

Introduction

The Old Man and the Green Machine

*C*an the Van Halen. Rack your Kid Rock. Stow your Styx. For this musical journey, we're leaving the amplifiers with the long-haired pretty boys in spandex and taking a flying leap from the concert stage: to a football field, baking in the heat of a late June afternoon. Sixty guys spread out in a loose parabola near the 50-yard line, lean back with horns in their hands and manufacture loud the old-fashioned way—with their lungs.

The command is innocuous enough. "Concert F, please," the director says. "Go as far as you and your sound can handle." Which to a 20-year-old, carrying a baritone in a marching group can be translated: "Son, see if you can peel the paint from the grandstand in one mighty blow." The stadium reverberates with their enthusiasm, and this is only the warm-up.

The uniform of the day is gym shorts, tennis shoes and ball caps, a T-shirt here and there. All around lie backpacks and horn cases, water bottles—the detritus of the determined. Assistant drum major Chris Lugo takes a breather in the shade beneath the stands as the brass section plays on. There's a hitch in the sound—someone's just a shade off pitch—and Lugo flashes a knowing smile. The director waves his hands. There's a pause to breathe, then the horns whip up and they're at it again. "Our pre-tour routine is 12 hours a day," Lugo says. And he means every day. "Once we're on tour, we scale it back to six to eight hours."

Such is life in the Cavaliers Drum & Bugle Corps, where even in practice they aim for perfection. From late May through mid-August, the Cavaliers will visit 40-odd cities and play 29 shows, from Orlando, Florida to Stillwater, Minnesota, San Antonio to Boston, winning nearly every competition along the way. In 2002, they won them all. In four of the last five years, their annual 12,000-mile quest ended with the top prize—a Drum Corps International championship.

The pressure can mount, but Lugo and his mates wouldn't have it any other way. The standard set by the Cavaliers is what drew Lugo to drum corps in the first place, brings him back from Gainesville and the University of Florida to Rosemont, Ill. every summer. "I'm never going to play in a group like this anywhere else," he says. "These are the best teachers and the best players in the country."

Every year, 600 guys vie for a place in the Cavaliers, coming from as far away as Japan and Italy, and from colleges and high schools across the country. Just 135 make the cut as members of the brass, percussion or color guard. It took Ben Collins four tries to earn a roster spot. By then he was a senior in high school and professed drum corps "junkie," turned on to the sound since his percussion teacher played him a tape in middle school. For now, Collins can be seen strutting the field strapped to six drums, or multi-toms. But someday, he'll stand before a classroom; his music education major at the University of Illinois plays in perfect harmony with membership in a corps that spawns band directors like it has patented an assembly line.

The pace of performance and instruction is on fast-forward with groups in DCI, which bills itself as "marching music's major league." In many big-time college programs it's march, stop, play. In drum corps' highest levels it's sprint, turn, march backward, climb a ladder, jump over a color guard member, all while blowing an intricate musical line opposite to what may be emanating from the trumpets or tubas next to you. Most of the music and formations are original creations, or at least arrangements, and players are expected to change drills and parts on the fly, the better to gain a competitive edge. "This is like the Chicago Symphony of marching band," Collins says.

Rarely, though, do orchestra professionals describe their fellow performers as "extended family." But that will happen when you spend night after night sleeping on gym floors en masse. A typical tour day for the Cavaliers begins about 10 or 11 a.m.—time to "sleep in" after an all-night bus ride, say, from Broken Arrow, Okla. to Dallas. They launch into practice and don't emerge until shortly before that night's show, when they don their crisp green and black uniforms, plumed hats and long white gloves, and give it their all under the stadium lights. Afterward, it's pack up and roll out; they usually reach the next destination about 6 or 7 a.m. "The hardest part," Collins says, "is at 5 or 6 when the sun is going up and you still have two or three hours to go."

What makes the grueling tour worth it are the unforgettable memories, friendships forged as one summer melts into the next. The Cavaliers began in 1948 as a Boy Scout troop, made up of buddies from Chicago's rough-and-tumble Logan Square neighborhood. The mission back then wasn't pressing another professional musician from the mold, but giving kids an alternative to street crime, putting a bugle or drumsticks in their hands and telling them, "this is where you belong." From that spark, a nationwide fraternity was kindled, some 4,000 members strong today, all male and proud of it. Part of a nearly sixty-year tradition of secret handshakes, slogans, songs, signals—brotherhood—that brings so many back to the fold.

You see them slinging eggs in the cook truck, blinking from the driver's seat of a bus on the bad side of midnight, or holding down benches in the grandstand, graying guys with their wives in tow, grumbling about "when drum corps was really drum corps," the days when steely-eyed veterans from the American Legion and VFW ran things and ticked off points if your helmets didn't sit the same way. "Their Cavalier jackets don't fit 'em," observed corps nurse Helen Turner, "they may be two sizes too small, but they have to have that jacket on."

Pride—it's about more than the Cavaliers' stellar scores, floating a point or two above the competition every show, every week, earning them their nickname, the Green Machine. Beyond the precision of a company front, the ricocheting drum shots and echoing fanfares, the grinding gears of a musical juggernaut, are the people, the heart of any championship organization. And all of them owe their allegiance to one man, whose legacy runs longer than the handshakes, songs and the name itself.

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They call him the Old Man. It has been Don Warren's lot in life since his late teens to be branded as such, though no one can dispute the moniker now. Like some measure of canonical distinction bestowed early in one's career, or a tuxedo gracing the shoulders of a mailroom clerk, it's a title Warren has had to grow into, validate. Though today there can be no argument: Don Warren is the Old Man, plain as tapioca pudding.

His corps association knows no off-season, renews itself each winter, when he'll drive to the school in Rosemont to meet them: kids some 60 years his junior, kids who in their eagerness to be part of the group, one of the gang, remind him of the boys from his neighborhood, growing up, the ones he was somehow destined to lead. Kids, who in the way they flash their drumsticks, blow through an impossible run on the horn, toss a spinning flag and catch it a hair's breadth from the ground—again and again—never fail to shake a chuckle from his lips, remind him of what a fantastic journey it's been: his dumb luck, his divine fortune to be ringmaster of this traveling circus for so long. The Old Man—once and forever.

Many Cavaliers' alumni could tell you stories, touch your heart and tweak your funny bone with tales from the road, and on the field. But Don Warren goes back to the beginning. To the 1940s, when drum corps spawned like summer mosquitoes in the years after World War II, when nearly every neighborhood could count on a marching unit to fight for bragging rights, and if you fit the uniform, you were in. He's the last still active from those days—out of the entire movement, nationwide—the only man to lead a drum corps from its inception and never let go the reins. “The president,” as he's fond of cracking, “and still founder.”

There's something about it that won't let him go. After retirement, after a heart attack and two multiple-bypass surgeries, something that makes him maintain a second phone line in his house, pick it up, answer, “Cavaliers.” Some reason, at 76, why he still gives a whit about getting the best price on a coach bus for summer tour, makes sure the roster of cooks, drivers, doctors, seamstresses and souvenir salesmen is filled to the last line on the volunteer form. Why he cares for these teenagers at all, still feels they need his guidance, so different from him in upbringing, so focused, practically young professionals, worlds away in talent level and career potential and family income.

He'll brave the snowflakes all the same this morning in late December, 2004, piloting the silver minivan with the Cavaliers logo through snarls of traffic, foregoing other errands to make a stop at the school where auditions are held. He'll wander the halls, shake hands, poke his head in classrooms, bust the chops of instructors he's friendly with—and he's friendly with everyone—sidle up to kids who didn't make the cut and urge them to “practice. Try again next year,” pick a tray from the stack in the cafeteria and file through the chow line, take his

place at a long table among denizens of the MTV generation, and hold court.

He's the Old Man, you see. He's got to.

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It's eleven miles, give or take, from the Church of the Advent in Chicago's Logan Square to the modern, gleaming glass tower housing the Cavaliers' headquarters in Rosemont. If you catch a break in traffic, making the drive from old to new takes 15 minutes. But the distance, as measured in gallons of sweat, and heart palpitations, and the number of nervous nights wondering if the books would balance, is far greater.

It took the Cavaliers some five decades to ascend from the basement of the neighborhood church where they were founded to the ninth-floor offices at the top of the U.S. Bank Corps tower. The suite is four-rooms, more or less, but from this corner thrums the engine of today's Green Machine. The shelves of the supply closet in back are heaped with souvenir pens, Cavaliers T-shirts and caps, instruction books and season DVDs, waiting for dispatch to all corners of the globe by corps treasurer Don Heitzman. Secretaries Rosanne Duewerth and Peggy Kosin work the phones in the room next door, selling tickets to the Naperville home show, taking down uniform sizes, accepting payment of dues, coordinating rides from the airport to the audition site, entertaining corps hopefuls who wait on the couch in the foyer. Kosin remembers the boy who walked in sporting "a 15-gallon-sized hat" and shirt that said, simply, TEXAS. "You can always tell a drummer," she says. "He walks in with a swagger, a strut." And besides, his hands give him away—they never stop moving, drumming on the couch, walls and doorframe as he studies the trinkets and trophies adorning this nerve center of the corps.

Plaques proclaim the Cavaliers' six DCI championships, and group photos accompany each title, recording the tanned and grinning mugs of members in the flush of glory. A framed drawing traces the corps' evolution: Cavaliers throughout history are arranged in an arc around the cigar-munching mug of founder Don Warren. The boys, as they sit, take in the odd, billowing navy pants of the 1949 edition, quaint band-style shakos of the 1950 corps, the outsized, silver belt buckles and black, swash-buckling vests of their 1970s brothers. On a wall opposite the drawing is a plaque etching the best of their forebears in gold nameplates

beneath the legend Cavalier of the Year. Current director Jeff Fiedler is commemorated there, beside 1980, his final year as drum major. Fiedler has celebrated more than thirty July birthdays on the road with the corps since first suiting up at 13. He's seen thousands of faces troop through the ranks in his tenure; his vice-like mind clings to their stories, even as they've gone on to other adventures, grown-up life away from bus rides and Boo Parties and devilish pranks, while he's stayed and played Peter Pan, leading the charge again each golden summer.

If Fiedler were buzzing about in the offices, he could gaze into the 1992 corps picture and treat the boys to a history lesson—where are they now, the first Cavaliers to grab DCI's top prize? There, in the front row, he'd point, a tiny, dark-haired kid, the youngest that season, Nathan Smith. He's a big guy now, shaved his head, became one of the first showboat designers on the cable TV home-improvement shows. In the second row, Doug Johns, snare drummer from Spring, Texas; he went on to Baylor University, did graduate work at the University of Michigan before joining the team that came up with the drug Cialis. Rob Wis was drum major in 1992. Today, he's an accountant for McDonald's and father of four.

There's Wayland Abernathy, soprano trumpet turned golf pro. John Bartlett and Phil Macino, executives with Federal Express and Microsoft, respectively. Sean Salinas, gunning for a role in the Blue Man Group. "God, these guys have gone on and done incredible things, the more I look at this," Fiedler says. Many made careers in music. Fiedler's finger moves over the percussion line.

There's Mark Miller, way over on the left end, top row, a baritone in '92. Today he gigs around the country on trombone. David Warner, with the closely-cropped dark hair, served as tuba and sergeant in the U.S. Marine Drum and Bugle Corps, better known as the President's Own. Matt Ownby runs a music publishing company, Rell Lafargue is an orchestral percussionist, John Hatfield drums for New York City recording studios. "These are great musicians, all great musicians," Fiedler says. "I can go 'band director, band director, band director,' just like that."

Andrew Keith teaches percussion in Gurnee, Illinois, Spiro Dorizas in Greece. Dean Westman—the kid wearing glasses three over from the top right corner, ears poking way out—directs the band at Stephen F. Austin High School. Dan Belongia, Erik Harris, D. J. Alstadt, Eric

Majors—band directors. This is the pattern that emerges through this gift of remembering, matching faces to dreams realized, of the Cavaliers as factory for upstanding men.

It wasn't always this way—the music part. There's been a shift in this latest generation, so focused: start this activity in grade school, study with this top-name teacher, secure a recommendation to this elite program, sprint from novice to master before 25. It's an era of specialization, of means to an end. The Cavaliers' municipally-sponsored digs mirror this phenomenon. Through the windows one spies planes gliding to land at O'Hare Airport, nestled in the elbow of Interstates 294 and 90 across the way. Along Rosemont's main drag is evidence of a suburb engineered for maximum economic impact, some \$248 million yearly. The massive gray façade of the Donald E. Stephens center calls to conventioners with its million-square-feet of meeting space; the Allstate arena looms as a white-walled castle fortified to collect your entertainment dollar. There's the glass-walled glitter of the Rosemont Theater, even a museum of Hummel figurines—largest collection in the world. Hotels sprout like flowers spilling down the hill in front of the convention center, though the blossoms of the hospitality industry are more numerous—5,200 guestrooms in all. Skybridges crisscross overhead, pulling the eyes of 50,000 annual visitors skyward.

It can be dizzying, the modern sprawl, like a marching show executed at breakneck tempo. And if the five requirements for becoming a Cavalier are talent, dues, attendance, attitude and health, old-guard alumni cite dues, first, and talent, second, as signs times have changed, and not necessarily for the better. When it costs a few thousand dollars per summer to participate, when virtuoso skill is required for admittance, who does the organization serve? Certainly not the ruffians and ne'er-do-wells of old, who got on the straight-and-narrow as a result of corps membership.

But Don Warren doesn't look at these kids and see strangers. There's something he recognizes in their eyes—a desire, a fighting spirit, a bit of the rascal, too, heirs to a long line of pranksters. They don't take themselves nearly as seriously as their predecessors assume. There's a question Warren poses at audition camps: Why the Cavaliers? They respond:

“We hear members are treated with respect. They aren't yelled at, put under pressure.”

“The chance to win a championship.”

“The tradition.”

“Why not?” says a prospective member from Hawaii. “It’s the best corps. Besides, the chicks dig green.”

Good reasons all around, Warren figures. The Cavaliers must be doing something right. “I have 135 reasons for what I do,” for staying involved, he explains. “I liked what it did for the kids.”

When Warren encounters old guys at reunions, or young guys at the year-end banquet, talking about what being a Cavalier means, he feels validation, that his time on Earth has amounted to something. When the boys don their uniforms before a show, “you’d think they were putting on gold, I can see that in ‘em.” There’s reverence for what they belong to. And so, too, does Warren take pride in what his charges have gone on to do after their time in the corps is done. Their achievements become superimposed on his own.

He has the gift, too, of remembering. He enters the suite of offices this December morning and pauses before the framed drawing, eyes the cartoon likeness of himself. It’s a younger version, hair a little darker—though just as boiled-egg sparse—and victory cigar clamped between his teeth instead of propped in his shirt pocket, wrapped in plastic. Doctor’s orders are to light up only on special occasions, and so he resorts to gumming a chewing brand, apologizing for the habit, the moistened “turds” that accumulate in the ashtray. But an old man takes his pleasure where he can, and there is still a vitality in Warren, a bit of the insurance salesman who juggled the top corporate accounts, the wheeler-dealer who has long gotten by on personality. There’s his easy grin, and gimlet eyes, green with a splash of blue in the center, the warm press of palm in his handshake—not too limp, not too firm—and his way of slipping into a story, this gift for attaching names to faces so distant they’ve been immortalized in art. “There’s Bernie Mix,” he says, squinting at the blots of ink and pencil.

The first Cavaliers weren’t musicians, destined to lead orchestras. That ragtag bunch was destined to build city streets and bridges, root around in sinks and sewers, fry short-order eggs and fix engines. They were Chicago old-neighborhood kids, looking to kill time on a Saturday afternoon. They wore a khaki Boy Scout uniform parading down Milwaukee Avenue, played a straight bugle—no valves—and tied the knots for their own snare drum slings, thank you.

Warren Alm, among the original buglers, earned a degree in microbiology, worked for Kraft as a food research technologist. Don Pikey became a foundry engineer with International Harvester and Caterpillar. Glen Hatton became Dr. Hatton, researching brain biology and serving at the University of California in Riverside. Sal Ferrera, one of the corps' most talented teachers and composers, a self-taught musician, went on to teach economics at DePaul University and run a Chicago development company.

John Bardos earned pay as an agricultural engineer, Frank Batka as sheet metal worker. Bill Dragland delivered mail, Johnny O'Brien worked construction. Ron Phillip was a military policeman, later went into security. Ron Allan worked for Trans World Airlines 34 years, doing just about everything but fly the planes. Jarvis Fiedler was art and creative director for several advertising agencies, devising TV commercials for clients including Zenith, Kraft, Coors and Falstaff beer.

One trait all carriers of Cavaliers tradition have in common, no matter how many years separate them: they'll beat the pants off any corps crossing their path, an attitude forged in Logan Square in the late 1940s, with Don Warren's original "street kids." In the yellowed images of his memory, he pictures them still, as they were then: young, eager and wild, and on the verge of something bigger than them all.

Colt Foutz