

# SMALL BAND CONSIDERATIONS

This is a compilation of all the “Small Band Consideration” segments throughout the book.

## Chapter 1: Foundations of the Marching Band

What is a successful marching band experience? It is not trophies or points earned! *It is a sense of accomplishment and achievement* as a member of a group that sounds good and looks good. No one feels good or successful when *they know* that they do not sound or look good!

Playing while sitting or standing can be a challenge for 9th graders (7th or 8th sometimes are included) whose *skills are at a basic level*. When this is the case, marching and playing simultaneously for the first 2 or 3 months of school is going to be a struggle.

Directors of *very small bands* need to decide what involvement in marching band is in **the best interest of their students**. They need to give an *honest appraisal* of the level of their student musicians. Very small bands frequently (but not always) have many young and unskilled members. Further, year-to-year retention is often a problem in these groups leaving them with a young band every year.

What instrumental numbers are needed for the students to experience the success as stated above? Even with all strong players, performing spread out on a football field is a challenge, with only one or two players per part. Are there administrative or community expectations or pressure to have a marching band *on the field*? The band director must make sure that his/her approach aligns with the expectations of those and any changes are approved.

There are a couple of approaches that vary from the traditional marching band but create more success and a better experience for the student members.

A three year marching band development program:

- Year 1—Develop the music skills needed to sound good. A student will never sound good in motion if they cannot play well seated or standing! *Pep band only* at football games and set up directly in front of the stands in an arc or block and play the school songs and National Anthem at Pre-Game and a number of songs at Halftime. Spend a *modest amount of time* on basic parade block marching skills to move the band as needed. GOAL = Improve Playing Skills
- Year 2—Continue to develop musician skills while solidifying basic marching skills. Perform on the field for Pre-Game and Halftime, with the *winds only playing when stationary*. Learn a simple drill with 6-10 sets. GOAL = Continue to Improve Playing Skills and add Marching Show Skills
- Year 3—Function as a performing marching band with Pre-Game and Halftime shows. The difficulty of music and visual and the number of drill sets must be appropriate to the level of the members to allow the group to *look and sound good*. GOAL = A Performing Marching Band

An alternative approach to marching band:

This approach has worked well for a few small band programs by creating a “stage” type show with tarp and musical productions. Two outstanding programs of this type are Alter High School Band, Kettering, OH and St. James School Marching Band, Montgomery, AL. The best explanation is to search and watch videos of these fine bands.

A third option to consider is [WGI Winds](#). One of the advantages of this program for small bands is it occurs later in the year allowing more music focus in the fall, it is indoors and it only takes 10-12 wind players to perform successfully on a gym floor. This allows the concert band to be the center of the program throughout the school year.

## **Chapter 2: The Wind Section**

For the small band, the same approach should be taken with developing Sound, Technique and Musicianship as discussed in the chapter. *Teachers should not push the students beyond their abilities* and most importantly, should not try to sound as loud as a larger ensemble. Just as a small wind ensemble cannot get the same full sonority and volume of a large concert band, the small marching band simply cannot and should not try to sound like a larger band.

### **Quality of Sound should always be the Goal.**

For very small bands—less than 24 winds—instrumentation should be based on allowing the winds to balance the musical hierarchy. The *melody* is always the most important element.

The page on “Balanced Instrumentation Goals” referred to “good proportions of soprano, alto, tenor and bass voiced instruments.” For the very small band, this may need to be adjusted to High, Middle and Low Range instruments. For 16 winds this could mean:

- 6 High (flute/clarinet/trumpet)
- 5 Middle (alto sax/mellophone)
- 5 Low (tenor-bari sax/trombone/baritone, tuba.)

Arrangements would need to be *aligned with this approach* with rarely more than 3 parts.

A tremendous help in filling out the *total sound of the band* is the use of a synthesizer and electric bass. Even a simple synthesizer part of sustained 3 and 4 note chords can fill out the empty sound often associated with very small groups. More on this in the following chapter.

Staging, arranging and adapting arrangements are important considerations and are addressed in other chapters.

[Small Band—Big Results](#) by Ryan Addair is an excellent resource book for the director of smaller groups.

### **Chapter 3: The Percussion Section**

The **no battery—all front ensemble** instrumentation is an option for smaller bands. It is difficult to get a sense of cohesion and musical percussive effect with a battery of fewer than six members. As soloists or duets rather than sections, the ensemble result is not very strong. With all of the students in the front ensemble a concert band percussion approach is taken in writing, rehearsing and performing. *Timing can be difficult* for the wind section when the percussion is all in the front. A more successful approach is to place the percussion behind the winds near the back hash marks. Depending on the musical genre, a rhythm section of drum set, piano/synth and bass can create a complete musical accompaniment requiring only one drummer.

[Small Band—Big Results](#) by Ryan Addair is an excellent resource book for the director of smaller groups.

### **Chapter 4: The Color Guard**

Recruiting Color Guard members for a small band program is extremely important and fortunately, the available pool can be much larger than finding musicians who have been playing for several years. For a very small band, a minimum of 4 members would be a good target goal. The bigger the size of the guard, the more that can be done to enhance the total visual program and allow the musicians to be closer together so they sound better.

The normal rule of thumb is to keep flags no closer than 6 steps apart. However, spacing much larger than 6 steps will not have much of a section impression with few members.

Use large, bright flags and keep the work simple and large to create the most effect. The work should be in unison for the most part. Double swing flags can be effective for the biggest moment of the show.

A color guard soloist with a wind player soloist works well to highlight the music and the visual. It also gives a stronger guard member a moment to shine. Use the full guard to highlight a music section feature in the same manner.

### **Chapter 6: Rehearsal Techniques**

The director of a small band will find all of these rehearsal techniques applicable. The small band typically has a small staff so adjustments will need to be made in regards to sectionals. A small band actually has an advantage in that it is much easier to get to the individual in rehearsal and solve problems musically and visually. “There is no place to hide!”

### **Chapter 7: Show Planning**

It may seem obvious, but band directors sometimes forget the practicality of matching the show selected with the band performing it. An honest evaluation of the band’s projected size, as well as level of ability, needs to be in the forefront of everyone’s mind. Every year there are very effective small band shows, but they were always planned with the size of the group in mind. Too often a small band tries to perform a show that would be well suited to a large band or DCI group with unsuccessful results.

Some thoughts to keep in mind when planning for the small band:

- Most important—choose appropriate music for the size of the ensemble. A large symphonic work such as *Great Gate of Kiev* or *Star Wars* is not going to be successful with a small band.
- Use bright colors in the flags and costumes, if appropriate to the show theme, to make a bigger visual presence.
- Avoid ballads or use them in short segments as part of another production. It is difficult for the small band to sustain the quality of sound, balance and blend.
- There are more ideas for small bands in the following chapter on Drill Design.
- Be creative!

## Chapter 8: Drill Design

Some thoughts to keep in mind when designing drill for the small band:

- *Reduce the practical field size* by the use of props or tarps. With a small band, there is no need to go beyond the 30 yard lines or behind the back hash. Props or backdrops can focus the attention of the viewer and portray the theme in a convincing manner. Make sure the props are as *professional looking* as possible.
- Keep the *wind instruments close together* (2-3 steps) when playing section features so they can perform with confidence and a unified sound.
- *Use bright colors* in the flags and costumes, if appropriate to the show theme, to make a bigger visual presence.
- Integrate the color guard in the forms *frequently* rather than using them as a separate entity or backdrop.
- Make sure the marching technique and execution is excellent. Although there is greater exposure (no room to hide), in many ways it is easier to clean a small band visually than a large one. Take advantage of this opportunity.
- Be extra cautious in getting accurate numbers to the drill writer. One missing wind player can make a big difference in the drill and sound of the band.
- If there are not enough numbers to have a balanced battery and front ensemble it would be better to place them all in the “front” ensemble. Placement at the back hash mark usually works best for timing. The percussion can then function as a concert band percussion section. An option is to have the battery march only a portion of the show, perhaps the opener and/or closer, to get variety and also develop marching skills for the future.
- Be creative!

## **Chapter 10: Leadership**

A band with a small staff can use the Leadership Team to make up for that deficit and ease the work load on the band director.

## **Chapter 11: Recruiting**

Recruiting for a small band program is no different than for any program except it is more critical that everything possible be done. Every added member can make a big difference. Challenge each *current member* to recruit one *new member*. “Pull out all the stops!”

## **Chapter 13: The Band Boosters**

Small bands frequently have small staffs and occasionally just the band director. The band boosters can be of tremendous help in those situations. Further, they can, over time, develop a budget that can support some staff assistance.

*Band Boosters Board and Committee Chairs* listed earlier in the chapter are from a large boosters group. For a small band, several of those jobs could be combined. However most of those duties are needed for any size group. It would be excellent if *most of the parents* were involved with the boosters in some capacity.