of the boys has obviously not heard her. He moons for the photographer.

Carole Martel, a Quebec girl and the other survivor of the afternoon's car smash, uses a contrabass horn as a mirror to adjust her hat.

All eating, drinking, smoking and hand-holding stops. The corps is in uniform and on its best behaviour.

The Optimists are the fourth group to compete. They drive to Lamport Stadium on King Street West. All around the stadium are buses with American licenses. Boys and girls of every size, shape and colour, dressed in uniforms inspired by Zorro movies, the Imperial Indian Army or a wild west show, are tightening drums, unfurling flags, adjusting hatbands.

"We may beat the Garfield [New Jersey] Scouts," says Mike Grimes. *"If we don't, we'll be last"*.

Last! You wonder what the dozen or so Americans in the corps are thinking of this chance. One of them, a tall boy with glasses, Ron Restorff (*"Call me Buffalo Bob, I'm from Buffalo"*), says: *"I'm not worried. Next week we're going to change our show."*

They fail to beat Garfield. They place last, 20 points behind the world champion Blue Devils of California.

Compared with the antics of the top three corps, the M & M of the Optimists is tame. All their manoeuvres are extravagant anyway. Colours and rifles are trailed in the dust as corps guards kick their way through moves that owe more to cheerleading than to the original Veterans of Foreign Wars, the U.S. organization that started this whole business.

But some of the moves are wilder than others. The Phantom Regiment of Illinois, wearing

outfits reminiscent of U.S. World War II Military Police, has its rifle guard flat on their backs on the Astroturf, spinning their rifles around their upstretched legs.

A middle-aged spectator remarks: *"Look at that, like a lot of trained dogs."* In contrast with the other presentations, the Optimists' parachute fails, in the artistic sense, to open.

After their performance, the Optimists behave beautifully. Unlike the visitors who drift one by one into the stands, the Optimists file on, filling three neat rows. Their discipline and appearance are excellent. Perhaps that's why parents are happy to allow 20-year-olds to spend about \$500 and the whole summer marching with the corps instead of working. Certainly, they have no delinquency in their ranks.

Despite their loss, they're again optimistic. They have narrowed the gap between themselves and the Scouts, who have already beaten them once this season. And on Monday they head to Peterborough and camp and a determined attempt to breathe fresh life into the second half of their show. They will drop two numbers and substitute *Farandole*, a lively piece they first played in 1976. Perhaps with new music they can finish stronger in Denver, Colorado, at the finals. Perhaps they can again place in the top 12, making it three years in a row and securing themselves permanent status in the Drum Corps International.

As host corps, they play the others onto the field. With eight corps out there under the lights, performers outnumber spectators by about two to one.

The corps listen while the ratings are given. As each corps hears its position, the colour guard runs through a quick flurry of flags.

After the scores are announced, to the boos of disappointed fans of the Madison (Wisconsin) Scouts, who place second, the corps march off, each one playing itself off. First to go are the defeated Optimists. Ironically, their march-past is a medley from *West Side Story*, beginning with the plaintive *There's a Place for Us*. It nearly broke my corny heart.





*Bashfulness
out on the field
as the Corps
changes and
travels to the
stadium for the
big competition*

