



# A Day in the Life of a Corps

*The Unusual Account of  
How a Junior Corps  
Primes Itself to Win  
the Canadian Nationals*

...by Douglas McPhail

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My original plan was just to get a ride up to Kingston and watch the 1968 Nationals like any other spectator, but it didn't work out that way. I made arrangements to go on one of The Optimists' corps buses and it was the strangest trip I have made in fourteen years in drum corps.

It started Friday night, the day before the Nationals.

It was the usual parting scene for a young junior corps. Members who had girlfriends lingered with them behind the bus, although not to talk; forgotten parents waved unnoticed goodbyes after the customary lunch bags had changed hands. And I stowed my suitcase of sandwiches carefully in the bunk (the luggage rack) of bus # 1. The buses revved and rolled out eastward and the sun dropped down behind, perhaps somewhere out past Winnipeg.

And that's when the trip began to take on it's strangeness.

These Optimists were not the boisterous six-footers who had stomped Scout House out of all events except memories. These were younger and smaller, most of them, and diligently tempered more with training than with fire. And they are a better corps.



Douglas McPhail

They sat quietly, at first, like double rows of robots and read the signs which peppered the inside of the bus.

Most of them were subtle signs: "Today is Sept. 11th..." although the date of the Nationals was the 7th. A sign which had once rode home from many victories read, "Optimists are down this year..." Of course there were the arrogant signs which rivals scoff at but also post proudly on their own buses. And there was also an excerpt from a poem, which although unusual for a drum corps, did not seem out of context. It read:

*"Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'  
We are not now that strength which in the old days  
Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are."*

I knew it was from a well known poem and I made a definite note to look up its name and its ending when I got home.

On most corps trips there is a lot of smoke, some hands of poker and the guffaw-talk about exotic and delicious fantasies. But the Optimists surprised me. The conversation – at least what I heard – included arguments on how a given substance alters its dimensions at the speed of light, and speculations on the concept of infinity. They joked about contests getting so technical that eventually punch-card data of your computer-programmed show would be sent to Contest Headquarters where the chief Computer would evaluate your hornless, drumless, manless show and the season would be over in a milli-second. Some future.

But for the present we were on our way to Kingston and the headlights cut a swath of light down the dark of the 401. There was the rolling hum of the tires and the quiet talk, not the excited chatter about the most important contest of the year, only quiet talk; restrained talk. The moon was a tangerine on the right and a smaller window bounced up the windows on the left, and the night-black hills and the blinking gas stations dropped back fast to the west.

It was often hard for me to realize that these guys on the bus were a drum corps, let alone The Optimists who had been beaten repeatedly by De La Salle this season, except for last week at the C.N.E. and at the Shriners' Show much earlier. And Kingston, tomorrow, would be a one-night-stand to retain the title they had held for ten years. Imagine: ten years on top, twenty-four hours to the Nationals, and no one talks about it!

You could say that the older ones in the corps had never known such defeat in Canada before and refused to believe it now. Or you could say that the younger ones had been urged to retain a reputation whose origin they never knew, except from stories. Both could be true. Yet these people are too emphatic over trivia, you know there is some deep emotion held back so strongly that it hurts. And on the bus nobody asked, "What if we don't win?" They said nothing about it at all. But you could tell they were thinking.

The Optimists were more like a corps when we checked into the motel on the outskirts of Kingston. It was a new, two-story motel with a balcony. When the corps was finally cajoled and herded into their respective rooms, I heard a loud thumping on a door. Someone was hollering, "Let me in! Let me In!" He kept shouting, insisting it was his room, and I watched until the door opened and swallowed him in. Then the hollering came from inside the room, more frenzied, and when the door reopened four skinny forms in underwear straight-armed the flailing intruder, carrying him overhead, and dumped him into another room before running back down the balcony to their own.

Even after the lights in the rooms went out, you could still smell the quick-lime, fast-dry smell of white shoe polish. There was the sound of rolls and triplets muffed on a mattress in the dark, then on a practice pad, and then on a drum.irate phone calls stopped the drumming and no doubt the manager soothed the non-corps guests. That was just before someone meticulously tuned a new head on a bass drum.

Eventually all sound softened into sleeping, silence thickened on the crickets, and when the sun rose, there were roosters. It was the morning of the day of The Nationals.

It was a bright, crisp morning and it looked like the beginning of a good day although weather can change easily, especially in the fall. But the corps was eager. They finished breakfast quickly, started rehearsal at ten and worked on music, breaking it down bar by bar. For drill they went over and over manoeuvres, stopping at each infraction and starting over, the kind of rehearsal you expect to see much earlier in the year and which is boring to watch. It took them a long time to get right through the show. Even then the drill was just passable, hardly exciting, and a breeze pulled small gray clouds in from the west.

On the bus on the way back to the motel for a buffet lunch they were laughing and shoving as is usual with corps and it was good to see the tension lift. They talked loudly and emphatically about everything before the question came. It was a single voice and at the same time it was everyone's and everything that was never said. The voice hollered, "Shut up!" What have you got to talk about? Why aren't you thinking how rotten your drill is?" And the heavy, hurting silence dropped down on everyone like acoustic tile cubicles, one per man in double rows, and you could feel the earnest resolutions of the thinking.

The sky was gray now and there were the first signs of fall: a few dead leaves that skittered in the gutters as the bus droned by like a hearse of mourning pallbearers. The arrogant signs in the bus seemed out of place and I saw no one staring at the one that read, "Tho' much is taken, much abides..."

We saw some of Kingston on the way to the preliminaries after lunch. It was like touring a labyrinth of gray, handmade, limestone canyons. There were upright ancient houses, some restored and some crumbling their tradition into history like those corps

who, after greatness, disappeared. The clouds had gathered thickly now, one large ominous gray.

The Optimists dressed into uniform and there was not much talking. They were inspected after the de-linting, sewing, trimming, polishing, dusting and last-minute haircuts. A tenth was lost because a horn player's pants were too short.

The 'Mets' from Montreal were on the field. Looking from the school where they changed, you saw Optimists and Del and Cadets LaSalle, in that order, lined up in fronts to go on for the prelims. And when it was over, that's the way they placed: Optimists first by nearly 2 points.

The corps was back at the motel when they were phoned the results. They jumped a bit and rippled with exhilaration but more from relief and release than excitement. It was not the big title but it was a start.

And it was peculiar to see how the weather coincided with their mood because the sun was out by then and there were no more clouds that day.

They had a long rehearsal after supper, all through the evening and past the time when it was too dark to fully dress a front. Still it was not the warm-up and the polish before a show but the grinding stop-start breakdown, just like most of the other 39,000 man-hours of practice which the corps had logged this year. The drill looked better. The horns were crisp and the drums, as always, could be relied upon.

The Optimists sang on the way to the finals. They sang all corps songs: Boston, Chicago, and even some old Princemen with horn parts that go, "Lalaalaaaala lala, laala lala" and drum parts that go, "Zdm zdm zdm, zzzzdm bump ziggitybiggitybum..." And when they were in uniform you could tell by their eager eyes that they were ready and that they shared a knowledge of something strong which reaffirmed, "**That which we are, we are...**"

They filed onto the field and the thing they knew flowed up and down the line and you



De La Salle (Nationals, 1968)

could feel it sparkling under the lights. LaSalle had just come off and three of them were crying. Del watched straight-faced without a glint of rivalry. The long green line ran the gauntlet of Ambassadors and Commanders, many of them old Optimists, and the passing handshakes and the smacks and the pats were a blur of white and orange on green.

...”And from Toronto, The Optimists!”

The crowd cheered. And they cheered as they had not done for a long time, not like at other contests where they booed because the Optimists won too much. Now they cheered the Green to win again.

The starting front broke once, snapped straight and feet grabbed the field and held it tight. They did better than they hoped. You could not have asked for more.

When they went off, they were smiling.

The sweat was still fresh on their uniforms when the line broke back of the stadium. And they danced and hugged and jumped and cried. A drummer babbled, “It was just like being one guy out there, all of us! You could feel how smooth it was!” And there were a few, the perfectionists, who knew they each had lost a tenth – a dropped rifle, a dry solo, a flammed triplet – and they did not look at each other. But the rest did not care. They, the corps, had done what they had come to do. Everyone knew it.

Even the rookies were freed from the agreement which bound each of them as a flunky to a senior until the Nationals were won. They had been good apprentices.

Instead of suspense, the retreat was more the waiting for a confirmation. And after they won their eleventh National title, The Optimists played and sang the Corps’ Score and their fans crowded in around them on the field.

Out of uniform they brimmed with smiling; a few let out shouts which had been so long held back... Mostly they smiled, deeply pleased and happy, looking forward to the Victory Party which all corps plan but few have earned.

And that’s how they were when they won.

When I got back to Toronto, I looked up the poem which I had read so often on the Optimists bus that day. It was from Tennyson’s “Ulysses”. The poem ends:

*“...that which we are, we are,  
One equal temper of heroic hearts,  
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will  
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.”*



Optimists (Nationals, 1968)