

Secrets of Success from the University of Alabama Drumline

An interview with Neal Flum

By Paul Buyer

In the fall of 2007, I was on sabbatical visiting seven of the top college marching bands and drumlines around the country, including LSU, Alabama, Western Carolina, Michigan State, Ohio State, North Texas, and Arizona. Spending roughly a week at each school, I attended rehearsals, meetings, and football games, and I interviewed the band directors, drumline instructors, and section leaders. When I arrived on each campus, I bought a hat at the bookstore so I could blend in and connect with the students. All I requested in return was a parking pass.

I chose the bands based on their home football schedule, athletic conference, and reputation, and although I wish I could have visited more top programs, my funding only stretched to seven schools and locations. The purpose of my research was to learn how the top college marching bands and drumlines achieve excellence. How did they practice and rehearse? What were their values, goals, and philosophies? What set them apart?

After three months of travel, research, and observation, I discovered five factors influencing excellence that the programs had in common: culture, staff and student leadership, rehearsal time, number of shows, and competitive auditions. I concluded that these factors are the main reasons why college bands and drumlines achieve excellence or fall short of it. In addition, two new factors emerged—attendance and weather—after applying these principles to my own drumline at Clemson University.

In April 2009, I published a book on my research called *Marching Bands and Drumlines: Secrets of Success from the Best of the Best*, published by Meredith Music Publications. Later that year, I hosted a PASIC panel discussion as a member of the PAS Marching Committee featuring four of the drumline instructors from the book: Matt Henley at Western Carolina, Jon Weber at Michigan State, Gary Hodges at Ohio State, and Paul Rennick at North Texas, with Alabama's Neal Flum serving as PAS Marching Committee chair. A transcription of the panel discussion can be found in the May 2010 issue of *Percussive Notes*.

To this day, it is an honor to call these master teachers my friends, and I have enjoyed growing our relationship over the years since my sabbatical. They

were all kind enough to let me into their world, peek behind the curtain, and share their secrets of success so the rest of us could learn from them.

My friendship with Neal Flum has been particularly special after serving on the PAS Marching Committee together and Clemson and Alabama meeting in the 2015 and 2016 College Football National Championship games. This past season at our band's joint dinner at Tampa's Busch Gardens, Neal suggested writing an article together about what he has learned since my visit to Tuscaloosa over nine years ago. While some of the band directors in the

book have moved on to other schools, the drumline instructors, with the exception of Gary Hodges at Ohio State, have remained. We hope you find these lessons and reflections valuable, and continue to use them to work toward excellence with your drumline.

PB: Talk about your growth as an individual and music educator and any epiphanies you have had since the book was published.

NF: As a disclaimer, I will mention Thom Han-num several times. That is attributable to the profoundly important role he has played in my life



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as a mentor, colleague, and friend. From time to time during one of our many conversations over the years, Thom has offered a moniker for me of which I am extremely proud: “life learner.” If there is one constant in my development as a marching percussion educator and arranger, it is the willingness to honestly self-appraise my skill sets as an educator and know that I can do better.

I think that how I teach is always a result of what I call “observation-accumulation-interpretation-application,” which is learning from others over time and then incorporating that into what I do by trying to place upon it my perspective on what makes for effective teaching and arranging within our marching band environment. Having worked with Thom Hannum and Colin McNutt, I observed, among many things they do exceptionally well, that they approach teaching like a coach approaches a team sport.

The psychology of how individuals engage their respective processes and roles on a team is vital to the team being successful. What I noticed is that Thom and Colin had particularly well-developed approaches to coaching the way their students thought about what they were doing. Thom would sometimes offer that a problem was not so much a hands (technical) issue as it was a head (thinking) issue. Typically, I would spend a good amount of time focusing on micro issues like grip technique, specific rhythms, or a two-bar phrase in a halftime song. That approach proved not to be consistently successful because time was always working against us. We simply did not have enough time to rep things.

I’ve learned that what makes for effective teaching for our program is focusing on *coaching* the way students engage the process of learning, their approach, and being less concerned about the specific technical aspects of marching percussion. Don’t get me wrong, technique is vitally important. But since we have such a short window of time in which to learn new music and drill, stand tunes, and cheers with the Million Dollar Band, we have to economize and prioritize. Focusing on *how* we engage the learning process and *how* we think about things helps us coach habits, and habits are greatly determinative of how successful we can be at doing something or not doing something, especially in the world of marching percussion.

PB: *Is there anything specific you learned from the other programs featured in Marching Bands and Drumlines that you have adopted into your own teaching?*

NF: Smart writing! The one consistent observation I took from the performances of the Clemson, Michigan State, Ohio State, and UMass percussion sections is the way the percussion arrangements were constructed. It’s obvious to me that you and your arranger [Tim Baynard], Jon Weber, Mark Reynolds, and Thom Hannum have a strategy for the way you write for your college marching percussion sections and that you take into account ten critical questions:



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- (1) How long do we have to learn the parts?
- (2) What is the average skill-set level of the performers?
- (3) At how many games will we be performing the halftime show?
- (4) How many halftime shows do we have this year?
- (5) What is the style of the music we are performing?
- (6) Am I thinking about risk and reward in writing the music?
- (7) How large are the wind and percussion sections?
- (8) How are we typically staged in a halftime show?
- (9) What traditions need to be maintained and incorporated into what we do at games?
- (10) Do we have a front ensemble?

Those critical questions were answered quite effectively by those ensembles’ percussion arrangements and, as a result, always put the students in the best position to be successful. I might also add that a neat thing about college marching band is the variety of styles, traditions, and ways in which the percussion sections and marching bands are integrated into their respective game-event atmospheres. I’ve always been open to incorporating things I’ve observed in other college marching percussion sections into what we do. To that end, the richness of variety and excellence in the marching percussion ensembles in your book, as well as the ones I have personally observed in games or clinic settings, has been instrumental in my development as an arranger.

PB: *How would you describe the culture of the Alabama Drumline now compared to when I visited in 2007?*

NF: Much improved. There is a more highly developed sense of ownership of the process; the students are more serious about exploring higher levels of performance excellence, and we seem better equipped to teach with a system and process that maximize our time together. Every session is mapped out in intervals so that we make sure we stay on task. We try to place the impetus

of learning on the students so they don’t develop an attitude where they see rehearsal as a place to learn things they should have addressed away from practice. Rehearsal, to our way of thinking, should be where we improve things the students have already been assigned.

I am deeply indebted to Colin McNutt for my time with The Cadets and now the Boston Crusaders. Watching Colin train and manage his staff and observing the way he goes about budgeting and organizing time has been instrumental in our improving our percussion section culture. That and studying the way he writes for those groups have been exceptionally helpful to our improvement as an ensemble and as a team.

Better writing lends itself to having a greater opportunity to achieve clarity as a percussion ensemble and within the musical ensemble. When the writing is better and is reflective of the fundamentals program, it seems to bring everything into focus, making it easier for the students to understand and achieve with their physical responsibilities, musically and visually, in our halftime and pregame shows.

PB: *In the book, you talk about “Role Model Leadership”; specifically, that it makes a huge difference if the leaders are role models and extensions of the instructor or director. Is this still the leadership style you use? If not, how has it changed?*

NF: I think that role model leadership will always be an intrinsic part of how we engage the leadership process of our percussion section. However, I believe that aspect of what I do receives far less attention in the information I impart to our students.

What has become the most prominent part of what I and our leaders do is make sure everyone understands the importance of our “process.” It is no secret that right across the street from our music building is the home of Coach Nick Saban, and we have appropriated a lot of what he does



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with the football team with our percussion section. So, the emphasis has shifted away from my addressing role model leadership and, instead, speaking more about our process, what it is, consistently engaging it with excellence, living in the moment, and positively affecting others—always. In a way, we focus less on “what we are doing” and more on “how we are doing it,” or even more importantly, “how we think about it.”

One aspect of my leadership that I learned from Thom Hannum and Colin McNutt and that is a by-product of how time, or should I say the lack of time, affects our learning process is that we spend more time coaching “heads” and not “hands.” There’s always the necessity of addressing grip technique, stroke technique, timing, rhythm, etc. But, the larger and more important aspect of what we do is habituating the manner in which students approach the process. I guess, in a way, we are trying to get students to develop a consistency of approach to everything they do. How you line up your drums, place your carriers on the ground, where you place your drill book, how your section moves from place to place—it’s about the consistency of how we engage the process. It’s about mindset and habit.

PB: What is your rehearsal schedule? How often does the drumline practice? The band? What are the expectations in terms of sectionals and individual practice?

NF: The band rehearses from 4:00–5:30 P.M. Monday through Friday, with our section warm-up from 3:30–4:00. Our percussion sectionals take place on Wednesdays from 6:30–9:30 P.M. We also rehearse on game days. That schedule typically depends on when the game starts and where we are in the process of learning a new halftime show. The one change that is significant is that academic requirements and, as a result, class conflicts are a more common occurrence, and seldom other than Fridays and Saturdays do we have the entire

percussion section present for a rehearsal. There were times this past fall when we warmed up with one or two bass drums.

Percussion section members are always expected to demonstrate a high level of individual accountability. That is typically demonstrated through their memorization of the required materials, whether it be halftime music, cheers, stand tunes, grooves, etc.

PB: How many halftime shows does the Million Dollar Band perform each year? Are there pros and cons to this number, and how do you put your students in a position to succeed each time?

NF: We typically perform three halftime shows, as well as a medley we perform with our marching band alumni at one game, a Homecoming song/show, and our pre-game show. Our job is to entertain, be it in the stands or on the field. So, what we do is directly related to the game atmosphere and expectations of our fans at home games. Would it be nice to have one halftime show, write more challenging percussion parts, and have more time to elevate its performance level? Yes. However, there is great benefit in managing the amount of material we do during a football season and performing it at the level at which we do. I think there is great value and many helpful life skill sets our students develop in managing their way through the season. We often tell the percussion section that what we do is more about developing positive and effective life skills than it is about music.

PB: Describe your audition process. How competitive is it? How many students typically audition for the Alabama Drumline each year?

NF: Last year we changed our audition process. We used to have a three-day audition process in June or July. We now have our auditions the last weekend of April to coincide with our auxiliary auditions for twirlers and colorguard. We begin

on Friday afternoon and end either before or after the Saturday-evening dinner break. Audition packets are posted on our percussion web page in January. Students are expected to have their materials memorized prior to the camp. The process is quite competitive because we have a limited number of positions available based on the number of instruments we have and the size of the marching band roster. The number of students auditioning differs from year to year. I’d say we average between 50–70 students. This past April, we had 53 students audition. If a student does not make the instrument for which he or she auditioned, we strongly encourage that person to audition for another instrument and exhaust every opportunity to earn membership in the marching band.

PB: How has the Alabama Drumline been able to stay so consistent in your performance level over the years?

NF: I am quite proud of our consistency. That consistency is a result of hard-working, dedicated students, a capable teaching staff, a sensible and thorough exercise/fundamentals program that bears an obvious connection to how our music is written (think skill sets and concepts), great wind arrangements by Michael Klesch wherein the role of the percussion section is always carefully considered, and probably the most important factor, the excellent leadership of our Director of Bands, Dr. Ken Ozzello, and the support he provides the percussion section as well as the culture of the marching band he has developed since 2003 and continues to improve each year. It is rewarding to work with someone confident enough to encourage input on the percussion section’s role in the marching band both musically and visually. Fundamentally, we can be consistent because the marching band culture in which we function is consistent, particularly the vital aspect of having a positive, constructive, educational one that looks forward and is not hesitant to embrace change.

PB: In Marching Bands and Drumlines, you talk about “The Saban Factor,” referring to the influence head football coach Nick Saban has had on the band’s successful recruiting and retention. With four national championships at Alabama, how has “The Saban Factor” continued to impact the Alabama Drumline and Million Dollar Band?

NF: When students visit with their parents, I tell them that they could not have picked a better time to consider attending the University of Alabama. We have a brand-new marching band building. The physical campus is growing everywhere—almost running out of room—the student enrollment is up to approximately 37,000, the city of Tuscaloosa is flourishing, and the athletic department has seen great success with many of its teams. While I think that much of the growth of the university and Tuscaloosa comes at the confluence of many factors, it is the dominating energy, spirit, and vision of Coach Saban that is a driving force behind so much of our improved campus culture, and the great vision

and leadership of our past president, Dr. Robert Witt. Couple that with the great things happening on campus and with an excellent school of music, and it makes recruiting and retention much easier.

PB: *What is your band/drumline attendance policy, and how do you handle class conflicts during the season?*

NF: The policy for conflicts, absences, and tardies is clearly outlined in the syllabus/marching band handbook each student is required to read. Each student is then required to sign and submit an agreement of understanding found at the end of the handbook. The attendance policy allows students one class conflict per week. Unexcused absences and tardies are, obviously, not helpful to the ensemble or a student's grade. Marching band is a course housed in the College of Arts and Sciences. Every student who participates in marching band is required to register for our marching band course, for which students receive a grade.

PB: *How does weather affect your drumline's performance, and what do you teach your students about playing well in difficult weather conditions during the football season?*

NF: Weather affects our rehearsals less than it used to because we now have a marching band building with large and small ensemble rehearsal rooms. Significant effort was extended in designing the building and specifically the rehearsal rooms so the acoustical environment is better in which to perform and the decibel levels are also better managed. That being said, we are proactive in encouraging our students to make use of hearing protection.

Alabama is miserably hot and humid from August through late September, and sometimes into October. Thanks to Dr. Ozzello, we have an athletic trainer at every rehearsal and performance, sufficient hydration, appropriate water breaks, and a sensible rehearsal schedule that does not overtax the students. If it rains, we can go inside and rehearse. We seldom encounter particularly cold weather. If we do, then I typically quote Thom Hannum: "If you think it's cold. It's not." Seriously, if it is bitterly cold, we just tell them to keep their hands warm, do the best they can, and moderate our expectations for how well they'll be able to perform. Over the past several years, almost all of our games during the bowl season have been in warm-weather climates and indoor stadiums. Cold weather, other than a very few outdoor rehearsals, has been a non-factor.

PB: *You state in the book, "We don't really measure ourselves against other groups because we don't really take a competitive mindset, so we hope that wherever we've started, that we've journeyed as far forward as we could." In an era where DCI, WGI, and high school band are so competitive, how have you gotten your students to buy in to intrinsic motivation in college drumline?*

NF: Perhaps our students buy in to what we are do-

ing because we make it about achieving consistency of excellence in all we do, especially the details, as a means of preparing ourselves for success with life's many challenges that await us. Much like Coach Saban, it becomes less about winning and losing, competition, and more about living in the moment at our very best. You will seldom hear Coach Saban speak about winning. Similarly, we focus on performance excellence and excellence across the spectrum of marching band responsibilities. If we achieve that, everything else will take care of itself.

PB: *In the book, you emphasize self-discipline and work ethic as two important life lessons your students learn through the drumline experience. Are there any others lessons you intentionally teach and focus on during the course of the season?*

NF: Yes. Self-discipline and working hard are givens for succeeding at most anything in life. What is more important to me is that we strive to positively affect others. We do teach and talk about the importance of kindness, love, doing for others, and especially being thankful. Community outreach is an important part of the Million Dollar Band culture. Dr. Ozzello made that a priority when he took over the band in 2003. Something else we focus on is enjoying what we are doing. Coach Saban speaks of learning how to love practicing. We focus on that but we also take into account Scott Johnson's wise counsel: "If you are not having fun, you're doing it wrong." I used to think the word "fun" lacked a certain sense of seriousness. The older I get the more I understand the genius in Scott's admonition.

PB: *What are your goals for the 2017 Alabama Drumline?*

NF: We hope for them to be successful as individuals and as a percussion ensemble. We hope for them to understand their role in the band and to be supportive of the other band sections. We hope for them to be ladies and gentlemen always and to succeed academically. We hope for them to enjoy what they are doing and to positively affect others.

For myself? I hope to teach better and more efficiently, do a better job of arranging and incorporating our fundamentals program skill sets and concepts into the music, and to get our program to the next level. Of late, I have become interested in finding the "motion" inherent in the music and teaching in a way that facilitates students being better able to use the motion, the physicality of what they are playing to be more successful in consistently achieving excellence.

Going a little old school, ultimately we want to "drum clean." Every now and then I'll share with the percussion section that in the world of the marching arts it doesn't get much better than playing clean and entertaining folks.

PB: *In closing, I want you and your students to know how much this experience has meant to the Clemson Tiger Band and Clemson Drumline. When I started this project, I wanted to learn from*

the best, bring that knowledge back with me, and apply it to achieve one goal: to make us better. It has truly been transformative and on behalf of my students—past and present—I thank you for inspiring us!

NF: If we have helped make your program better, to inspire you, then we thank you for that wonderful compliment. In the world of Nick Saban's "process," we have positively affected others, and that is a good thing—maybe the best of things, to borrow a line from *The Shawshank Redemption*. My life has been a charmed, blessed one. Along the way so many generous and patient individuals have helped me grow as a person and as a music educator and percussion arranger. I suppose that's why one of my favorite quotes is: "If I have seen further than others, it is by standing upon the shoulders of giants," by Isaac Newton. We can all be giants by helping others.

I am grateful for your friendship and what you have taught me, Paul. It is a beautiful thing that music helps us transcend the craziness of college football competition and fandom and helps us find mutual respect and offer support to each other's program. Being a part of your research process and your book provided an incredible opportunity and a baseline to which I could measure my development as a music educator moving forward. I am grateful for the journey and the positive changes it brought about. As a friend of mine, Kathie Kirsie Bowlter, once offered: "In life it is good to have an end to journey towards, but in the end it is the journey that matters." Onward I go.

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Neal Flum is Assistant Director of Athletic Bands, Director of Pep Bands, and the Percussion Section Director at the University of Alabama. He is a percussion consultant for the Boston Crusaders and previously served in that capacity with The Cadets Drum and Bugle Corps (2010–13, 2015–16) as well as percussion caption head for Music City Drum Corps (2012–14). He is a past Secretary and President of the Alabama PAS Chapter, past interim and chair of the PAS Marching Percussion Committee, and a member of the staff of Thom Hannum's Mobile Percussion Seminar. **PN**