

# BATTLE OF THE BANDS

As the summer winds down, scores of teens take to the field—not for football or soccer, but to follow their own beat in an all-American tradition. THE HIGH SCHOOL MARCHING BAND → →

Parade prep: The Cascade Sound lines up in Auburn for the annual Veteran's Day Parade



By Todd Matthews → → photographs by kevin p. casey



**AT 4:45 ONE MORNING LAST FALL IN LEBANON, OREGON, 121 TEENAGERS FROM EVERETT ROUSE THEMSELVES FROM A COLD GYM FLOOR.**

A short while later, wearing the sweat pants, T-shirts and hooded sweatshirts they slept in, the students climb aboard three charter buses for a 30-minute drive to Oregon State University (OSU) in Corvallis, where the Northwest Marching Band Circuit Championships will determine which band is the best in the region.

Upon arrival at OSU, the temperature is a painful 32 degrees, and every corner of the campus is covered in thick fog. Behind stoic faces and stiff postures, several students shiver. After changing into their uniforms—black pants, white and crimson jackets with silver baldrics across the chest and tall shako hats with swaying white plumes—and warming up for 45 minutes, these teens, members of the Cascade High School Cascade Sound marching band, make their way down the stadium's entrance ramp and onto the field. It's now 8:30 a.m.; only a few hundred people have braved the cold to watch the performance.

The band arranges itself in a scattered, diagonal splash from one end zone to the other. A judge's voice booms over the stadium's public address system: "Drum majors, is your band ready?" Three female drum majors in black satin floor-length evening gowns and white elbow gloves perform an elaborate salute for the judges. "Cascade Sound, you may take the field for competition." The drum majors hike up their long dresses and clamber up ladders to direct their band from three raised platforms. The competition begins.

Band director Mark Staley is hoping Cascade—one of 31 bands from Washington, Idaho and Oregon—will do well enough in this preliminary round to be

among the 16 that make it to the evening's final round. If Cascade Sound is eliminated, it will be a long trip for a short performance, and at a price. The trip to Corvallis—with its three chartered buses, fuel for a band-owned semitruck to haul their instruments, food and other expenses—will cost \$9,000.

As each school year gets under way, football fields across the country are filled with gridiron competitors. But at some high schools, marching bands take to the same field, with a program and competition schedule every bit as intense as football's. In Washington state, around 7,500 high school students are involved in competitive marching band programs—from Spokane's University High School to Bellevue's Newport High School, Mukilteo's Kamiak High School to tiny Mead's Mount Spokane High School. Cascade Sound is one of those bands, and—with 130 members—one of the biggest.

A LARGE MARCHING BAND is like a giant, complex organism with different parts and functions. Drum majors are the brain, providing direction with white-gloved

gestures that imperiously pinpoint important notes. The drum line—composed of snare, tenor, bass and cymbals—is the spine, giving the band its beat, and an anchor to which all the notes and melodies can attach. The stationary drum pit provides exotic and sensory sounds by way of gongs, vibraphones and timpani. The brass section adds body and energy, while woodwinds contribute subtle layers. The color guard, armed with accessories, including flags and wooden rifles, provides whimsy and bling. All of this is packed into an eight-minute performance by individuals striving to create something larger than themselves.

Cascade's complicated show—called "Nocturne"—is no exception. Marching and playing, the band creates triangles, circles, arrowheads, only to slowly dissolve and reform. The lines of marchers slither like a sidewinder from one end of the field to another before slowly breaking apart to form a few large circles that slowly spin like windmills. At one point, the band forms a giant, tightly compacted triangle, then charges toward a corner of the field as horns blare and drums crash. Meanwhile, color guard members flit between band members, switching out turquoise, teal, orange, and yellow flags, and launching white wooden rifles into the air.

At a practice the night before the competition, with evening setting in and a cloudless stretch of blue sky turning dark, Staley and his assistant director, Mitch De Grace, drive the band, hoping to master a short sequence in the eight-minute routine, but it is eluding them. Staley and De Grace see and hear all the tiny mistakes. "Here's what I'm hearing off the field," shouts Staley. "Mellophones, it's too loud

"I'M USUALLY NOT THE LEADER OF ANYTHING. I'M TALKING MORE AND GETTING TO KNOW MORE PEOPLE." —PIT SECTION LEADER MARISSA LYTTLE, 17.

"WHEN I WAS IN MIDDLE SCHOOL, PEOPLE WERE LIKE, 'ALL YOU DO IS BANG THE DRUMS.' NO WAY. NOW IT'S A STEP HIGHER BECAUSE THERE'S SO MUCH STUFF WE HAVE TO MEMORIZE. IF YOU MESS UP, EVERYONE HEARS YOU. NO ONE FULLY UNDERSTANDS THE DRUM LINE IS HARD." —PERCUSSIONIST PATRICK DINNEEN, 15.



Kevin Libby adjusts his uniform for the Auburn competition; below, students, including Alex Davies, collect instruments from the semi trailer that travels with the band. Opposite page, early-morning competitions run counter to teens' urge to sleep in



