

# Old Skool Drum Corps *by Bob Carell*

**A**S MOST of us already know, the music and design that make up the show for a modern drum corps is very different from that of “Old Skool” corps; however, many people who have grown up with DCI might not know how they differ. This article will explore some of those differences.

### Background

Back in the day Drum Corps were often sponsored by service organizations such as Optimists Clubs, Lions Clubs, Rotary Clubs, Boy Scouts, Police Athletic Leagues (PAL), Catholic

especially in the North East area of the USA. One of the benefits of drum corps was very well articulated by Norm Fack who was both the Police Chief of St. Catharines, Ontario and the Director of the local drum corps, the Grantham Township



*Drum Majors on retreat in Racine, Wisconsin in 1964. This contest was a precursor to the multi-regional shows of today. It included the Casper Troopers from the West, corps from the Midwest, the Boston Crusaders from the East Coast and the Toronto Optimists from Toronto, Ontario, Canada.*

Youth Organizations (CYOs) and local organizations (often towns or counties helped with the finances). Other sponsors were Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) or American Legion (AL). In order to compete in the VFW or AL championships the Corps needed to be sponsored by a VFW or AL post. As a result, American Corps would have both AL and VFW sponsors.

Don Daber, a key figure in the Optimists organization (Toronto Optimists and Seneca Optimists) from 1960 until the Seneca Optimists disbanded, had a favourite chant: “What about the kids?” As Don knew so well, Drum Corps needed to focus on “the kids” and that happened in many ways. In addition to learning to play a musical instrument there was a real camaraderie in drum corps that created friendships which often lasted a lifetime. Corps members learned valuable life skills such as self-discipline and the value of working as a team to create something greater than oneself. Drum Corps also gave the corps members a positive focus. CYOs, with their emphasis on young people, were very active in the drum corps activity,

Police Boys’ Band. He said “look I can either chase these kids on the streets or gather them all up here and give them something constructive to do”.

Corps developed their shows during the winter and spring then competed on summer weekends in the cities and towns of North America. Determining who was best was decided by a group of skilled judges. Contests were usually “regional” with corps from the Midwest competing against each other and Corps from Canada and the Eastern states competing against each other. This presented a challenge for Canadian corps when a 500 mile overnight bus trip often preceded a competition. Upon arrival we had to practice then compete. It could be very gruelling. The first time that I experienced a contest that included a broad sampling of corps was a 1964 competition in Racine, WI. In addition to the Midwest corps the contest included the Boston Crusaders, the Casper Troopers and, us, the Toronto Optimists. It was a harbinger of the contests of today.

A typical American corps had access to large indoor

## OLD SKOOL DRUM CORPS (CONTINUED)

armouries which meant that they could develop their drill during the winter. As a result, they were able to finish learning the drill for their shows early and their competition season usually began in early May. Their season would end after the VFW and AL championships which were usually held in mid-August and early September.

Canadian corps did not have access to large indoor drill spaces so they usually began learning drill outside, often in the snow, on Easter weekend. Given the late start on creating a drill show the corps season in Canada usually began in late June, with the Rose Festival that was held in Welland, Ontario. The Canadian Nationals were held on the second Saturday of September and the season normally ended at the end of September with a corps contest at the Grape Festival in St Catharines, Ontario.

### Composition and size of a typical drum corps

In the early days many corps were male-only while others were strictly female.

All corps, whether male, female or mixed, competed against each other although, for many years, the Canadian Nationals also included an "All Girl" category. Over the years the composition of corps changed so that most of them included both male and female members.

Today we have DCI corps that have a maximum age of 21 and All-Age corps. Back in the day there were Junior Corps with the maximum age of 21 and Senior Corps for which most member were over 21. One of the differences, though, was that Junior Corps sometimes competed in Senior contests.

A typical drum corps consisted of a Colour Guard, a drum



*Toronto Optimists practicing on Easter Weekend, 1963, in the parking lot of the Shell Tower at the CNE (Canadian National Exhibition) grounds. The temperature was a chilly 5°C, which is 39°F.*

line and a horn line. In the early days drum corps were much smaller than the corps of today. In the late 1950s a typical corps consisted of 40 to 60 members (eg: the 1958 Toronto Optimists had 39 members); however, corps sizes started increasing so that, by the end of the 1960s, corps often had 50 to 60 member horn lines!

Colour Guards were very different from the

colour guards of today. There was always a National Party that included an American or Canadian and American flags plus someone carrying a weapon (rifle, sabre, pistol) to "guard" the National Colours. "Old Skool" flag poles were often much taller than the poles used today and flags were much heavier, as many were embroidered. For example, the flag poles used by my corps, the Toronto Optimists, included an aluminum point (about 10 or 12 inches) at the top. When assembled (the poles were in two pieces) the total height was approximately 11 feet. The flags that we used consisted of two embroidered flags stitched together with a fringe. Given the height of the

poles and the weight of the flags it was a struggle to keep the flags upright in heavy winds. In fact, the flags were so heavy that our flag poles often bent when the guard did a "present arms" (a rapid dip of the flags to salute the National Colours at the end of the Colour

Presentation). Given the size of the poles and the weight of the flags about all that could be done with the flags was keep them upright, dip them and, on occasion, remove the poles from their holsters and do some simple movements.

A typical drum line consisted of three snare drums, three tenor drums, one or two bass drums, a few cymbals and, perhaps, some glockenspiels. By 1960 most corps had stopped



*The 1958 Toronto Optimists Drum & Bugle Corps on the front steps of De La Salle "Oaklands". The total corps size was 39 members.*

## OLD SKOOL DRUM CORPS (CONTINUED)

using glockenspiels. Except for small changes in numbers this configuration varied little until the late the 1960s when additional types of drums (side-mounted Bass drums, Typanis, etc) were added. In 1960 the Toronto Optimists introduced what was then considered a very big drumline that included six snares and three tenors; however, the extra tenths in GE were offset by reduced execution scores and they reverted to the usual three and three. Obtaining permission to use non-traditional instruments could be a challenge. I think it was 1965 when the Toronto Optimists planned on playing Temptation. We wanted to use Steelpan drums (also called Steel drums or Pan drums) in the music but the rules organizations refused to allow their use.

Early horn lines usually used G bugles that had a single, horizontally mounted piston valve which altered the note by a full tone. A half-tone slide was eventually added and this was replaced by a rotary valve. In terms of instrumentation, corps used Sopranos, Tenors, French Horns and Baritones. The Baritones were eventually replaced by larger Bass-Baritone horns. Whaley Royce, a Canadian bugle manufacturer that had developed the first French Horn bugle in the 1940s, developed the first Contrabass around 1959; however, it was not until 1962 that the Contrabass was first used by the Garfield Cadets and the Hawthorne Caballeros. By the way, the August 2012 issue of GCC contains an article by Don Angelica (reprinted from the August 8, 1962 issue of Drum Corps News) in which he discusses the controversy that arose from using the contrabass. Whaley Royce also created the Mellophone and the Euphonium which were first used by corps in 1964 (the Mellophone was based on the Mellophonium which was created by Conn in the late 1950s for the Stan Kenton Orchestra).

### Field size and show design

Corps contests were held on an American size football field (100 yards long x160 feet wide vs 110 x 65 yards for a Canadian field). In the old days, the only lines on the field would usually be the sidelines and, perhaps, a line indicating centre field. Some of these fields were closer to cow pastures

and there was always the possibility of stepping into a hole on the field and tripping. At times a contest might be held on a baseball diamond which meant that the stands could be at an angle to the corps. Trying to maintain a straight line under those circumstances could be a challenge. If we were lucky the front sideline would be the third base line. A corps would often step off the line in a cloud of dust and it was always interesting to watch a line of corps members go up and down as they marched over the pitcher's mound. Today's fancy astro-turf fields with a flat surface and marked lines every five yards are a definite improvement.

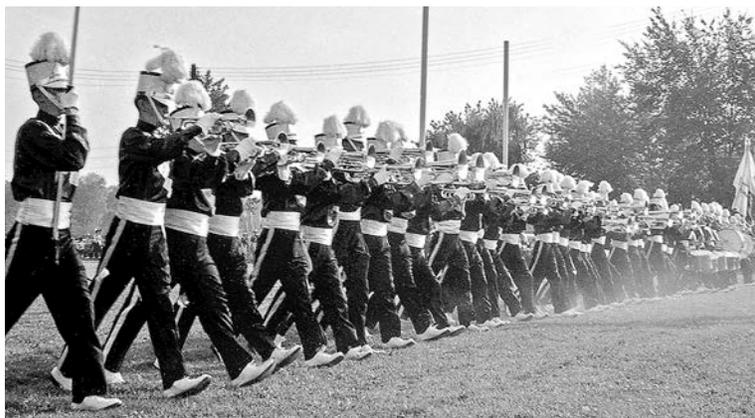
Typically a corps' show would include an "Off The Line" number, a stationary concert,

a mandatory colour presentation (presenting the National Colours) as well as an exit or "Off The Field" song. A corps would form up on the starting line (left end from a spectator's perspective), play some songs while in motion, perform a stationary "concert" at centre field, near the sideline, play an "out of concert" number and they would end their show on the "finish line" (on the right end of the field). Before the "Off The Line" number the corps might perform an "opening fanfare" and there might, perhaps, be a "closing fanfare" on the finish line.

Unlike the free-flowing drills of today M&M shows were designed to present effectiveness using company fronts, echelons, squads, platoons etc. "Ticks" were assessed (a tick reduced the score by one tenth of a point) if anyone was out



*Toronto Optimists competing at Roosevelt Stadium in the 1960 "Preview of Champions". You can see that the only markings are an outline of the competition field.*



*1961 - Toronto Optimists step "Off The Line" on a dry, dusty field in Windsor, Ontario.*

## OLD SKOOL DRUM CORPS (CONTINUED)

of step, if lines weren't straight, intervals were not equal, etc.

### Judging and Point Allocation

Today, scoring and point allocation is standardized; however, that was not always the case. We'll get to that later. Right now let's look at the types of judges we used to have.

There was always a Timing judge, often a judge who conducted an Inspection (inspections disappeared around 1965), as well as the mandatory Execution judges on the field and General Effect judges in the stands. A corps' final score would be the total of all categories minus inspection infractions and penalties.

Corps could receive "penalties" for a number of reasons. For example, in the area of timing a corps would receive a two point penalty for being over-time or under-time. Corps would also be assessed a minimum two point penalty for being late for inspection. During a performance a corps would be penalized a tenth of a point for dropping a piece of equipment plus a full point if it was picked up. Avoiding a one point penalty meant that, if a drum stick, mouthpiece, rifle, etc was dropped we had to wait until a judge (hopefully) picked it up and handed it to us. In addition

to these examples, there were numerous rules regarding the National Flag and Flag Violations often generated penalties. For example, "nothing could pass between the guard and the National Flag" or "when the National Flag passes by, all other flags must dip in respect". Each flag violation generated a penalty of two points.

When it came to timing, judging rules stated that a corps' performance must be between 11 and 13 minutes long and



1962 - Rome, New York. Toronto Optimists' National Party using regulation army issue, Lee Enfield 303 caliber rifles with nine inch steel bayonets. All the metal parts were chrome plated. Total weight: 9.2 lbs. (The breach was welded closed)

inspection a judge would look at each member to check their personal appearance, their uniform and their equipment. Each infraction (eg unkempt appearance, dirt on a uniform, an unpolished horn, etc) resulted in a penalty of one tenth of a point.

In terms of execution, a corps would begin with the maximum points for a category and judges deducted a tenth of a point for every mistake they saw. When it came to General

Effect a corps began with zero marks in the category and the judges gave marks based on what they thought of the show.

There would typically be six Field or Execution Judges, two each for marching, drumming and bugles. These judges used a "tick system" in both drill and music. They looked and listened for

errors and each infraction that they noticed generated a "tick" which decreased a corps' score by 1/10th of a point.

While I can't comment about the judging for horns and drums I remember M&M judging varied by jurisdiction with the most stringent judging occurring in the US Midwest. Jack Roberts was a former M&M judge as well as a drill designer and instructor for the Toronto Optimists. He remembers: "the Midwest judging was a little different with zero tolerance. If the

they must be in motion for at least 8 of those minutes. The timing for a performance began at the first note of music or at the first step off the starting line and ended when the last corps member crossed the "finish line". A starters pistol would be fired when the show began, again at the 11 minute mark as well as when the final corps member crossed the finish line.

During a typical



1965 - Toronto Optimists - "Colour Presentation" at the Canadian Nationals in Hamilton, Ontario.

## OLD SKOOL DRUM CORPS (CONTINUED)

front had one or ten not in the front, you would receive a tick for each person, one or ten. If the front continued like that with no recovery, usually 10 steps, they would tick all over. That said, it was usually up to the M&M judge to decide, as long as he or she was uniform throughout the contest. The judges in Midwest, East and Canada all did it similar, but Midwest

was brutal. For example a squad had to have all its members perfectly erect at all times. In Canada and East, if the interval was equal, it was deemed to be correct as a squad even when the outside persons were leaning to the centre, because the interval was still correct. Ergo, I had to teach something I did not like because of the judges jurisdiction we would face. Also if the front was off, we had to make sure it was not intentional before ticking away. Many Corps would bend the ends of a company front to escape the ticks, but the GE judge would get them if it was still off.”

General Effect, or “GE” judges had the best seats in the stands. There would usually be GE Judges for M&M (Marching and Manoeuvring), Drums and Bugles. Their job was to analyse the “effectiveness” and “showmanship” of all aspects of a corps show. These judges would look at things such as the difficulty and complexity of the music and drill, how the various aspects interact (does the drill fit the music, do the drum charts work well with the horns), etc. Generally a corps would start with zero points in GE and the judges would add points as the show progressed.

A negative aspect of GE scoring was that corps that performed early in a competition often had lower



*Mr Baggs with the Chief Judges of the NY and Michigan All-American Association. (1965)  
L-R: Al Tevels, NY; Mr Baggs; Col. G. Cutler, Michigan.*

when it came to the allocation of points, there was an absence of uniformity since competitions did not use a standardized scoring system. A corps could, for example, compete in three or four contests over the course of a weekend and be judged using three or four different scoring systems!

At the end of this article is an example of scoring as defined by the All-American Judges Association in 1958; however, this was not the only judging association. For example, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, the Midwest and Canada each had independent judging associations and rules. In fact, different contests in the same area might use different rules. For example, one contest in New York might use All-American rules while another might use the rules for the New York State Judges Association.

I've included a table showing a few examples of contests and how points were allocated for each category. As you will see, one contest might allocate as much as 90 points for

execution and 10 for GE while another one might assign 55 points for execution and 45 points for GE. In addition, the number of judges evaluating a particular category was not consistent. A Drum Corps competition always had two judges for each execution caption; however,



*1961- Toronto Optimists Colour Guard with their tall flag poles bending slightly in the wind.*

## OLD SKOOL DRUM CORPS (CONTINUED)

the number of GE judges often varied. In some contests there might be two judges for each category, in another there might be a single judge for each GE caption or, perhaps, one judge who assigned a score for total General Effect.

### A few memories of shows

“El Cid”, the opening drill for Optimists’ 1963 show, had the corps stepping off the line then forming a large triangle that covered the width of the field. The triangle continued moving forward but condensed to single spacing. It then changed direction and moved at an angle to the crowd. Drum judges always hovered around the drum line. Those who had never seen our show were often too intent on their work, missing what was happening around them. On numerous occasions they got caught within the triangle, creating problems for both the judges and our corps.

After retreat we would gather in the dressing room and Barry Bell, our horn instructor, would review the caption sheets, pointing out areas that might be causing problems. He would also read comments from the judges. We did this after a 1964 Senior competition in Titusville, Pennsylvania (we’d won each of the previous two or three years). It had rained heavily and the grass was very slippery. During our performance one of our corps members had slipped on the muddy grass with their knee touching the ground. They stood upright and finished the show. A judge wrote that he almost missed it because the recovery was so smooth; however, he still penalized us a tenth



1961 - Toronto Optimists being inspected, Phillipsburg, New Jersey.



Toronto Optimists 1963 “El Cid” triangle which often captured drum judges.



Truman Crawford, Bill Shepherd of Whaley Royce and Dave Watt holding Optimists first Contrabass (1965)

for dropped equipment plus a full point for picking it up. That loss of 1.1 points cost us the contest.

In 1965 the Optimists opened their show with a company front – all the way to centre field. One August night at practice our focus was on ensuring that the front was like a board. Much of the evening was spent marching in a front and playing. When we reached the “finish line” we’d do a four count turn and march back to the starting line. The rehearsal was during the Perseid Meteor Shower and we were lucky enough to see a large meteor streak by. We continued marching and playing but all eyes were on the meteor. After it had disappeared our eyes looked down the line and it was as straight as an arrow. Gawd we felt good! And confident that the front was solid. Two days later we were competing – on a baseball diamond, at an angle to the stands! Sadly, for that show, the board was a tad warped.

### What more can I say?

I hope you’ve enjoyed the read. Hopefully you have also gained an understanding and appreciation for “Old Skool” or “Classic” or “Golden Age” or “Old School” Drum and Bugle Corps.

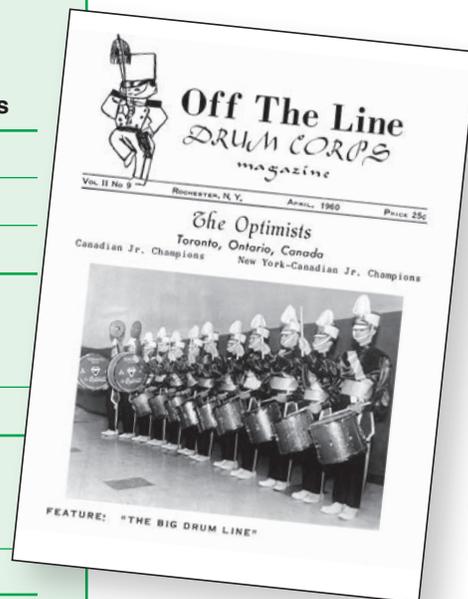
The following three pages contain additional material that will clarify or supplement aspects of the article. ■

## OLD SKOOL DRUM CORPS (CONTINUED)

### Example of Point Allocation by Caption

(from a 1962 contest in Rome, New York using New York State rules)

	Toronto Optimists	Blessed Sacrament	St Catherine's Queensmen	Utica Yankees
GE M&M	14.9	12.6	13.1	12.7
GE Bugles	13.1	12.8	12.2	10.5
GE Drums	13.7	13.5	13.3	12.3
<b>Total GE</b>	<b>41.70</b>	<b>38.90</b>	<b>38.60</b>	<b>35.50</b>
Field M&M: 1	19.1	18.6	17.5	18.0
Field M&M: 2	18.6	19.4	18.6	17.5
<b>Average M&amp;M</b>	<b>18.85</b>	<b>19.00</b>	<b>18.05</b>	<b>17.75</b>
Field Bugles: 1	11.6	12.8	12.1	12.3
Field Bugles: 2	13.2	13.4	12.3	12.5
<b>Average Bugles</b>	<b>12.40</b>	<b>13.10</b>	<b>12.20</b>	<b>12.40</b>
Field Drums: 1	12.9	13.5	13.1	10.6
Field Drums: 2	13.6	13.4	13.8	11.2
<b>Average Drums</b>	<b>13.25</b>	<b>13.45</b>	<b>13.45</b>	<b>10.90</b>
Penalties	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
<b>Total Score</b>	<b>86.20</b>	<b>84.45</b>	<b>82.30</b>	<b>76.55</b>



1960 - the cover of "Off The Line" magazine featuring the Toronto Optimists' "Big" drum line that included six snares and three tenors.

### Rules from the All-American Judging Association: Drum & Bugle Corps Rules — June 29, 1958

- A minimum drill of 11 minutes, a maximum 13 minutes.
- All judging will continue through entire performance.
- Inspection. Condition of uniforms, equipment and general appearance as a military unit. All instruments used must be on the inspection line.
- Total penalty will be deducted from the General Effect score.
 

Musical quality of bugles or fifes	25%
Excellence of drumming	25%
Marching and manoeuvring (M&M)	30%
General effect	20%
- A penalty of two points will be deducted from the total score for each minute or fraction thereof for over or under time on the field.
- If a member of the corps proper steps over the side boundary, a penalty of one point for each error will be assessed.
- A two-point penalty for any breach of the flag code.
- All competing drum and bugle corps must march in the parade and appear in the grand finale to qualify for competition and prizes.
- All-American judges will be in charge. No contestant or directors will be allowed to converse with judges while contest is going on. Please abide by this rule.
- Any unit not reporting within 15 minutes of their set inspection time shall be penalized two points; a unit not reporting within 30 minutes shall be penalized four points.
- Failure to report by any unit prior to the start of the inspection of the last competing group shall disqualify the unit.

## OLD SKOOL DRUM CORPS (CONTINUED)

### Samples of Point Allocation by contest

The table below shows examples of point allocation in a variety of contests (the information was taken from contest programs). The total for execution categories could range from 55 points all the way to 90 points while the total for GE could vary from as little as 10 points all the way to 45 points. Also, inspection penalties could easily cause a corps to lose a contest – before they even stepped on the field to perform!

As you can see, when it came to assigning scores to a corps' performance there was an absence of consistency and uniformity. The result was that the same performance could yield different results depending on which judging system was used.

Contest	Execution				Execution Total	General Effect			GE Total
	Inspection	M&M	Bugles	Drums		M&M	Bugles	Drums	
All-American (1958)		30	25	25	80				20
New Jersey (1962)		30	30	30	90				10
Waterloo, Ontario, Canadian Nationals (1963)		25	20	20	65	15	10	10	35
Mundelein, Illinois (1963)		30	30	30	90				10
Falconer, New York (1963)		30	20	20	70	10	10	10	30
Medina, New York (1963) Using NY State rules		25	15	15	55	15	15	15	45
Pittsburg, Pennsylvania (1963)	10	30	20	20	70				20
Racine, Wisconsin (1964)	10	20	20	20	60				30
Rochester, New York (1964)		20	20	15	55	15	15	15	45
Wisconsin (1964)	10	20	20	20	60				30
Kingston, New York (1965) All-American rules		30	25	25	80				20
Garfield, New Jersey (1967) All-American rules		30	25	25	80				20

### How contests are judged

*(from the program for a contest in 1957 sponsored by The Optimists)*

#### ✓ Inspection

At the end of the field each Corps is set up in a Corps front. Mister Curiosity is there with his pad to insure the primary basis of a good Drum Corps — neatness. For each infraction he finds, he takes off a tenth of a point. Failure to be clean shaven, lack of a haircut, spots or dirt on uniforms, unpolished shoes are individual items for which he takes off a tenth of a point. Equipment such as drums and bugles must be spotless — infraction thereof means a tenth of a point. Mr. Curiosity is there to find each minute violation — that is his job and he does it.

#### ✓ Marching and Manoeuvring

As the Corps lines up on the field — two nasty little rabbits with pads under their arms suddenly pop up playing the game of Hounds and Hares. On the competition field the hares are after the hounds.

No army general is more exacting. A mistake is not the glaring error noticeable to the public, it is the minute failures which detract from perfection that constitute their meat. Interval between men, distance between ranks, files not covered, dress or ranks, squad, sections, platoons and Corps fronts must be in perfect array. Any failure, even of the slightest degree, means the loss of a tenth of a point for each unit infraction.

The perfection of detail must be carried out to such a degree that any bad break of formation or any nonconformity of even a pivot meets with disapproving check of Mr. Rabbit to the tune of a tenth of a point. The unforgivable Drum Corps crime — out of step — is greeted with a tenth of a point for every sixteen steps. Should the hound decide to become

a little lazy and fail to pick up his feet, marking time or become sloppy in his bearing, Mr. Rabbit is there to take off one-tenth of a point. An unmerciful cuss is Mr. Rabbit but he must do his job and he does it.

#### ✓ Bugling

If you take special notice of a couple of individuals with big ears, they are the Bugle Judges. The poor fellows have been straining their ears so long to detect mistakes, their ears almost leave their heads, propel a pencil and note a tick for each mistake.

Theirs is the task of ascertaining that each man in the bugle line is a musician, playing his part. Tone quality, musical accents, proper musical blend, tone and release are all qualities which a good Drum Corps must effect. Failure to do so in any way means the loss of a tenth of a point. Musical contrast, diminuendo and crescendo, accelerando and retard are vital qualities of a good musical unit; each failure means the loss of a tenth of a point. Handling of equipment such as position of bugles while marching and playing, bringing them up and down at the beginning and completion of a song lend to the good order of the unit. Each failure means a tenth of a point. The poor fellow has a tough job — no wonder his ears become big and his eyeballs hang from their sockets.

#### ✓ Drumming

These fellows are really stinkers. They sneak behind the Corps, they walk beside the drummers, they have no respect for privacy. If you suddenly see someone take out survey equipment, it is the drum judge trying to ascertain the proper angle of the drums, the exact position and height of the stick. Each failure means a tenth of a point. Each drum rudiment which corresponds to the musical note on the bugle, must be done to perfection. Attack, release, contrast,

diminuendo, crescendo are all tonal requisites of a good drummer. Any time he errs in any one of these departments, he loses a tenth of a point for his unit.

#### ✓ General Effect

Showmanship is a vital part of a Competition. Hidden in the stand at vantage points are three big judges spotting their prey. These men ascertain the effect of the Corps on the audience, the smoothness of execution of the drill, the general temper of the bugling and drumming, the action of the drum major and the Color Guard. Are the manoeuvres simple or complex, are they set to the music, does the entire show have the harmony and blend it should have? These are questions the General Effect Judge must determine and score the Corps accordingly. It is a difficult task and takes a capable man.

#### ✓ Timer

The fellow has a starters pistol and a clock. He fires the pistol on the first step off the line or at the first note of music. A Corps must be on the field from eleven to thirteen minutes. He times them as to the length of time in motion. He fires the warning gun at 11 minutes. He times the Corps as they leave the field to make sure they are within the specified time. If a Corps is under or over, there is a penalty of one whole point.

We have tried to present a brief picture of a competition in a light vein to make it more impressive. Our purpose is to pay real tribute to the Judges who are men of high calibre and of precise training. They are the watchdogs of fair play, they perform a difficult task and deserve real tribute. We salute them today and on each occasion, congratulate them for their fine work. You, the people, can enjoy a competition because of their watchfulness and hard work.