

Toronto Optimists Feeder Corps

by Bob Carell

BACK IN THE DAY drum corps members were usually just kids off the street, with no training. Age limits for Junior corps meant that there was a constant outflow of trained members coupled with a struggle to replace those who left. On occasion a corps might lose over half its membership. Even the top corps experienced difficulty recruiting new members. In an attempt to deal with this attrition, many junior corps started “Feeder Corps”.

Feeder Corps usually were parade corps or, if they competed, they were in a lower class. For example, a Junior “A” corps might have a feeder corps that competed in the Junior “C” category. The purpose of a feeder corps was to give younger people training in the drum corps activity and, hopefully, to supply a steady stream of members to the main corps. The Feeder Corps gave young people the opportunity to learn to march and play an instrument. The plan was to train members of the feeder corps so that, when needed, they would be ready to join the competitive corps. The hope was that they would actually join the competitive corps. Of course, our hopes are not always realized and some members of a feeder corps might join a competitor. Such are the vagaries of life!



Promo for the Bantam Optimists (1962)

During its existence the Toronto Optimists had four feeder corps: the Bantam Optimists, The Optimist Cadets, the Optimist Lancers and the Cadet-Lancers (a merger of the Cadets and Lancers). The focus of this article is on these feeder corps.

at your service



THE OPTIMIST LANCERS DRUM & BUGLE CORPS
THE OPTIMIST CADETS DRUM & BUGLE CORPS
THE TORONTO OPTIMISTS DRUM & BUGLE CORPS



The Bantam Optimists

WHEN IN 1959 the Junior Optimists Drum Corps won its second consecutive Canadian Championship, it was realized that the high performance standard required to maintain leadership would not be found in boys newly recruited and without previous training. Of



course, members with this training would soon become necessary as Corps members reached the maximum permissible age for competition purposes. Therefore, on the strong recommendation of Mr. Barry C.

Bell, Music Director of The Optimist Jr. Corps, sponsored through the good offices of the Toronto Optimists Club and assisted by The Whaley, Royce Music Company, the Optimists Bantam Corps of twenty-eight boys was formed.

The function of the Bantam Corps would be:

(a) To interest boys from approximately nine years of age up to Junior "A" age in the activities of Drum Corps and to supply good basic instruction in drill as well as drum or horn playing.

(b) To maintain a high standard of efficiency by screening the boys without genuine interest or talent.

(c) To encourage the trained boys of suitable age to seek a place in the Junior Drum Corps.

Thus the major objective of the Optimist Club would be attained by teaching a form of self discipline to many boys requiring guidance, opening the doors to the world of music for many who would otherwise miss the opportunity, and provide an atmosphere for the talented to perform and develop.

The Bantam Optimists, the first feeder corps for the Toronto Optimists, was created in 1960. The



Dave Harris, Ronn Prokop and ?



Bantam Optimists (at Union Station for the Optimist Club Convention, 1960)

FEATURE ARTICLE: Toronto Optimists Feeder Corps (continued)

corps was initially organized by Bill Jay, who had played bugle with the Toronto Optimists, and Fred Johnson who would go on to become a successful politician in Scarborough. The corps was run by various people during their existence. One or two nights a week members of the Toronto Optimists would go a Bantams' rehearsal to instruct them. One of their drum instructors was Ronn "Skip" Prokop who went on to be one of the founding members of the rock group Lighthouse.

The Bantams would not have existed without the help of Bill Shepherd of Whaley-Royce. In his book, "From Toronto, The Optimists" Colin Hedworth wrote: "*it was due to Bill Shepherd*

that the Bantam Optimists Corps got started. His company, Whaley Royce, donated all the drums and bugles that enabled the Bantams to get started."

As competition levels increased it was rapidly becoming harder for an individual without some prior training to join the Optimists. The purpose of the feeder corps was to train young people in the drum corps activity. The hope was that this would create a reserve pool of talent from which the Corps could draw new players. By 1961 it was a thriving enterprise and, very quickly, it would prove its value beyond all doubt.

In 1960, under the musical direction of Mr. Bill Jay, the Bantam Corps took a First at the Kiwanis Music Festival. In addition, they won the 1960 Junior Novice Standstill Championship at the Canadian Nationals in Hamilton as well as the 1963 Junior Standstill Championship in Waterloo.

1961 produced a scarcity of instructors and the Corps stood still, literally. That changed in 1962 when additional marching members of the Toronto Optimists came out to help.

Here's a story about the Bantams many people might not know. At the end of the 1963 season the Toronto Optimists lost a great many horn players as well as a number of drummers. Winter rehearsals sometimes had as few as 12 horn players and, when all the horns were there, there were still



Truman Crawford and Bill Shepherd of Whaley-Royce (1965)



Toronto Optimists and Bantam Optimists (Optimist Convention, Union Station, Toronto, 1960)

only about 17 players. As much as the corps tried, it was unable to recruit enough new members. In the spring management held a meeting to decide whether they could even field a corps. A decision was made to compete; however, this could only be done by shutting down the Bantams corps and moving members of the Bantams to the Toronto Optimists. I think we had 33 horns by the end of the season. And they were good!

Integrating the new members, learning the music, drill, etc. was a challenge and it meant missing our first drill show of the year, a June exhibition in Hamilton that was sponsored by the newly-formed Canadian Commanders. Given the late start we were in rough shape at the beginning of the season. In fact, we got hammered on a June trip to the Midwest. During the summer of 1964 we continued to improve and, surprisingly, no Canadian corps was able to beat us. Thanks to those members of the Bantams, we went on to win our sixth consecutive National title!



Bill Jay leads the Bantam Optimists down Yonge St (1960)



Fred Johnson with the Bantam Optimists (1961)

FEATURE ARTICLE: Toronto Optimists Feeder Corps (continued)

At the time, shutting down the Bantams was probably the best available choice. Without exercising that option the corps might not have competed in 1964. Had they done so, it is unlikely that Optimists would have won Nationals. The

corps also got a bunch of very good members who stayed around a long time. The down-side is that, as experienced members left, The Optimists could no longer rely on a stream of new recruits from the Bantams.



David Burgh of the Bantam Optimists



Bantam Optimists march down Bay St from Toronto's City Hall (1960)



Bantam Optimists (Nationals, Waterloo, 1963)

The Optimist Cadets

IN 1967 TWO MEN who were to exert much influence discovered the Optimists. These were brothers, Al and Greg Tierney. The Optimists realized that unless people could be recruited and trained, the Corps could run into difficulty in the future. The original “Peanut Squad” (as the Bantam Optimists were sometimes called) had been disbanded in early 1964 to keep the main corps alive. Now, it was decided that a feeder Corps was, once again, needed. The process was set in motion.

Recruiting was tough and practice facilities almost non-existent. This was not good. In fact, the whole summer was spent looking for recruits and practice facilities. It was felt that the suburbs of the city were the best place to pursue this idea, and this

led to a lucky break. The Scarborough Knights of Columbus were looking for another youth activity. With baseball and hockey already well covered in the community they were open to new ideas. Like everyone, they were short of money; however, they did possess a practice facility.



Al Tierney with some members of the Optimist Cadets (1969)

FEATURE ARTICLE: Toronto Optimists Feeder Corps (continued)

A Grand Knight attended an Optimists practice and was impressed by the discipline. A meeting of the executive of the Optimists and the Knights of Columbus took place. Later there was a second meeting with the general membership of the Knights of Columbus.

Attendees at these meeting saw slides of the Optimists as well as the 1965 movie of the Optimists that was filmed at Ivor Wynne Stadium in Hamilton. All of the K of C men were in favour of this promotion. While they could not contribute financially they agreed to provide their clubhouse for practices as well as assisting with the recruiting drive. On September 1st a final decision was taken to accept this offer. A plan was developed that culminated in a recruiting day on September 17th.

Handbills were distributed with much of the work being done by the Knights (at this time of year the Optimists were busy preparing for the Nationals). On the 17th, the Corps paraded from the Knights of Columbus Hall to a church. There, on the church

steps, they played to a crowd of a thousand. Slides were again shown and short speeches were given by Mr. Daber and Mr. Greg Tierney, Chairman of Youth Activities for the Knights of Columbus. Applications were handed out and, by the end of the day, forty-seven had been completed and returned. The first rehearsal was set for September 23.

Band seeking young recruits

Free membership in a drum and bugle corps for boys 10 to 14 is being offered by the Toronto Optimist Club, which supplies uniforms and equipment, and the Knights of Columbus, who let the band practice in their 975 Kennedy Road hall every Saturday morning. Applicants can phone 759-9231

Published in the Toronto Star on September 20, 1967

During that week a small article in the Toronto Star brought a sudden increase in phone calls to everyone who was involved. Suddenly, the recruiting drive became not only a success but in danger of being swamped. At the first rehearsal, the original forty-seven recruits were there along with

another ninety-five newcomers. Now, membership in the Optimist Cadets, as they were called, stood at 142, with the prospect of more to come as time passed. Thus, money notwithstanding, we now had "The Optimist Cadets Drum and Bugle Corps", Mr. Al Tierney, Director, Mr. Greg Tierney, Manager.



Optimist Cadets (1969)

FEATURE ARTICLE: Toronto Optimists Feeder Corps (continued)

It was a Parade Corps for boys 10-14. Both of the just mentioned men had played a large part in this activity. They would play even larger roles in the future, but this endeavour was most important for the future survival and success of the Corps. They

even began their own newsletter, “Cadet Capsule”, edited by Al Tierney.

In 1975 the Optimist Cadets merged with the Optimists Lancers to form the Cadet Lancers.



Optimists Cadets Awards (1974)

Back: Lynn Oram, Guard-of-the-Year; Lynda Baillie, Cadet-of-the-Year; Bob Moore, Section-of-the-Year

Front: George Price, Drummer-of-the-Year; Victor Decloux, Bugler-of-the-Year and Pat Tunney, Rookie-of-the-Year



Pat Tunney (now Buttigieg) receives the 1974 “Rookie of the Year” award from Vic DeCloux (Optimists Cadets Awards dinner, 1975)



TORONTO OPTIMIST “CADETS”

a Parade Corps for Boys 10-14 yrs.

In The Optimist Cadets (of Scarborough) a boy begins to see himself at work. He starts off not knowing how to march or play an instrument and ends up with people cheering for him on the street.

But “Parade Corps” sounds too easy. It hardly says the things a boy begins to learn.

When he first picks up a bugle or a pair of drum sticks, he works at a scale or a rudiment. He grasps some music appreciation. The plinth of aesthetics.

When he marches on parade, the line is straight because he adjusts himself within the line: a lesson in sociology: his working role in a group of peers. And when he stands at attention he holds himself upright and straight. And a good thing happens. Pride seeps up in his mind.

That’s what a boy begins to learn in The Cadets. Some pride and self-awareness. And that’s what builds values that work.

The boys also learn about earning. They bought uniforms and instruments with funds from their fertilizer sales campaign.

And when The Cadets put on a campaign to get more boys to join, the results showed what kids think of learning discipline. Almost two hundred boys signed up to join.

That shows you don’t have to trick a boy into learning things. Or into accepting authority. If it just begins to help the boy come up to his potential, then you’ve made a Friend.

Still, The Cadets are more than an end in itself. A Cadet hopes to get good enough to join The Toronto Optimists Drum and Bugle Corps, the Canadian National Champions. The boy begins to build a long-term plan.

And long-term plans build better cities, better Friends, and better boys.



Optimist Cadets (Batavia, 1969)



Optimist Cadets (Batavia, 1969)



Optimist Cadets (Batavia, 1969)

The Optimist Lancers

By David Burgess

THE ETOBICOKE OPTIMISTS Lancers were formed in the autumn of 1969 and were the creation of Richard (Dick) Brown. The Lancers were to be a 'feeder corps' to the renowned Toronto Optimists, a drum and bugle corps who competed successfully at the Junior "A" level and had multi-national titles to their credit.

In the spring of 1970, the fledging drum corps from Etobicoke became known as the "Lancers" in tribute to the 27th Lancers of Revere, Massachusetts. The 'corps colours' were orange, green and white complete with a rakish white Australian style bush hat. As the summer of 1970 progressed - the Lancers forged into a very strong street parade unit with a very strong drum line, a competent horn line and a graceful colour guard.

A Drum Major (David Burgess) and Colour Guard Captain (Debbie Brown) were selected to complete the package. The repertoire for that summer consisted of "Perot" and "Red Sails in the Sunset".

Highlighting the summer – the Lancers had the honour of being the first drum corps to play at Ontario Place for their opening day celebration.

1971 saw the Lancers evolve into a very solid and well received street parade unit. The Corps added two new musical numbers to their repertoire ("Song of the Vagabonds" and that time honoured Bob Dylan classic "Blowin' In The Wind") and the song "Perot" was mercifully 'retired'! The Lancers had their first taste of competition on the field at the Ontario Provincial Championships that summer. They competed in the Standstill Class and placed second. It was a terrific first time effort and made the Lancer members interested in further competition somewhere down the line.



Optimist Lancers (1970)

FEATURE ARTICLE: Toronto Optimists Feeder Corps (continued)

The year 1972 was a banner year for the Lancers Drum Corps. New musical numbers were added to illustrate how much the Corps had progressed with the additions of “Games People Play” and “Wagon Wheels”. Both songs featured soprano



Calgary Stampede Diamond Jubilee Youth Parade Pin (1972)



Optimist Lancers

bugle soloists (John Burgess and Scott McCabe respectively doing the honours) for the first time. The Lancers took their ‘show’ west that summer and wowed the crowds at the Calgary Stampede. Upon their return to Ontario, the Lancers decided to try

1973 saw the Lancers make the ‘jump’ to M&M (marching and maneuvering) competition at the Junior “C” level. Under the watchful eye of Russ Blandford and the rest of the superb Lancer instructional staff (including the likes of Bill

McLeod and Lorne Ferrazzutti), the Corps showed that their years of dedication to marching in countless street parades had paid off. The Lancers kept “Games People Play” as their off-the-line and “Wagon Wheels” as their exit number. Added to

this exciting mix was “Put Your Hand In the Hand” (into concert), and “Aura Lee/Cecilia” medley for the concert number and a beautiful, stirring rendition of “British Grenadiers” for their colour presentation. The Lancers completed an undefeated



Optimist Lancers (1970)



Drum Major David Burgess (1972)

their luck again in competition and entered into the Canadian National Championship in the Standstill Class. This time, their hard work and dedication was rewarded with a First Place being awarded to the “Orange, Green and White”! To top off that victory, the Lancers also won the Canadian National Street Parade Competition.

season at the Junior “C” level - capturing the “C” Canada title, the provincial title, the Canadian National Junior “C” title and repeating as the Canadian National Street Parade champs.

After the successes of 1973, it seemed only logical that the Lancers make that “big jump” into the

FEATURE ARTICLE: Toronto Optimists Feeder Corps (continued)

Open Class ranks and try competing against such stellar drum corps as the Etobicoke Crusaders, the Toronto Optimists and De La Salle “Oaklands” to name just a few. This meant that they would now be independent and no longer an Optimist feeder corps.

The Lancer staff decided to retain two “tried and true” musical numbers from their Junior “C” success by keeping “Wagon Wheels” (exit number) and the colour presentation of “British Grenadiers.” Added to the mix was an off-the-line from Masterpiece Theatre called “The Masterpiece”, a really ‘kicking’ drum solo based on the number “Smoke On The Water” and a concert medley of “Cecilia” coupled with the amazing “MacArthur Park.”

The Lancer members approached the 1974 season with “optimism” based on their previous undefeated season in Junior “C”. However, it was not to be

for the “Orange, Green and White” that summer.

Outside of Canada, the Lancers did reasonably well in competition but inside Canadian boundaries, the story was completely different. The Lancers took heavy defeat after heavy defeat despite their best efforts on and off the field although they did successfully defend their street parade champion status at the Canadian Nationals.

Ultimately, the continuing defeats eroded morale right down to almost zero. At the end of the 1974 season, many of the Lancer members decided to continue their drum corps careers elsewhere and it looked like the Optimist Lancers would fold operations and fade into drum corps history.



Optimist Lancers Group photograph



Optimist Lancers at Ontario Place



Optimist Lancers at Ontario Place

The Cadet-Lancers

By David Burgess

SADLY FOR THE LANCERS but fortunately for the Optimists, a number of members “graduated” to the Toronto Optimists in the winter/spring of 1974/1975. These individuals were front and centre of the rejuvenation of the Toronto Optimists following their very rough 1974 season.

1975 looked mighty grim for the Lancers until the Optimist Cadets Drum And Bugle Corps (Scarborough) under the guidance of Mr. Edward (Ted) Baker graciously offered to merge their operation with what remained of the Etobicoke Optimist Lancers. The “Cadet-Lancers Drum and Bugle Corps” was born! The two separate Corps merged together quite well although there were a few rough spots and some “ruffled feathers” as the two became one - not unlike any sort of “marriage”!!

The Corps kept both styles of uniforms with the horn line adopting the Optimist Cadet style tunic and pants topped off with white plumed shakos while both the drum line and the colour guard went

with the Lancer-style blouse and pants/skirts. The drum line went with the white plumed shakos and the colour guard opted for the ‘beret’ style hats.



All in all, the look was stylish and worked well on and off the field. The music for 1975 included an off-the-line of “Paint Your Wagon”, an into concert of “Chattanooga Choo-Choo”, a concert of “Eres Tu” and an exit of “San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Flowers In Your Hair)”. The Cadet-Lancers did very well and managed to win the “C” Canada Championship and came second at both the Provincial and Canadian Nationals in the Junior “C” categories, just being edged out by the London Midlanders. The Cadet-Lancers did win the Canadian Nationals Street Parade Competition for 1975.

In 1976, the Cadet-Lancers built upon the solid foundation of the previous year and came out with a truly dynamic show that featured an off-the-line from the overture from the rock opera “Tommy” made famous by the “Who” and a new exit number



Cadet-Lancers (1976)

FEATURE ARTICLE: Toronto Optimists Feeder Corps (continued)

from “Jesus Christ Superstar” - the ever popular “I Don’t Know How To Love Him”. Retained from the previous year was the ever popular swing tune of “Chattanooga Choo-Choo” and the concert production of “Eres Tu”. The 1976 Cadet-Lancers fielded a horn line of 38, a drum line of 24, a colour guard of 24 flags with 8 rifles, led onto the field by two Guard Captains and two Drum Majors. This unit was successful in winning the Canadian National Junior “C” championship against a solid unit from Simcoe, the Golden Lions. The Cadet-Lancers also posted a victory as the Canadian National Street Parade Champions for 1976.



Cadet-Lancers (1977)



Cadet-Lancers (1976)



Cadet-Lancers in guard competition (1977)



Cadet-Lancers (1976)