

Cognitive, Physical and Pedagogical Benefits of Marching Percussion

By Spencer Jones

A wide range of influences can attract young people to want to play percussion. Some may have seen a local high school or college marching band perform, or they saw their favorite band live and the drummer was an amazing player. Some have a strong background in church groups, and the drummer at their church gives them lessons. Many influences will get students into a music program at their school because they are curious to learn more about drumming. Regardless, at some point many of these students will likely become involved with marching band.

In general, there is a time limit for performers in the marching arts because students either graduate from college or “age out” of DCI or WGI. So, if after spending 10 to 12 years becoming invested in this activity, only to not be able to participate any more at a certain age, one has to ask, is it worth it?

Jeff Prosperie defines this issue as “transfer value” and says that the marching arts have value after your marching years, either as a percussionist or in a different field altogether. The marching arts can help you develop many things, both personally and musically. You can gain good habits with your health and exercise, learn how to diet correctly, develop your mental elasticity and self-discipline, and learn how to focus for long periods. In addition, you gain knowledge not available in a classroom setting, train your listening abilities, and improve your self-confidence. It is quite possible to develop many long-term beneficial habits through the marching arts.

PHYSICAL ENGAGEMENT

All musical activities require certain skill sets that may vary from each other. Marching percussion requires a different level of physical engagement than you would find in a traditional concert hall, and the biggest difference between being an orchestral percussionist and a marching percussionist is this physical demand. At the high school level, you will find students who rehearse five to six hours a week with the band, and then spend regular practice time at home. At the collegiate level, you will see seven to eight hours of ensemble rehearsal per week, possibly including outside sectionals, in addition to

individual practice time to work on music alone and reinforce good habits. In a drum corps setting, you will see 12- to 14-hour rehearsal days (with small breaks), which is a very demanding rehearsal schedule. All of these hours require increased physical conditioning, and over time you will see the benefits and have healthier students if they are prepared and trained correctly.

Educators can begin preparing their students for the demands of marching percussion by starting a conditioning routine. Light cardio and core workouts are standard exercises for young age groups so their bodies become adapted to the higher amount of stress. A marching snare drum can weigh between eight to ten pounds, a marching tenor can weigh 15 to 25 pounds, marching bass drums can weigh between eight and 40 pounds (depending on size), and most of this weight is on the shoulders and lower back. As students move into more engaging programs with increased demand, they will need more stretching and “total body” exercises. High-level competing high schools, colleges, and drum corps have daily stretching, cardio, and workout routines in place to help students remain healthy during the marching season. Some DCI groups even have a sports medicine specialist on staff for physical conditioning and to help with possible injuries.

Percussionists should also train with resistance bands if possible. Resistance training can play a key role in strengthening the musculoskeletal system, and it helps reduce the chances of developing osteoporosis, fractures, and other similar issues by enhancing bone mass. Enhanced bone mass has been known to help with correct posture, which means less stress on random points of the body. Most importantly, resistance training will help improve your range of motion. Joseph Merlino states in his research, “If certain areas of a percussionist’s body are not as well adapted to perform a task, other muscle groups have to overcompensate to achieve the desired result. For example, if the wrist is not developed enough to perform repetitive strokes on a snare drum, the muscles in the forearm will be activated.” This could also become an issue during marching drill; if a student has not developed enough leg mus-

cles or a strong center of balance, he or she could pull a muscle that is being activated due to overcompensation for another muscle group. Any program that provides a conditioning plan for its students is going to see positive results and have greater student enjoyment.

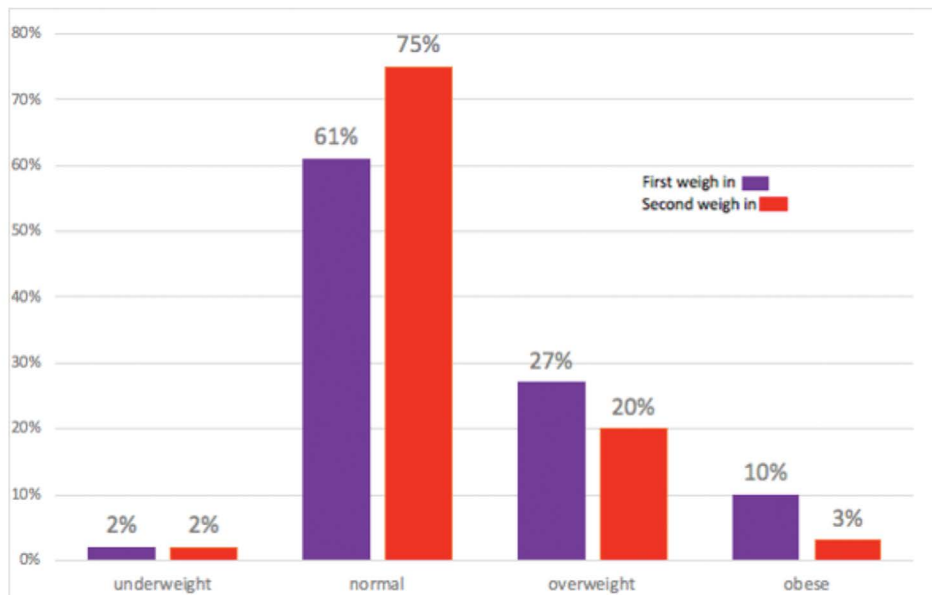
BODY MASS INDEX

Researchers at the University of Tennessee tested 501 members of Drum Corps International to study the changes of their Body Mass Index (BMI) over the course of two years. They documented each person’s BMI at the beginning of their first season, the end of that season, and the beginning of a second marching season. The goal was to document each person’s starting physical condition, then see the change over the course of one summer, and then to see how the changes were maintained over the following year. The findings of the study were documented and charted based off the World Health Organization’s classification of the healthy weight levels for each person’s height, age, and gender. The four categories of weight ranges are: underweight, normal, overweight, and obese. At the beginning of the first season 2% of the members were underweight, 61% were normal, 27% were overweight, and 10% were obese. At the end of the first season there was a drastic shift to a more positive BMI. At the second weigh-in, 2% were still underweight, 75% were normal, 20% were overweight, and only 3% were obese. Unfortunately, the researchers were not able to gather sufficient data for the third weigh-in due to outside factors. From this data however, they were able to gather positive BMI results from just one season of drum corps participation.

INJURY RATES

Although students can benefit physically in many ways, some injury rates need to be discussed. At the collegiate level, percussionists have the third highest injury rate among all the instrumentation in a marching band. These range from short-term injuries like sunburns, blisters, chronic pain from overuse, and lower back pain, to long-term injuries such as osteoarthritis and carpal tunnel syndrome.

Body Mass Index Study Results



Just like in any other activity, stretching routines and strengthening exercises can help prevent possible long-term damage.

MENTAL FOCUS

In addition to the physical engagement, the marching arts also require an extreme amount of

mental focus. A percussionist typically has multiple responsibilities in rehearsal and performance settings. First, you must listen to the section leader to establish the tempo and adjust yourself accordingly. Second, you must initiate the musical passage while also initiating the first step of a new drill set, and third, watch your step size to make sure you are trav-

eling correctly, while simultaneously thinking about the music. This is just 10 seconds worth of mental engagement that percussionists encounter in every rehearsal and performance. These combined activities have many benefits for long-term mental health, applied to both musical and non-musical activities.

This situation can also be thought of by categorizing the two physical responsibilities that are occurring. Playing the drum can be classified as an “ipsilateral” movement, which means the starting position of the hands corresponds to the position of the drum (with the exception of marching tenors). Marching drill is classified as a “contralateral” movement, which means the starting position of the feet are traveling to a different ending position. Snare drummers and bass drummers are doing both ipsilateral and contralateral movements, while tenor drummers are doing two contralateral movements. Musical rhythms help to orient attentional processes in time, which benefits the preparation and control of motor actions, and the honing of temporal processing of information. This may also benefit long-term brain plasticity and help to fight things such as early onset dementia and Alzheimer’s disease.

MUSICAL PERFORMANCE ANXIETY

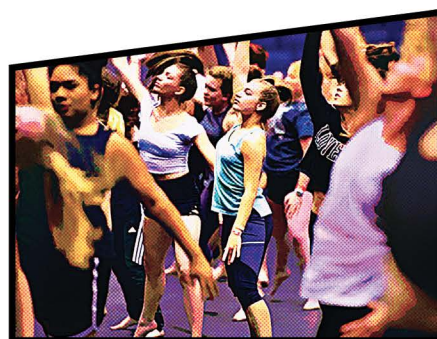
Another issue that is regular in many performers is musical performance anxiety (MPA). Multiple young performers report having high levels of MPA and do not know how to address it by themselves. Many students describe their anxiety as thinking

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of all that could go wrong instead of focusing on what could go right. Over half of the students in one study done by Christopher Castille reported that they were being overly critical of themselves, while only a handful reported this as being performance inhibiting. One possible reason why so many students report having issues with MPA is because educators do not usually discuss how to deal with it in an educational setting. In the marching arts, this is something that is discussed regularly. Crystal Sieger describes MPA as “a social phobia defined as an excessive and persistent fear of being with unfamiliar people or in situations of possible scrutiny by others, which triggers fears of acting in ways that will be embarrassing.” The audience for any marching performance will generally be unknown to the performer. Drum corps play to new audiences every night in a different state, so being able to overcome anxiety is part of the activity. Percussionists have a very strong sense of comradery in the marching arts, and each person is held accountable for his or her responsibilities, since every person has to be identical in performance quality. Working for several hours and days on developing those skills with other people helps build the confidence that a performer needs to convey music correctly. Teachers who coach students in replacing negative and task-irrelevant thoughts with positive and realistic ideas will help create a better performance experience for their students.

Having a positive experience is the most important part of going through any marching arts program. Musically, students want to be challenged in ways that are new to them. Having well-written marching percussion arrangements for a high school or college band is crucial to the students being challenged in the right ways. Some instructors choose to write their own parts so they can “fine-tune” the parts to highlight group strengths and work on developing other skills accordingly. The skills can include how much rudimental writing is involved, advanced sticking combinations, split parts for the cymbals and bass drums, and polyrhythms in the ensemble writing. Split parts are defined as highly syncopated rhythms, such as two players alternating playing thirty-second notes. This takes trained percussionists who have spent time developing their timing and rhythmic abilities. Indoor drumlines and drum corps have arrangements of increasing difficulty year after year, since these activities are focused on high-level performing. In many cases during a high school and college marching season, the instructors

have to plan careful instruction to make sure that the music that is chosen is not too easy or too hard. If the music is too easy, your percussionists will become bored and stagnant in growth; if the music is too hard, they will become frustrated and feel defeated at the end of the season. The primary goal of this activity is to instill professionalism and musical growth into each student, so if the music is lacking, you will lose the ability to teach these traits.

HIGH-LEVEL FEEDBACK

Since the marching arts at the competitive level is very physically and musically demanding, it requires high levels of instruction to get the students performing at their best. Researchers from a number of conservatories decided to test high-level percussion students on quality of performance and growth based on how well they were given visual feedback from their instructors. They were provided video performances of their instructors or one-on-one feedback. The high-level feedback was based on physically expressing the musicality and the expressive style, while low-level feedback was just addressing dynamic and rhythm issues. At the end of the study, there was no clear difference in dynamic and rhythm changes, but the students who had the high-level feedback showed clear growth in musical expression. Many drum corps and indoor instructors take this teaching method very seriously in order for their students to succeed. What makes the difference between performance qualities of groups like drum corps is how well the instructors convey and demonstrate the concepts.

CONCLUSION

The marching arts can be a very difficult yet rewarding experience. Many people who went through college marching band or drum corps will tell you that they have not found anything that is as rewarding as performing. The transfer value of the activity can help with different aspects of your life in the present and long term. The research points to the marching arts being a beneficial experience even though it is short lived. In addition to developing your abilities as a musician, it can better your health after just three months of the activity and possibly prevent mental illnesses later in life.

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Spencer Jones is a Doctoral candidate studying Percussion Performance at Louisiana State University under Dr. Brett Dietz. He completed his Masters in Percussion Performance degree at Stephen F. Austin State University in 2019 under the direction of Dr. Brad Meyer and Dr. Ben Tomlinson. His undergraduate degree was completed in Music Education at Northwestern State University of Louisiana in 2017 under the direction of Ken Green and Oliver Molina. His marching percussion career includes DCI as a member of the Louisiana Star in 2015 and continued as a member of the percussion staff in the summers of 2016 and 2017. Spencer has worked in the Louisiana Indoor drumline program with Destrehan High School. He is an instructor for multiple high schools in Texas and Louisiana. **PN**

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