



Toronto Optimists History-Newsletter

This publication honours and continues the tradition started by Don Daber in 1960.
Toronto Optimists History - Newsletter is published on a Random Basis.

The Toronto Optimists History website celebrates:

The Toronto Optimists Drum & Bugle Corps 1958 - 1975 | The Seneca Optimists Drum & Bugle Corps 1976 - 1978

Published by Bob Carell. Please direct inquiries to: Toronto_Optimist@rogers.com
A PDF version is available on the website: www.TorontoOptimistsHistory.ca

1963 — Optimists Small Corps!



Random Issue

September 2026

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PDF VERSION ON OUR WEBSITE: www.TorontoOptimistsHistory.ca

Contribute to YOUR Newsletter

Dave and Bob started the newsletter as a vehicle to republish Colin's history of The Optimists. Those issues included a "Featured Corps", highlighting a Canadian Corps", and a "Spotlight", featuring another Canadian Corps. After we had published the book, we took a break. It's time to start again.

We will now publish "**Random Issues**" of the newsletter. To lighten our workload, we will no longer include a "Featured Corps" or a "Spotlight". When we have enough material, we will publish an issue. This issue is The First.

Your feedback will help us choose our next steps. Since starting the TOH Newsletters, we have published memories from over 30 different sources: some from individuals, others from publications. The Newsletters section on the website includes a link to an Acrobat file that contains a topic list for each issue.

To continue the newsletter, we need more stories! Here are a few ideas for you to think about:

- How did you feel on the starting line for your first competition?
- What was your most memorable show?
- What was your favourite trip?
- What do you remember most about your time in the Corps?
- What was your most challenging time in the Corps?

I hope you get the idea and will submit your suggestions! Thank you.

SEND your suggestions, stories or articles to Bob: toronto_optimist@rogers.com

2021



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WELCOME TO THE INAUGURAL ISSUE of the new Toronto Optimists History - Newsletter

Don Daber launched the first issue of TOH in December 1960, and since then there has been a long history of Optimists connected. David Johns and I decided to continue that tradition by creating The Toronto Optimists History - Newsletter for the Toronto Optimists.



Don Daber and David Johns at the computer working on an issue of TOH.

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WELCOME TO THE SECOND ISSUE of the new Toronto Optimists History - Newsletter

Our first issue was very well received and we hope that all of you will continue to enjoy learning the history of The Toronto Optimists. In this edition we are publishing Chapters three and four of Colin's book. Chapter three focuses on the coming together of members of Open Corps and the Toronto Optimists. Chapter four continues the story of the Toronto Optimists. This issue also contains some memories of 1957 and 1959 that were submitted by Phil Hestings. As an added feature we are reprinting an article by Colin Hestings about the Optimists' drum line. The article, which covers the years 1957 through 1962, was originally published in a 1962 issue of TOH (Volume 2, #6).



Phil Hestings, Drum Major (1962)

ISSUE 2 APRIL 2021

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- 4 What's new on the Toronto Optimists History website
- 5 FEATURE ARTICLE: Optimists Drumline from 1957 to 1962
- 6 From Toronto... The Optimist
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THIS IS THE THIRD ISSUE of the new Toronto Optimists History - Newsletter

Your response to these newsletters has been very positive and we hope you will enjoy this one. The Optimists had over 100 members in the first year in competition. Everyone, corps members and fans, were wondering whether the Optimists could hold on to their place. Perhaps Scott Hestings would regain the title of "the last of his kind" in the past, I'm sure you already know the answer. However, you might be interested in hearing from the year published. This issue includes Chapter 5 and 6 of Colin's History of the Optimists. These chapters focus on the development of the corps, its management and its second year in competition, including the corps' first trip to Jersey City.



The Toronto Optimists Drum & Bugle Corps, Jersey City, 1960

Scott Hestings, President of Optimists, Jersey City, 1960

For the Preview of Champions, we have also included an article by Lorne Foran about the beginnings of the Optimists. In addition, you will find an article about Doug MacKenzie who was recently inducted into the Bugles Hall of Fame.

The focus of this publication is the history of the Optimists, however, we hope to include information about other corps. In this issue we have included a special feature, an article about the Jolly Jesters. The Jolly Jesters were, not only, an important part of Canadian drum corps history, they were also a corps ahead of its time. We hope you will find the article to be both interesting and informative.

ISSUE 3 JULY 2021

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HEY! THIS IS THE LAST ISSUE FOR 2021 of the Toronto Optimists History - Newsletter

Your feedback has been very positive and we hope to make these newsletters even better in 2022. The nature of life is change and that applies to drum corps. It is a corps' fate to change its members. The Toronto Optimists were not able to do that in 2021. As the Optimists prepared for the 1960 season they had no main goal, we had their first competing Nationals and improve the corps standing in the USA.

This issue includes Chapter 7 and 8 of Colin's History of the Optimists. These chapters focus on some of the changes and experiments that occurred during the winter of 1959/60 as well as the 1960 season. In 1960 Don Daber discovered drum corps and this discovery had a positive impact, not only on the Toronto Optimists but on the drum corps activity in both Canada and the United States.

In this issue we have included a special feature, an article about the Preston Scout House Band. Scout House was a truly unique corps that played a very important role in Canadian drum corps history. We hope you will find the article to be both interesting and informative.



March Band inspecting the Toronto Optimists, 1960, Toronto, 1960

ISSUE 4 October 2021

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Issue 2: April 2021

Issue 3: July 2021

Issue 4: October 2021

2022

Issue 5: January 2022

Issue 6: April 2022

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Issue 9: January 2023

Issue 10: April 2023

Issue 11: July 2023

Issue 12: October 2023

2024

Issue 13: January 2024

Issue 14: April 2024

Issue 15: July 2024

The Toronto Optimists History Newsletter

David Johns and I have decided to publish what we call “Random Issues” of the Toronto Optimists History Newsletter. When we were re-publishing Colin’s History of the Optimists, it was clear that the next issue would include the next chapters. Now, we are in a new era.

We have already decided the content for the first two “Random Issues”. **The content of future issues will depend on you!** We need you to give us some direction. Please submit your ideas. While we cannot make any guarantees, we will do our best to satisfy your requests.

NEXT ISSUE: 1975 — The End of an Era!

Doug MacKenzie was the Corps Director in 1975, Toronto Optimists final year competing. As a result, Doug has a unique perspective on all that transpired. He has written an extensive story that provides an in-depth overview of that last year and the subsequent merger. Doug’s article will be included in our next “Random Issue”.

Below is Doug’s introductory paragraph:

Colin Hedworth wrote a wonderful chronology of the Toronto Optimists Drum and Bugle Corps. His book is based on “his time in the Corps,” and, as with most historical records, the “recollection of others,” rightly or wrongly”. Good people make decisions with the best of intentions, and hindsight is twenty-twenty. It is easy to be critical, but not easy to do. The following article is not to malign anyone or be confrontational, but to add to Colin’s narrative of the last Year of the Toronto Optimists. It is a story of how that last year came about and what the aftereffects were. Although Colin was not involved with the Corps in the seventies, I used Colin’s book and other references and spoke with people who were there at the time, as I was. Please see the credits at the end of this article.



The 1975 Toronto Optimists



WEBSITE ADDITIONS

Additions to both the **Main website** and the **Photo Gallery** continue to be made. A new photo is added to the gallery almost every day.

TORONTO OPTIMISTS HISTORY WEBSITE: UPDATE



Toronto Optimists Small Corps (Kitchener, 1963)

WEBSITE UPDATE:

What's new on TorontoOptimistsHistory.ca

The Website is Alive and Well! The main website already contains a wealth of information so, other than adding old issues of Green Capsule Comments, it's hard to know what else would interest people. If anyone has suggestions, I am open to hearing them.

Some suggestions might not be implemented because they are too complex, time consuming or I do not have the information I need; however, if I can follow through with a suggestion, I will do so.

My primary focus is the Photo Gallery because I still have many photos that have not been posted. Unless I'm taking a break, I add a new photo to the gallery almost every day. Below is a recent post.

- Bob



Toronto Optimists Colour Guard (Merritton Community Day, September, 1960)

L-R: Mike Layton (Guard Captain), Ivor Bramley (rifle), Ian Robertson ?, Bob Cook ?, Len Perrin (rifle), ?, Larry Cheevers ?, ?, Andy Henderson ?, Al Miller?, Don Yeaman ?

Toronto Optimists' Small Corps

Editor's Introduction

During the winter of 1962-1963 a few members of the Toronto Optimists decided to create a Small Corps to perform during the Spring of 1963. The corps members selected the music and designed a drill that could be performed on an indoor hockey rink. The corps performed in Waterloo, Hull, QC and Peterborough. My memory, after 60+ years, has faded. Perhaps there were other performance venues?

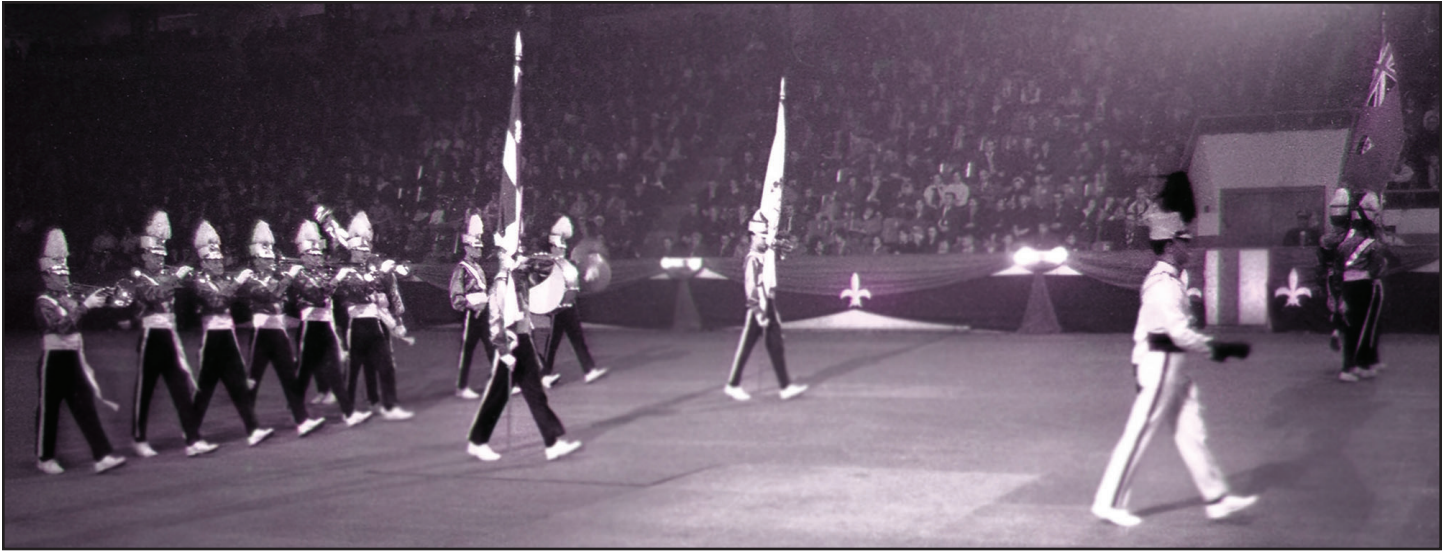
The article below was written by Dave Watt, who played Baritone in the Small Corps. I've illustrated the story with photos that were taken by Don Daber at a performance in Waterloo and another in Hull. The article was originally published in the Toronto Optimists' newsletter, Green Capsule Comments, Volume 3, Number 2, March—April 1963. (Bob Carell, Editor, 2026)



Glen Durish, DM, conducts opening fanfare (Hull, QC, 1963)

Toronto Optimists Small Corps: *by Dave Watt*

For the past two months, the attention of drum corps fans in Canada has been focused on a new phase in Canadian Corps – The Optimists Small Corps. This compact unit, consisting of 19 of the older and more experienced members of the present Canadian Champion Optimists formed together to create a minute replica of their parent Corps.



Off-The-Line (Hull, QC, 1963)

The idea of Small Corps was taken from the mid-west, where Small Corps are very common-place, although none of our members had actually seen one of these Small Corps in action. In Drum Corps periodicals the mid-west Small Corps were very often mentioned in half-time shows, and even in contests, and it was from this vague beginning that Robin Weatherstone brought together the nucleus of the Optimist Small Corps.



Toronto Optimists Small Corps (Hull, QC, 1963)

Into this Small Corps are incorporated many of the ideas that Corps members would like to do, but which are, unfortunately, either out of place in our own show, or already done by other well-known Corps. An ardent Drum Corps fan will notice that much of our music is taken directly from the select U.S. Corps. This is intended. The Small Corps is not at present a competing unit, and if it is to remain a demonstration unit, it should contain the best possible ingredients, which is precisely what it contains at the present time.



Small Corps playing concert (Hull, QC, 1963)

The Small Corps has not had, for any long period of time, a permanent instructor in any capacity which is why it should be looked upon as an even greater accomplishment since a large part of the music, drill, and drumming is played by ear. The Small Corps is comprised of: nine horns — four soprano, two french horns, and three bass horns. There are three in the drum line: one snare, one rudimental bass, and one cymbals. The six guard members constitute: two rifles, one national flag, and three secondary flags.

The music that is included in the repertoire of the Small Corps is a mixture of the favorite numbers of our own show, and the most popular numbers of other corps. Our Off-The-Line Fanfare is “Ben-Hur” followed by “Vanished Army”, both made famous by The Blessed Sacrament Corps exquisite horn line.



Small Corps (Hull, QC, 1963)



Small Corps Colour Presentation (Hull, QC, 1963) National Party L-R: Andy Henderson, Dick Ward, Chuck Clutterbuck

An original fanfare leads into “The March of The Charioteers,” one of the numbers from the Optimists 1963 repertoire (Note: replaced in show by “El Cid”). Then a tribute to St. Vincent’s Cadets is their never-to-be-forgotten “Land of the Pharaohs” brings the Small Corps into concert.

The concert of “I’m in the Mood for Love” is one of the hold-overs of the ‘62 field show of the Optimists. A brief, but familiar fanfare to Garfield Cadets, is “Exodus”, our out of concert piece

and into another holdover from the ‘62 Optimist Show — “Tabu”. The colour presentation is perhaps one of the most famous of all marches, remembered best in the repertoire of Blessed Sacrament — “National Emblem”. After a stirring rudimental bass solo, the corps heads towards the finish line playing the fanfare number used so effectively by the Optimists in ‘62, “The Party’s Over”. Our final fanfare, on the finish line is a new number for ‘63 “Barabbas” (Note: it was replaced in our show by “Lawrence of Arabia”), a fitting ending to a show that must be considered unique, if not for its quality, then for the inventiveness of the people who put it together.



Toronto Optimists Small Corps (Kitchener, 1963)

The members of the Small Corps — by section:

- Drum Major: Glen Durish
- Sopranos: Doug Yarker, Joe Gianna, Karl Bossert and Terry McKolskey
- French Horn: Howie Davies and Ross Cation
- Bass Horn; Al Lavigne, Dave Watt and Robin Weatherstone
- Cymbals: Bill Grigg
- Rudimental Bass: Ron Kaiser
- Snare: Vic Krukliis
- Rifle: Andy Henderson and Chuck Clutterbuck
- National Colours: Dick Ward
- Secondary Colours: Bill Hannah, Gene Chepswick and Mike Thys



Small Corps (Hull, QC, 1963)



L-R: Vic Krukliis on snare, Ron Kaiser hiding behind the Rudimental Bass and Bill Grigg on cymbals (Kitchener, 1963)



Small Corps (Hull, QC, 1963) L-R: Dave Watt, Ross Cation, Joe Gianna, Al Lavigne, Howie Davies, Drum Major Glen Durish, Robin Weathestone, Doug Yarker, Terry McKolskey, Karl Bossert



On the Finish Line (Hull, QC, 1963)

Jimmy McConkey: The Jimmy I Remember

Many Thanks to Doug MacKenzie who did all of the research and wrote the text of this great Remembrance of Jimmy. This is Part 1. We will include Part 2 in the next issue.

Jimmy McConkey was perhaps the first drum major to break the rigid military code of marching in Drum and Bugle Corps. His iconic style with the Archer Epler Musketeers, including his famous “dipsy doodle” dance in their concert and his unforgettable shoutout in *April in Paris*, set the stage for what was to come.



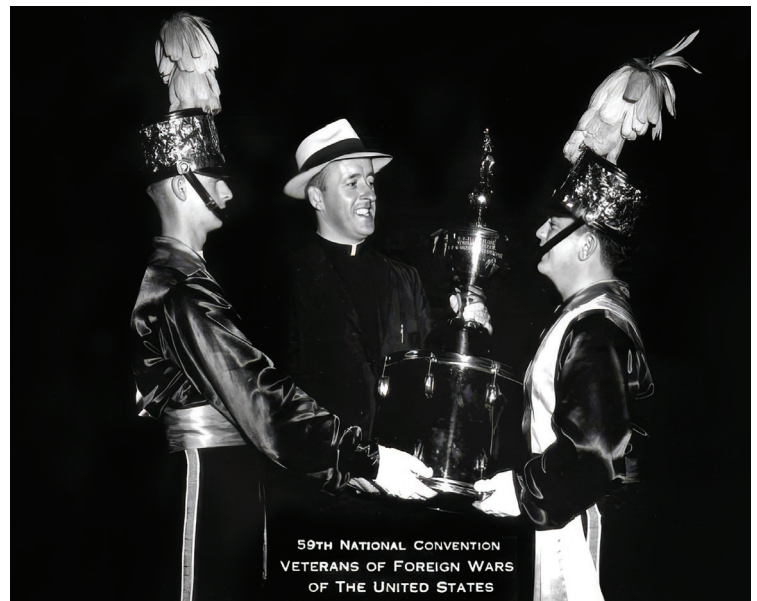
Jimmy McConkey with Archer Epler Musketeers (1959)

He began with the famous St. Vincent's Cadets of Bayonne in 1950, then St. Joe's Newark in 1956 and 1957; he moved to Blessed Sacrament as Drum Major in 1958, where he and Bobby Paul led the corps to a sweep of both the CYO and VFW National Championships. He then joined the Archer Epler Musketeers for the 1959, 1960, and 1961 seasons. In late 1961, McConkey moved to Toronto at the request of Canada's Marching Ambassadors and appeared with them at the Canadian Nationals. They would place second to the Guelph Royallaires. In January 1962, he joined the Toronto Optimists.

He was a true innovator in drum major showmanship. He designed his own uniforms, always incorporating a large belt buckle, a trademark carried over from his Musketeer days.

He also taught guard for the Optimists, Hamilton Conquerors, and the Marching Angels of Sarnia, along with Joe Gianna, a fellow Optimists soloist, who taught the later two horn lines. His presence elevated the Optimists to an almost perfect competitive year, losing only once, at the first contest of the season in Toronto, by a mere 0.5 points to the Garfield Cadets, who would go on to win the American Legion Championships.

That same year, Jimmy would lead the Optimists to a landmark victory over his old corps, Blessed Sacrament, at Rome, New York. He also won two Canadian National Championships in 1962 and 1963, making him perhaps the only performer ever to win national titles on both sides of the border—another reason for inducting him into the World Drum Corps Hall of Fame, which many have long sought.



Bobby Paul, Father Garner and Jim McConkey (1958)

The Showmanship And Legacy Of Jimmy McConkey (continued)



You can see Jimmy's surprise when Blessed Sacrament Golden Knights are announced in second place (Rome, NY, 1962)

This elite competitive trajectory reached an emotional peak in 1963. On June 15, 1963, Jimmy led Canada's Green Machine, The Toronto Optimists, into Jersey City's legendary Roosevelt Stadium, the very backyard of his former New Jersey and Pennsylvania corps. The moment his name was announced over the PA system, the stadium erupted into a thunderous, roaring homecoming welcome. The Optimists, a crowd favourite that afternoon, placed fourth behind Blessed Sacrament, Garfield, and St. Joe's Batavia.

As a highschool marching member of the Optimists during the legendary 1962 and 1963 seasons, I had the privilege of knowing Jimmy both on the field and personally. He lived nearby at the Gianna house; I would come home after school, and Jimmy would be there.



*Jimmy with the Optimists at the 1963 Preview of Champions, in Jersey City, NJ
Reprinted, without permission, from "The Encyclopedia of Drum & Bugle Corps"*

The Showmanship And Legacy Of Jimmy McConkey (continued)

I last saw Jimmy in 1976 at the DCI Championships in Philadelphia. Mike Thys and I had just left a hotel in downtown Philly. We were at an intersection on a red light when I spotted this guy in front of me – I turned to Mike and said, “That’s Jimmy McConkey” Mike says bull s**t, the light turns green, and we step off the curb with the guy walking in front of us – I say hey Jimmy – he turns around. He yells out, “Dougie MacKenzie!” It was karma; who would have thunk it! Six degrees of separation.

After the DCI finals, we spent the evening at the Archer Epler post, laughing, drinking, telling stories, and slipping back into the rhythm of a friendship forged years before. Jimmy drove us there and, we think, drove us back — neither Mike nor I remember the return trip with any clarity. The next morning, over breakfast, he gave each of us a copper bracelet. By the time we reached the border, Mike was convinced he had Legionnaire’s disease; his bracelet had turned green, along with his wrist and forearm. In reality, it was just a hangover with accessories. But in the moment, Mike was ready to be hospitalized.

It was the last time we saw him. And it was perfect — chaotic, hilarious, improbable, and unmistakably Jimmy.



Jim McConkey with the Toronto Optimists (Grey Cup Parade, Toronto, 1962)

Let Me Entertain You

Not everything around Jimmy was as dramatic, but there was drama. As I said earlier, he'd often be at my house when I got home from school, waiting to perform his lipsync routines to the LPs of Judy Garland and Ethel Merman. My mother and I were the audience. He didn't just lipsync; he became them, gyrating, posing, and slipping into the persona of those two divas with a commitment that would have impressed Ed Sullivan. We didn't think in terms of "drag"; at the time, we wouldn't have known what that was. We just thought it was entertaining, and he was very talented.

These performances would be repeated at the Beer's house, which was around the corner from my house. Bernie Beer, WDCH of F, was the assistant director of the corps at the time, and he and his wife, Mary, were always open to having Jimmy, Joe, me, and others over. There is a good picture of Jimmy and Barry Bell at the Beers' and one of Barry and me, too. They had two very musically talented children: Larry, who would play in the corps, and Marion, whom I can confess I had a crush on some sixty-plus years ago. Often after Sunday rehearsals at A. E. Long, where Bernie was an executive, we would all go back to the Beers for corned beef and rye sandwiches. These were the boil-in-the-bag variety and a big deal then. I remember thinking it couldn't get any better than this. I'm hanging out with the Assistant Director; the soloist and drum major, Marion, was the icing. The nights at the Beers were full of music and jovial good company; I fondly remember those days.

Jimmy also organized a few guys and put on a skit at our corps banquet based on Officer Krupke from *West Side Story*. I think it was 1962, or perhaps his last year, 1963. The skit featured Jimmy, Ronn Prokop, Dave Johns, and me. He was always the centre of attention and never missed a chance for the theatrical.

Bugle Polishing Parties

We had brass horns back then, and inspections by a judge were common on both sides of the border. It was like a military inspection. Each corps would line up, and a judge or military officer would look at each individual up and down. If your horn wasn't polished, you would be docked a tenth of a point. This also applied to dirt on your shoes or uniform and the length of your hair. In a nutshell, it was spit and polish. Many contests were won or lost on the inspection line.



Barry Bell and Jim McConkey (1962)



Ronn Prokop, Doug MacKenzie (behind Jimmy), Jim McConkey and David Johns doing Officer Krumpke sketch (1962)

The Showmanship And Legacy Of Jimmy McConkey (continued)

Jimmy would arrange a horn-polishing party. I think he did this for two reasons: one, it built camaraderie among the members, and it was always an opportunity to have a few beverages with the boys. Because of my age, I was shut out of the beverage part, but I found that hanging with the older members built relationships that I still have to this day. Sadly, our ranks are diminishing, but these are the things you look back on with nostalgia: the shared rituals, the laughter, the sense of belonging.

The Draft

Contrary to rumour, Jimmy did not dodge the draft; he travelled freely back and forth across the border without trepidation. He and I never discussed his status or the war; he was likely “four F”. My father, who was in the British Army during the war, was wounded twice and never questioned Jimmy once about the draft or being in Canada. He absolutely deserves to be in the World Drum Corps Hall of Fame. An unforgettable character and a “major” contributor to drum corps.

The Drum Corps World

And while I’m writing this, I’ll mention that anyone who has ever played in a drum corps has, for the most part, experienced the same things. Sure, the activity has changed and may not be what it was in the fifties, sixties and beyond, but there is this thing that binds drum corps people together, past friend or past foe. It cannot be explained; it is within the individual who participated, and it can’t be replicated by those who didn’t.

A recent example: when I was in Indy this year for DCI, my pal Mike Thys (now fully recovered) and I wound up having dinner with four guys from Holland, the Netherlands. We didn’t know them; it was a chance meeting over a menu, and Mike picked up on them speaking Dutch.

Now here’s the thing: these guys were from Dordrecht the home to Jubal Drum and Bugle Corp. Mike is from Turnhout, Belgium, where he was born, which is only 60 kilometers from Dordrecht – our drum corps experiences mirrored each other even though, geographically, we are over 6,000 kilometres away; they played in the seventies and eighties and we played in the fifties and sixties. It is also not uncommon to sit next to someone at a contest you’ve never met and end up talking about how you competed against one another, or how they remember the Toronto Optimists.

A few years ago, I spoke with Dave Richards, Frank Dorritie, Joel Leeson, Louie Scirrotto, and Freddy Johnson about Jimmy and the WDCH of F. His absence from the Hall of Fame is considered an oversight. Among older alumni, especially those from Blessed Sacrament, Archer-Epler, and the Optimists, the sentiment is often: “Jimmy should have been in the Hall years ago.”

Things have evolved, and so have people and the movement. My Drum Corps isn’t the Drum Corps of today, but I’m over it and enjoy watching the kids perform today. The past should not be forgotten, but the past should be forgiven.



Barry Bell and Doug MacKenzie (1962)

The Showmanship And Legacy Of Jimmy McConkey (continued)



Jim McConkey presents John Wayne with an honorary membership in the Toronto Optimists (Hatari parade, June, 1962)



Artwork by Don Daber. Reprinted, with permission, from "The Art Of Drum Corps World" by Steve Vickers

On the recording of Toronto Optimists at the 1962 Canadian Nationals, after playing concert.

Jimmy can be heard saying: "You better bleed on the finish line!"

Gene Chepswick and Don Daber discussed the idea and Don Daber created this illustration.



Congratulations to Barry and Lorne

For some time, both Barry Bell and Lorne Ferrazzutti, Toronto Optimists first instructors, have been Associate Members in the World Drum Corps Hall Of Fame (WDCHOF). This year, the WDCHOF has elevated them to Full Membership!

The formal induction ceremony will be held during the 50th Annual World Drum Corps Hall of Fame Induction Banquet. This year's event will be held on December 5, 2026 in The Venue of the Valley Forge Casino Resort, 1160 First Avenue, King of Prussia, PA 19406. If you wish to attend this celebration, you must R.S.V.P. by November 1.



Barry Bell and Lorne Ferrazzutti (2013)

Here is a link to the Banquet and Registration information:
www.wdchof.org/50th-annual-induction-ceremony-and-banquet



Barry and Lorne "back in the day"

For those who do not know, here is a very brief outline of Barry and Lorne's background with The Optimists.

The Toronto Optimists were formed in the autumn of 1957. The Corps owes much of its success to the dedication and expertise of three important individuals who guided the corps to 11 consecutive Canadian National Championships.

Mr. Al Baggs served as the Corps Commander, providing leadership and vision. Barry Bell carefully selected the repertoire, crafted the brass arrangements, and guided the horn players with great skill. Meanwhile, Lorne Ferrazzutti took charge of the drum charts and instructed the drum line. Together, their efforts and guidance turned the Toronto Optimists into a championship corps, proving how crucial their roles were in shaping the corps' excellence.

Bob Cook

1955 — September 2025

Corps: London Midlanders, Toronto Optimists, De La Salle, Oakland Crusaders, and the Optimists Alumni

Bob started his drum corps career when he joined the Midlanders from London, Ontario, in 1968. He marched with Midlanders from 1969 to 1971. After the 1971 season, Bob and a few other friends from the Midlanders came to Toronto to join the Optimists. Bob's brother, Dave, also joined the Optimists, playing cymbals.

Bob was a member of the Optimists' snare line during 1972 and part of 1973. After the 1973 season, he left Optimists to join De La Salle, marching with Del's drumline in 1974. During Bob's age-out year, 1975, he played with the Oakland Crusaders (the merger between De La Salle and the Etobicoke Crusaders).

After aging out, Bob spent two years with the Oakland Crusaders as part of their instruction staff. He was the Bass Drum Tech for Oakie's excellent 1977 drumline.

When the Optimists Alumni Corps was formed in 2002, Bob joined their snare line. He played with the Optimists Alumni Corps until 2005.



Bob Cook (2004)



Bob Cook, second from left, with his drum (Toronto Santa Claus Parade, 1971)

Gord O'Halloran

Saturday, August 31, 2024

Corps: 330th RCAC Trumpet Band of Danforth Technical School, Danforth Tech Crusaders, Toronto Optimists, Jesters, Commanders, Toronto Signals and the Optimists Alumni

Gord began his drum corps career with the 330th RCAC Trumpet Band of Danforth Technical School which became the Danforth Tech Crusaders. He moved to the Toronto Optimists in 1957 when Barry Bell and Lorne Ferrazzutti moved there to instruct the corps. Gord played tenor in Optimists' drumline until he aged out after the 1960 season.

After leaving The Optimists, Gord played with the Jesters, then the Commanders. In addition, Gord instructed drums for the Bantam Optimists, the Scarborough Elainettes Baton & Drum & Baton Corps, St. John's Girls, Brantford Girls and the Ridge Raiders. Later in life, he played with both the Optimists Alumni and Toronto Signals as well as singing with the DCAT Chorus. Gord was still a member of DCAT and the Toronto Signals when he passed.

Here are a few comments from some of those who knew Gord:



Gord O'Halloran (2004)

"He was a wonderful man, whom I got to know through St. John's and again with Brantford Girls."

"I still remember my 1st practice with the Optimist Cadets in 1972... I wanted to play drums but the line was full so horn line it was... Gord knew my passion was for drums and allowed me to hit the skins when we had breaks.. He said don't worry kid one day you will play drums, and 45 years later I made the switch...My condolences to Gord's family.. he was a true gentleman."

"He was a true drum legend in Ontario. Touching the lives of so many with his kindness and support."

A fine man and gentleman. A mentor and friend to so many."

"Gord taught me everything I know.! RIP, Thank you for your patience and wisdom for a young green kid. You're never forgotten."

"Gord got myself, my brother and sister involved in Sigs. Thank you Gord for over 20 years of great memories, R.I.P."

"You were a kind and gentle man! I'm blessed our paths crossed!!"

Hans Boehnke

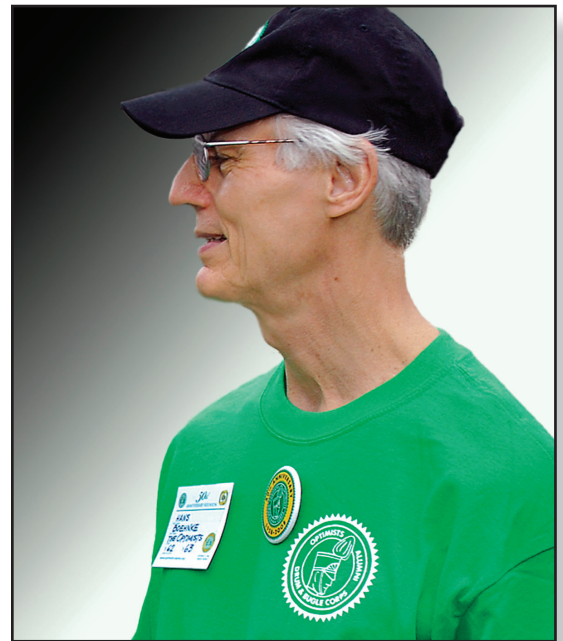
February 5, 1944 – October 1, 2025

Corps: St Mary's Band, Toronto Optimists

Hans began his drum corps career with St Mary's Band, in Toronto. I'm not sure when he began that career but I do know that he marched with Optimists, playing Soprano, in both 1962 and 1963.

After leaving the Optimists, Hans attended the University of Toronto, before attending the Canadian Memorial Chiropractic College, where he earned his Doctor of Chiropractic degree. He later achieved his Diplomate in Applied Kinesiology, a field in which he both taught and served on the Board of Examiners for many years.

He had a deep passion for helping others and consistently went above and beyond to support those in his care. Known as a strong, kind, ethical, and compassionate man, Hans left a lasting positive impact on all who knew him.



Hans Boehnke (Reunion, 2008)



Hans Boehnke is front, right (Trooping the stands, Preview of Champions, Jersey City, 1963)

Harry Clark

December 26, 1938 – August 5, 2025

Corps: Scout Band, Opti-Corps, Toronto Optimists, De La Salle

Harry started drumming with the Scout Band that started it all. When the guys left scouting and became Opti-Corps, Harry was there. And he continued drumming when Opti-Corps moved into Junior “A” and became the Toronto Optimists. Harry aged out in 1960; however, he never lost his love of drumming.

Harry wanted to instruct and that opportunity presented itself a few years later, not with the Toronto Optimists but with their arch-rival, De La Salle. Harry’s exceptional instruction, arranging and leadership skills were critical in helping De La Salle defeat the Optimists and become one of the top drums corps in North America! With one of the best drum lines anywhere.

Here are a few comments from some of those who knew Harry:



Harry Clark (1960)

“Harry was not only a fabulous drum instructor and writer he was a leader. He inspired he guided and he crafted and shaped a drum line we all were proud to be part of. Not only was he respected, he was loved.” (Peter Mosley from De La Salle)

“Although I wasn’t in the drum line I leaned a lot from Harry. Most times it is best to listen to others before having input. He was a thoughtful observer so when he spoke it was deliberate, measured and objective. I can picture him standing near the drumline with his arms crossed in thought. A truly classy man. Thanks for the life lessons Harry.” (Kathy Swaile from De La Salle)



L to R: Charley Jennson, Harry Clark, Jim Reynolds, Collin Hedworth, Carl Cluchey, Gord O’Halloran or Brian Williams (1958)

“Harry Clark was a ‘Prince’ among men. Cool, calm, even tempered and always approachable – even to a 14 year old rookie. If anyone deserves to be in the DCI Hall of Fame it is this percussion legend.” (Myron Melnyk)

Jim McConkey

September 10, 1938 – June 23, 2017

Corps: St. Vincents Cadets of Bayonne, St. Joe's Newark, Blessed Sacrament Golden Knights, Archer Epler Musketeers, Canada's Marching Ambassadors, Reilly Raiders, Toronto Optimists

Jimmy McConkey was a true pioneer of drum major showmanship. Jimmy broke the rigid military mould with a style all his own. His trademark "dipsy doodle" and his shoutout in April in Paris with the Archer Epler Musketeers became legendary throughout the activity. As his "you better bleed on the finish line" did with the Optimists.

Jimmy began with St. Vincent's Cadets in 1950, later marching with St. Joe's Newark and then Blessed Sacrament, where he and Bobby Paul led the corps to both the CYO and VFW National Championships in 1958. He spent the next three seasons with Archer Epler before moving to Toronto in late 1961 at the request of Canada's Marching Ambassadors, appearing with them at the 1961 Canadian Nationals.

In January 1962, Jimmy joined the Toronto Optimists. His presence, flair, and self-designed uniforms—always featuring his trademark oversized belt buckle—helped elevate the corps to an almost perfect competitive year, losing only once by half a point to the Garfield Cadets. He led the Optimists to a landmark victory over Blessed Sacrament at Rome, New York, and captured Canadian National titles in both 1962 and 1963. Combined with his U.S. championships in 1958, Jimmy is the only performer ever to win national titles on both sides of the border.



Jim McConkey (1962)



Jimmy is ready to conduct concert (Salamanca, NY, 1963)

Within the drum corps world, his name needed no introduction. "McConkey" meant showmanship, innovation, and unforgettable presence. Every Optimist who marched with him knew this, as did the fans who flocked to see him.

Jimmy passed away on June 23, 2017, near Syracuse, at age 79. Though never inducted into the World Drum Corps Hall of Fame, he remains one of the most distinctive and influential drum majors ever to take the field—a true original and a major contributor to our legacy as Toronto Optimists.

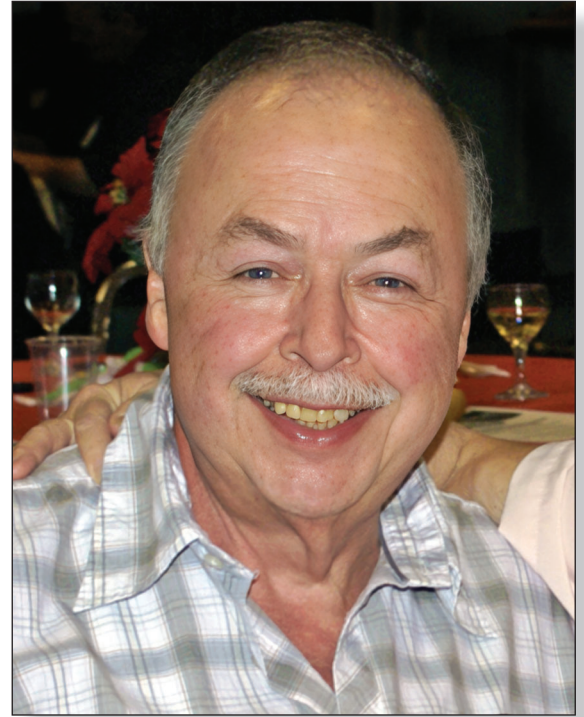
John Shearer

October 3, 1944 – December 12, 2024

Corps: Toronto Region Scout Band, Bantam Optimists, Toronto Optimists, Optimists Alumni

John had been a member of the Toronto Region Scout Band before joining the Bantam Optimists. Later, both of his brothers, Rick and Doug, followed him to the Bantams. John was the first of the three to move to the Junior Corps and, again, Rick and Doug joined him there. John played soprano until he aged out. Because John loved the corps, he wanted to help out so he volunteered as the corps' Equipment Manager.

By the time that the Alumni Corps began, Doug had passed; however, both John and Rick signed up. John played soprano then, when the corps got altos, he switched to alto. When the corps got 3-valve horns, John moved to mellophone. He stayed with the alumni corps until he could no longer march.



John Shearer (Christmas, 2008)

Below is a quote that John's brother, Rick, posted on Facebook. It paints a beautiful, and accurate, picture of John.

Yesterday I lost my big Brother and best friend, a gentle man with a heart of gold who would bend over backward to help anyone. He dedicated his life to his family, especially his son Richard. He kept in touch with his close friends that he has known from high school, scouts and the Drum Corps and still enjoyed his Friday breakfasts with retired coworkers. His early days were spent in the senior band in school, then with Toronto Optimists Drum and Bugle Corps and, later on, with the Optimists Alumni Corps. John will be truly missed by his wife, Barb, his family and his friends. Rest in peace.



John and Rick Shearer (Waterloo, 1963)

Keith Buckingham

March 16, 2026

Corps: Richmond Hill Hilltoppers, Toronto Optimists, Ambassadors

Before joining the Optimists, Keith was a member of the Richmond Hill Hilltoppers (I believe). He joined the Optimists after the 1964 season and played soprano with us from 1965 until he aged out in 1967. After aging out, Keith joined the Ambassadors and stayed with them until they disbanded.

After leaving drum corps, Keith entered the ministry. He was a graduate of Emmanuel and St. Chad College, Saskatoon, and ministered in the Diocese of Qu'Appelle, Saskatchewan as well as several parishes of Niagara, especially Holy Trinity Church in Chippawa. With further training in Chaplaincy and counselling, Keith ministered for 10 years as Chaplain at the Ontario Correctional Institute, Thorold, Ontario. The highlight of Keith's ministry was as a Chaplain at the Toronto courts. Keith also spent time as a volunteer Chaplain to the Niagara Police Service, a ministry that meant much to him.



Keith Buckingham (1965)



Toronto Optimists (Nationals, Varsity Stadium, 1965)

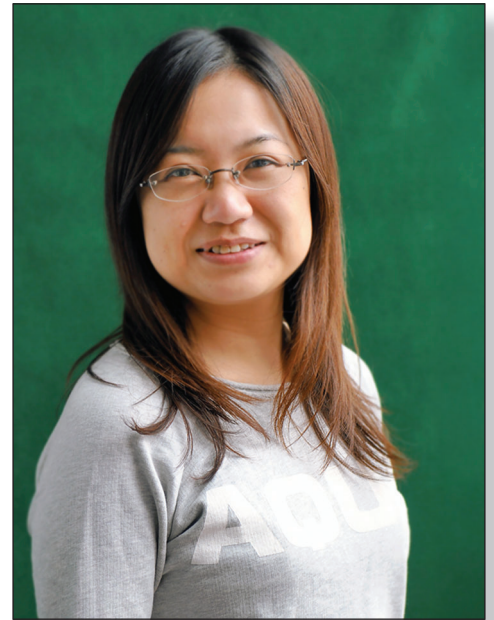
Kimiko Yamada

December 17, 1978 – July 28, 2025

Corps: Jokers (in Japan), Optimists Alumni

Kimiko Yamada, another friend from the Optimists Alumni, passed away on July 28, 2025. Kimmy had played Soprano with “The Jokers” in Osaka, Japan. In 2009, while living in Toronto to learn English, she joined the Optimists Alumni. I remember her strapping her horn to her bicycle and riding about 13 km each way to rehearsals at the Legion on Lakeshore Road.

Even after her return to Japan, Kimmy periodically joined us. I can remember her being with us in Rochester in 2011, Indianapolis for Soundsport in 2016 plus Jeju, South Korea in both 2017 and 2019.



Kimiko Yamada (2008)

On the Optimists Alumni Facebook page, Mike Lang wrote:

Kimiko fought a valiant battle with an aggressive stage four cancer diagnosis. Numerous different chemo treatments were tried and Kimiko endured them all with great bravery. Kimiko passed away today (July 28, 2025) with family around her at a palliative care facility close to her home in Osaka Japan.

Kimiko had been in contact with a number of friends and family through her final weeks through messaging, phone calls and visits. She knew how special she was to us as we shared pictures of happier times, videos and words of encouragement.

Kimiko was a remarkable lady. She joined the Optimists Alumni in Spring 2009 while visiting Canada on a student visa. She played alto soprano and later second trumpet. She amazed all of us by memorizing our complete show in less than two weeks to join us on stage at the St. Joe's of Batavia indoor show in Rochester. Kimiko performed our full schedule that year including Santa Claus parades in the snow. Kimiko remained active with us for a number of years after her return to Japan by using her holidays to travel to meet us in various locations including South Korea in 2017 and 2019. She was a friend to all of us, whether it was sharing camaraderie, humour or the occasional adult beverage (she was hangover proof).



L-R: Kimiko, Barry, Kirstin and Doug in Jeju (2017)

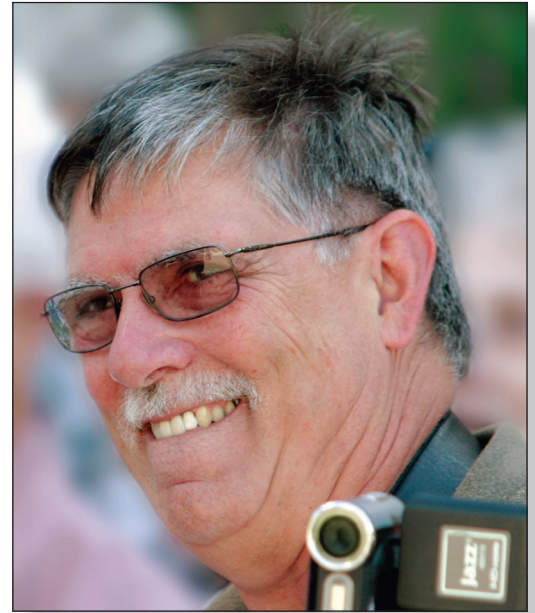
Marcel Smolinski

September 3, 1947 — January 16, 2025

Corps: Toronto Optimists, Optimists Alumni

My memory (which might be wrong) says that Marcel had no drum corps experience before joining the Toronto Optimists. He was, however, a friend of Optimists' members, Bill Hannah, Doug MacKenzie and others. In 1964, his first year with The Optimists, Marcel carried a flag. Not content with a flag, he spent time teaching himself to play Baritone, which he played until he aged out. After aging out, Marcel continued to help out the corps, especially its new members.

Marcel was a charter member of the Optimists Alumni, playing Baritone. He also donated the tops for the alumni corps' first "uniforms".



Marcel Smolinski (2008)

Here are a few comments from some of those who knew Marcel:

"He was a great corpsman in The Optimists and will be missed greatly."

"He is one of the most brilliant minds I have ever met. It was an honour to have known him."

"It was an honour and a privilege to perform with Marcel in the early days of the Optimists Alumni Drum Corps."

"Another keystone in the Optimist legend, I met Marcel when I joined Opti in 1970, he had aged out but was just hanging out. I knew him by reputation, I was in awe at how the old guard helped us newbies, he was so friendly and helped me to assimilate."

"I remember riding on the back of Marcel's Honda Big Bear. I became the counter weight to facilitate Marcel's "wheelie" development."



L-R: Alan Acron, Ray Roussel, Dennis Roussel, Marcel Smolinski, Wayne Dean, George Wright, Dave Hibbits, Bob Christie, Phill Bellavance, Bill Andrews, Paul Thompson (probably 1967)

Mark Wicken

October 24, 1944 – November 5, 2024

Corps: Port Credit Saints, Toronto Optimists

My recollection is that Mark began his drum corps career with the Port Credit Saints before joining the Toronto Optimists. He played tenor with The Optimists from 1962 through 1964. He was a great guy who will be missed by all who knew him.

After leaving the corps, Mark lived a very full life. Here are a few notes from Mark's obituary:

Mark died at home, peacefully, after a seven-month battle with cancer. He leaves behind his beloved wife of 40 years, Nonie, and his sons Andrew (Heather) and Chris (Maddie), grandchildren Charlotte, Oliver and Alice, grand-dogs Ted and Twyla, cherished extended family Nancy and Courtney (Tim), and innumerable lifelong friends.

Mark grew up in Port Credit with father Wally (piano prodigy), mother Ella (the "family rock"), and was pre-deceased by his sister Janis (Bob).

Graduate University of Toronto (Victoria College, Phi Gamma Delta Fraternity) 1967, and recent recipient of the University of Toronto Arbor Award for outstanding volunteer service to the University.

Mark began his career in advertising and worked in Toronto, Chicago and Saudi Arabia. He was later an educator at the International Academy of Design, Toronto Film School, and a guest lecturer at numerous other institutions. In retirement, he was the author of the book "Remember Me!": a passion project to instill invaluable lessons and strategies for new graduates in job search and career development. His aptitudes were enormous: professional drummer, incredible chef, martini mixologist, and entertainer-he was inducted into the Academy of Magical Arts at The Magic Castle in Los Angeles in 2015 as a recognition of his talents as a magician. Mark served on the Board of Directors of Music Fest Canada from 1992 until 2018, becoming its President in 2006. He played an integral role in transforming and progressing this organization which hosts the largest education-based music festival in North America.



Mark Wicken (1964)



L-R: Ron Kaiser, Ronn Prokop, Vic Kruklis, Mark Wicken, Orest Burak and Colin Hedworth (1961)

Pat Irvine

January 3, 2021

**Corps: Optimist Cadets, Toronto Optimists,
Seneca Optimists, Optimists Alumni**

Pat began his drum corps career as a drummer in the Optimist Cadets. He graduated to the Junior Corps around 1970 and stayed until he aged out. He played double-tenor and, later, Quads. After aging out in 1975, Pat was an instructor for the Seneca Optimists.

Here are a few comments from some of those who knew Pat.

"Pat grew up at Kingston Road and McCowan in a difficult family situation, and despite all the challenges he faced in life, was the example of a true OPTIMIST. It didn't matter where you came from, you were dedicated to excellence, precision execution and caring for the guys on your line." (Ray Skyvington)

"He was gentle and kind soul." (Calvin Johansson)

"He was an important part of my life. He taught me a whole lot more than banging a drum." (Ron Restoroff)

"There was something very special involving Pat...Late in Ron Kaiser's tenure with the Optimists...In either 1974 Or 1975...Pat was given the task of writing the drum parts of the exit number for that year. Maybe guys you can help me out with the details of that...ie ...whether it was a Tympani melody or a Bells thing I can't remember...I only remember it was approved by Kaiser ...who as we all know was a Perfectionist." (Ken Bain)

"That was Pat. Dedicated, very tough because of his early life and almost unapproachable on the outside but a sweetheart if he liked you. I was one of the lucky ones. Pat after drum Corp took that same dedication to life, cooking, and work. I am sad to here of his passing and like may of my friends and Corps members from the early 70's PAT was a one of a kind. Knowing Pat, he never changed, impossible to put in a category, Jim, Ken, Larry and Paul; Coffee will attest he was a very special person, we are all blessed to have marched with him." (Ray Skyvington)

"I liked Pat. I didn't know him well but he was a cool guy and a drum wizard. He helped our line big time." (Chris Mabey)

"One of the classiest gentlemen I have ever known, this is heartbreaking news." (Thom Sacco)

"I remember marching with him the early '70s with the Optimist Cadets. He was a very quiet guy, serious about his craft, and was an excellent drummer. We think in our youth that we are totally unstoppable and will live forever." (Bob Moore)



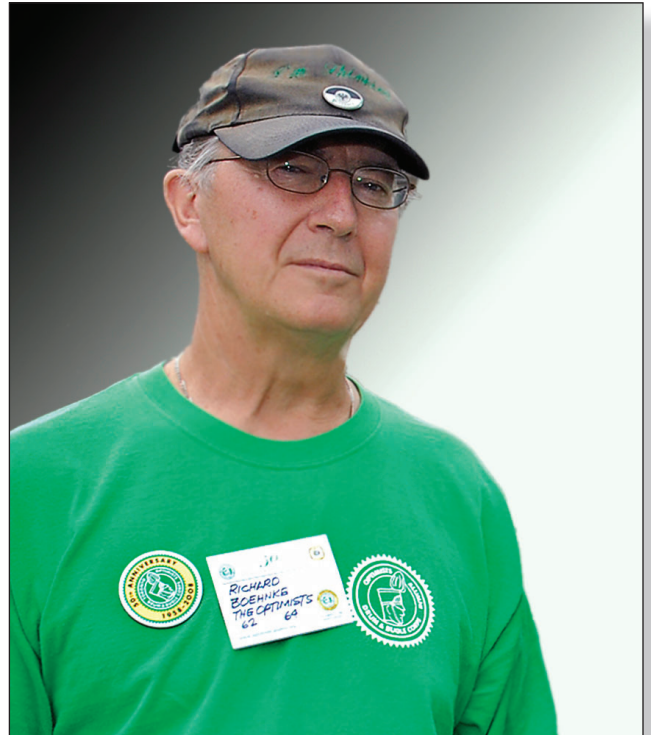
Richard Boehnke

September 6, 2025

Corps: St Mary's Band, Toronto Optimists

Richard began his drum corps career around 1958, when he carried a flag with St Mary's Band in Toronto. In later years, he played Baritone. While Richard decided to move to the Optimists in 1962 for his age-out year, he decided to stay a bit longer, giving back and helping out with the corps. In addition to writing for Green Capsule Comments, my recollection is that Richard was involved in both both fund-raising and promoting the corps. In 1963, the corps still used one bus plus a few station wagons. I seem to recall Richard driving one of the wagons.

After leaving the corps, he continued giving back. One of his loves was the Toronto Bruce Trail Club. For a time, he served as president and he was an important and inspiring leader during a critical stage of building awareness about the Bruce Trail. In addition, Richard dedicated over 30 years to representing and advocating for the community of Markland Wood and the surrounding neighbourhoods. His tireless efforts, thoughtful wisdom, and gentle nature helped guide essential public policy discussions, always aiming to balance growth with the safety and well-being of the residents in the community.



Richard Boehnke (Optimists Reunion, 2008)



Optimists Baritone Section. L-R: Dave Watt, Ron Cottrell, Mel Dey, Glen Durish, Richard Boehnke, Robin Weatherstone, Dick Ward, Al Lavigne and Bill Thorne

Ross Cation

1944 — 2025

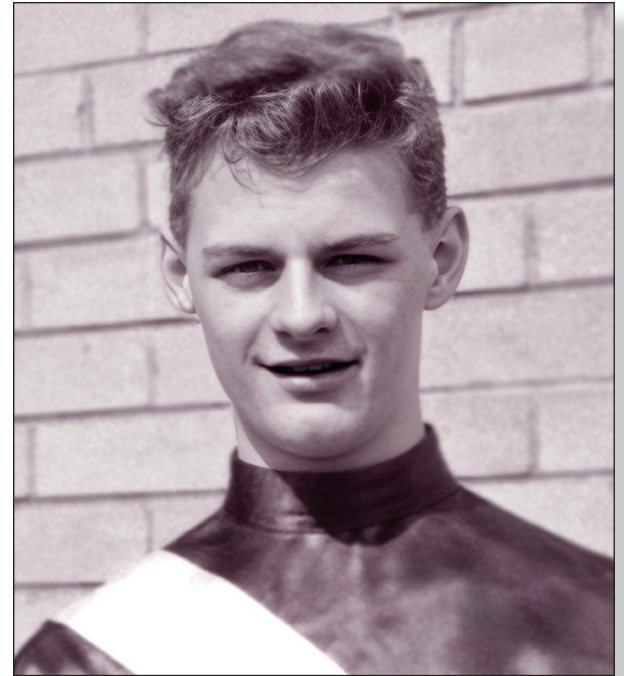
Corps: Don Mills Sky Raiders, Toronto Optimists

Ross started his drum corps career with the Don Mills Sky Raiders before joining the Toronto Optimists in late 1960. Ross played French Horn during his time with the Optimists. He aged out after the 1965 season. In 1963, Ross and Terry McKloskey played a French Horn duet in Chattanooga Choo Choo. In addition, Ross played French Horn in the mini-corps that the Optimists created in 1963.

Memories of Ross from Terry McKolskey

We first met when I joined the Don Mills Sky Raiders drum corps in 1959. We both then joined the Optimists in the Fall of 1960. I have known him as a very close friend since then.

Ross Cation (1961)



Ross was an admired friend to just about anyone who interacted with him. He was a happy guy with a positive outlook on life. He was caring, supportive, generous and had a good sense of humour.

He was an excellent French horn player and a leader amongst others in the sense of “esprit de corps”.

Ross created his own Insurance agency which thrived and he remained in that field until his retirement just a few years ago.



Terry and Ross playing a duet in concert (1963)

There are many memories, but some of the best were from our experiences with an informal group who had in common the enjoyment of downhill skiing. This was in period of time after we had aged out of the corps, ie; 1966 and on for many years. The participants were mostly Optimist alumni with others from the insurance industry. The group identified as “GASP” (guys annual ski party). It was an opportunity to get away and have fun. Ross loved those annual trips to a mountain ski cabin and to the best of my knowledge, he never missed a trip over the 20 years or so, that we did it. Sports in general and golf in particular were his passion.

Ross was married to Dinah Lee, and had two daughters, Gineen and Danielle. We’ve lost a very fine fellow.



*Jim McConkey and the Toronto Optimists playing our Off-The-Line, "El Cid"
El Cid Trio: Jeff Shimo, Joe Gianna and Jack Roberts (Nationals prelims, Waterloo, 1963)*

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