

ESTABLISHING CONSISTENCY WITHIN YOUR MARCHING PERCUSSION SECTION

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While a marching percussion section is one of many things on a band director's mind, this does not mean that the director cannot have a meaningful impact on the performance and progress of the drumline amid the chaos of marching season. When reflecting on the ability level and success of your own drumline, remember that students, audiences, and even judges want to hear a drumline with great sound quality, control, and the ability to make their performances appear effortless. One unifying element links successful high school, collegiate, and drum corps ensembles: consistency.

Every aspect of a drumline must be rooted in consistency. Whether it is the way a student strikes the drum or the way the drums are tuned, it should be done exactly the same way every time. This can easily be handled by a staff drumline instructor, but that is a luxury that many schools cannot afford on a regular basis. With that being said, here are some standard operating concepts that an individual band director can establish early in a marching season.

Some of these are one-time adjustments, but others require monitoring through a season. Student leaders can be tasked with reinforcing some of the concepts below, and the director can step in when necessary throughout the year.

Consistent Equipment Set-Up

After instruments are assigned for the year, it is imperative that the equipment is fitted specifically for each student. The first step is to adjust the carrier to each individual's body without the drum attached to the carrier, allowing for quick and easy changes. Most carriers are constructed with multiple adjusting parts to fit the student's body as closely and comfortably as possible, which can help evenly distribute the weight of the drum while the player is on the move. While fitting the student, ensure that the belly plate sits at a comfortable height and that the shoulder harnesses rests squarely on the shoulders (Example 1).

Once the carrier fits the student properly, have each student hold their hands up as if they were playing the drum. With a few slight adjustments, this will establish a comfortable and appropriate playing height for each individual. After setting this position, place the drum on the carrier and adjust the drum height portion of the harness to match the student's established position. This set-up method prioritizes varied individual drum heights over one even drum height throughout the entire section. Everyone's drums may be at different heights, but appropriate individual proportions will allow students to utilize the same technique and produce the best possible sound. Each drum should sit at the same height for each specific student throughout the season, even if they are utilizing drum stands.



Example 1

Maintain equipment consistency by utilizing specific marching drumheads, sticks, and mallets. Whatever your choice, these items should be identical throughout each subsection (snare, tenors, and basses). Uniform stick selection within each subsection will help provide similar articulation, tone, and feel. If your ensemble uses graduated bass drums, ensure that each player has the appropriate size mallet for their drum. Most manufacturers have a drum and mallet correlation chart on their websites for reference. Utilizing the same marching-specific drumheads throughout each subsection will have a significant impact on producing a uniform sound, and it will also provide a consistent canvas for tuning the drums.

Just as a wind section sounds best when playing in tune, a drumline must also play well-tuned drums to sound its best. Even if you are not familiar with marching percussion instruments, there is a wide array of free information and resources available online about tuning marching drums. No matter how you choose to tune your instruments, it is important that you choose a specific "goal tuning" and establish a routine to maintain this throughout the season. Drumheads need to be changed at least once a year, and new heads will stretch quickly and need to be re-tuned shortly after the initial tuning. Some instructors have specific pitches for each drum and others rely on intervals to maintain the same sound throughout the season. Either way, maintaining consistent tuning within each subsection will allow the ensemble to sound its best all year.

Consistent Technique

Now that the drums are set up and in tune, the ensemble needs to have a consistent way to approach playing the instruments. The easiest way to create a unified approach to all drumline instruments is to utilize the same matched grip used for concert percussion (Examples 2, 3, 4). When establishing this grip, it is important that all players employ a solid fulcrum on the stick between their thumb and pointer finger. This facet of the grip allows the stick to move properly



Example 2



Example 3



Example 4

for the best tone and rebound through all different stroke types. (Young bass drummers are particularly susceptible to misplaced thumbs on mallets.) This matched grip and fulcrum also allows the remaining fingers to help drive the stick towards the head and navigate complex passages.

With a consistent stick grip utilized throughout the drumline, the ensemble needs default "set" and "playing" positions - just like "horns up" and "horns down" for wind players. *Set position* is essentially the same for snare drums and tenors. Sticks are held parallel to each other while facing opposite directions in the player's hands. The student should hold the stick pair in front of the carrier's belly plate and about one inch above the drum rim closest to the body (Examples 5 and 6). For bass drums, the student's hands should touch the rims of the drum at either 3 or 9 o'clock (the closest position to the player's body). The bass drum players should not grab the rim with their fingers while at set position; rather, they should place the



Example 5



Example 6



Example 7

mallets against the side of the rims so that the mallets are pointing vertically towards the sky (Example 7). When playing, it is crucial that all members of a subsection strike their instruments in the same location. This is achieved through a consistent *playing position*. Snare drummers should align their sticks over the center of the drumhead where the beads of the

stick are less than one inch apart and less than one inch above the drumhead (Examples 8 and 9).



Example 8



Example 9

Bass drummers should also place their mallets over the center of each drumhead and their grip should look essentially the same as a snare drummer's, only rotated to strike a vertical surface (Example 10). Finally, tenor players should align their right hand stick over drum one and the left over drum two (the two outside quad drums directly in front of the player). The tips of the sticks should be less than one inch above each drumhead, but the sticks should be located between the center of the drumhead and the rim closest to the player (Examples 11 and 12). This off-center stick placement enables tenor players to produce optimal tone, projection, and articulation from the drum. In order to maintain proper playing zones on the drums to the player's right and left (drums three and four), students must utilize a "T" stick position (Examples 13 and 14). This position allows the player's arms to remain in a natural playing position with easy access to the proper playing zones on neighboring drums.



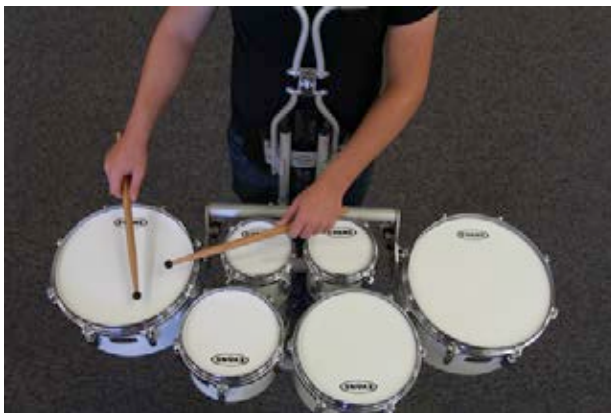
Example 10



Example 11



Example 12



Example 13



Example 14

Every ensemble needs a general protocol for moving from set position to playing position quickly, effectively, and consistently (once again, just like “horns up” and “horns down”). A good rule of thumb is that the ensemble at set position should move to playing position two beats before their entrance in the music. A similar system should be implemented for navigating from playing position to set position. This movement usually occurs one beat after the completion of a musical passage and it should be quick, energetic, and precise both in rehearsal and performance.

Consistent Sound Quality

After defining stick and mallet grip, as well as how to approach the drum with implements in hand, an ensemble must be able to produce high-quality sounds on each instrument. Appropriate playing zones were established through the playing position for each subsection. These zones are absolutely necessary in order for each player to produce the optimal timbre, articulation, and projection from their drum(s). Please keep in mind that playing zones other than the ones defined above (at the edge of the drum, over the snare bed, etc.) are utilized for unique timbres - NOT dynamic level changes.

The easiest way to get the best sound quality from your drumline is to establish a relaxed, high-velocity stroke. In order to maximize the projection from large marching drums, everyone must use as much velocity as possible when striking the drumhead. The stick should then be allowed to rebound to its original starting height. This fundamental stroke is called a *legato stroke* due to the fluid motion towards and away from the drumhead. The legato stroke is the foundation for marching percussion technique just as long tones are the basis for wind playing technique.

Just because an ensemble has a high-velocity legato stroke does not necessarily mean that the ensemble will play together (otherwise known as “clean” playing) because velocity is only half of the “cleanliness” equation. In order for a drumline’s high-velocity strokes to align, everyone must start each stroke the same distance away from the drumhead. Some teachers refer to this distance as *stick height* and others prefer to describe this distance with different musical dynamic levels. In a maximum-velocity setting, a louder dynamic level requires the player to strike the drum from a further distance than when playing at a softer dynamic level. These stick heights/dynamic levels should be established in basic legato stroke exercises like “Eight on a Hand.” In marching percussion music, unaccented notes are generally considered to be “taps” played at a *piano* dynamic level. The accented notes vary based on the notated dynamic level and should clearly contrast any unaccented notes. No matter the system you choose to implement, the players must understand where each stroke begins to ensure that everyone attacks notes together. Remember that a small drumline that plays perfectly in time will have a fuller sound than a large ensemble with inconsistent dynamic levels and stroke velocities. Also, always practice with a metronome when establishing these techniques to ensure a solid understanding of pulse!

In order to navigate musical passages with varied dynamic levels or stick heights, an ensemble must implement different types of strokes that can be taught and rehearsed through basic warm-up exercises. To quickly change heights from accented to unaccented notes, players must utilize a *control stroke*, meaning that they prevent the stick from rebounding after they strike the drum. Manipulating the stick after striking the drumhead maintains a consistent sound because the sound exists before any change is made to the stroke. To move in the opposite direction (unaccented notes to accented notes), players must utilize an *up stroke*. After the drum is struck from a small “tap” height, the player should lift the stick in preparation for the impending accented note.

Finally, students should be able to execute a *double stroke* as well as a *double bounce*. The double stroke is utilized with slower bounces where the player must assist the stick’s action to ensure an even rhythmic passage. A double bounce is utilized for fast open rolls where the rebound from the drumhead, along with support from the hands, produces an even

bounce. One common pitfall of the double bounce is the arm motion utilized to produce this technique. This stroke should utilize a pumping motion from the arm that hinges from the elbow, allowing the stick to act as a seesaw from the fulcrum between the first finger and thumb. If students are bending their wrist downward to create a double bounce, the second note of the bounce will be less powerful than the first, creating an uneven sound and rhythm. Just as any other stroke discussed in this article, performers should utilize maximum velocity to maintain consistent sounds, rhythms, and visual appearance.

All of these techniques are external and visible, even from the podium or the rehearsal tower. If established at the beginning of the season, the strategies in this article can act as guidelines for successful drumline rehearsal and performance throughout the year. Student leadership can reinforce these concepts on a regular basis so that you can focus on all aspects of the full ensemble. However, make sure to acknowledge the marching percussion section periodically in rehearsal from the tower or podium so they know that they are still on your radar! •

Dr. Gordon Hicken is the Interim Instructor of Percussion/Assistant Director of Bands at Angelo State University in San Angelo, TX where he teaches Applied Percussion, Percussion Ensemble, Drumline, World Music, Percussion Methods, Symphonic Band, and Basketball Band. He holds degrees from The Florida State University, The University of South Carolina, and Furman University, and his teachers include Dr. John W. Parks IV, Dr. Scott Herring, Dr. John Beckford, Prof. Jim Hall, and Mr. Ron Schwartz. As a performer, Gordon appeared as a soloist on the 2013 PASIC "Celebration of Emerging Artists" showcase concert, and he has performed with orchestras and chamber ensembles throughout the Southeast. Gordon regularly conducts master classes and clinics at universities and public schools, and he presented sessions at the 2014 Florida and South Carolina Music Educators Association Conventions, CBDNA Athletic Band Symposium, and South Carolina Day of Percussion.