

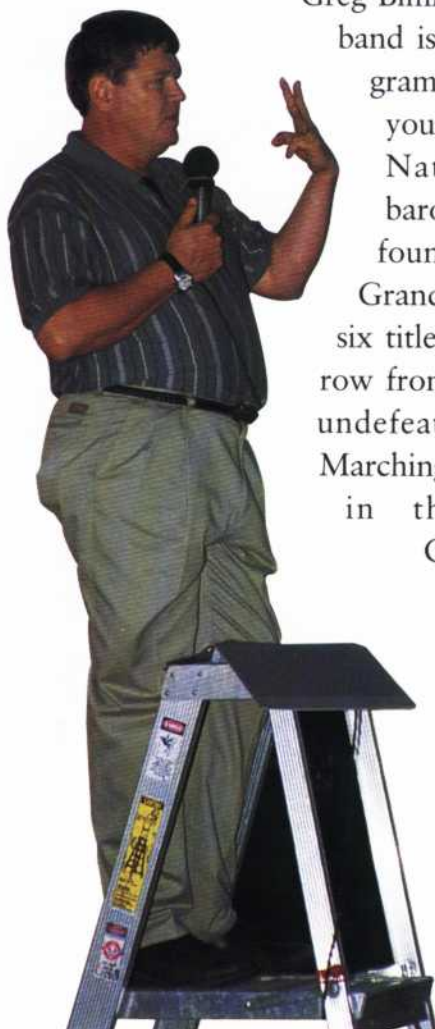
Best of Show

BY ADAM WINKLER

Lever wonder when you know you've made it? When, without a doubt, you are at the pinnacle of your position? Next time you're sitting around the brunch table at your state or regional MEA convention, mention the name Greg Bimm and watch what happens. Notice how everybody slowly looks at each other and nods their heads in unison? That's when you know.

Greg Bimm's Marian Catholic High School band is arguably the best marching program in the United States. Period. If you use the Bands of America Grand National Championships as the barometer, no other school since the founding of BOA has been crowned Grand Champion more often, earning six titles since 1985 including three in a row from 1987-1989. Add to that their undefeated record in the Illinois State Marching Championships since 1980 and in the Illinois State Concert Championships since 1981, and it's pretty obvious that the Marian Catholic High School band is in a class by itself.

Now for the million dollar question: How ever does he do it? How does one high school band (with absolutely no feeder program, by the way), year after year, maintain such musical excellence?



As a native of central Illinois, Greg Bimm was pretty much predestined to become a music educator. Following both his father and grandfather's route by studying the trumpet, Greg knew, from the day he picked up his instrument, that directing and conducting were in his future. True to his personal vow, he graduated Illinois State in 1974 with a bachelor's in music education, taught for two years as an assistant director, then returned to school for his master's in conducting from Western Illinois University. In 1977, the year he graduated, Greg Bimm was hired as director of the Marian Catholic High School band. Twenty-two years later, Greg Bimm's band program is a national household word amongst his peers.

So again you ask, how does he do it? As much as he would like to credit his students, the answers obviously lie within Greg Bimm himself.

SBO: What was Marian's program like when you arrived in 1977, and how has it changed since?



“By teaching younger kids to become better performers, [the squad leaders] are themselves becoming better performers.”

Greg Bimm: My first year there were 51 kids in the concert band, which was also the marching band. The freshman group, which didn't march, had 18. There were a few students who played pretty well, but the band program overall wasn't strong. This school has always been very supportive of fine arts, and when I came up with an idea to increase the band's size, they backed me up.

SBO: What did you propose?

GB: When I first came to Marian, we didn't have a study hall. We had a six-period day with a lunch in the middle. My second year, the school decided that it would be beneficial to have a study hall, so we added a seventh period. This couldn't have been better for the band, because I was able to convince the school to let me take that study hall period and use it for freshman band. Freshmen were scheduled in a study hall at the same time that upperclassmen had band. Now I had two band periods for the freshman, who would take their study hall time and march with the upperclassmen during marching season.

(Whenever they used their study hall time for band, they would use their band time for study.) When concert season began, we'd split into two concert bands. By my second year, the marching band jumped from 51 to 90 because we added all the incoming freshman. That year we also went to our first field show, and finished second runner-up. From there we kept growing.

SBO: What caused the band size to grow so quickly?

GB: It all started with the change in schedule. As soon as we jumped from 51 to 90 in one year, everyone's eyes went wide. People in the Marian Catholic family suddenly noticed that we were getting quite good, and quite large. And this, in effect, added huge excitement for incoming students, and more and more kids would try it as incoming freshman. Over the course of my first years, we grew by 20 to 30 every year, until what I currently have now, which is about 290 kids.

SBO: How did the band improve musically?

GB: Everything in our program is based around the symphonic band, and that caused our marching band to improve. Back then, a lot of schools started to do competitive marching, and they treated it like they treat their home football shows: by playing as loud as they could. But as a

result, a lot of bands didn't play very well. We started right away trying to play well, and as the symphonic band grew musically, the marching band did as well. And as the band improved, so did my drill writing.

How did you work on your drill-writing skills?

GB: Back in the late '70s, Drum Corps International started to broadcast their world championships on PBS. I began to tape it every year, and learn from it. I also went to field shows, watched and asked so many questions that it drove people crazy, but I learned a lot that way, and it got



me through my first couple of years. Back then, I had to teach the color guard and the drums, as well as write the drill and put the music together.

SBO: With Marian being a private high school, how do you recruit?

GB: By always making myself available. When I first started, incoming freshman didn't know about the band, and I had to find ways to make them aware of what was going on. Now most of the incoming kids know about us before they get here, but I still always make myself available whenever we host an open house. Obviously, there are too many schools for me to go out to, and since we're a private Catholic school, I have to be very careful about the image of recruiting anyway. If there's any hint of impropriety, people would jump all over it. All I do is make sure we have a lot of positive publicity, and once a kid shows interest in coming to Marian, we'll talk to every kid that might have an interest in playing an instrument.

SBO: What kind of school is Marian Catholic?

GB: We have 1550 kids that come from 75 different zip codes, or about 250 square miles from all over the south suburbs of Chicago. We also have a huge diversity of backgrounds. We have kids from some of the wealthiest suburbs of the Chicago area, as well as some kids that come from the poorest per capita suburb in the United States. To be eligible to come to Marian, all entering students have to score above a cutoff point on a national entrance exam. And by the time of graduation, about 97 percent

of our graduating seniors go to college.

SBO: Do private schools have to worry about fundraising and budget constraints?

GB: Our budget covers instrument repair and transportation. It also covers a color guard instructor. The band parents raise some funds, but since we are a private school, the entire school relies on fundraising, not just the band and athletic teams. Because of this, we are allowed to have one sale per year, and one fundraiser. We do a craft show, and we do a cheese and sausage sale right before Thanksgiving. Every band member also pays \$125 at the beginning of the year that subsidizes the rest of the transportation, and pays for food over five trips. Between this and the money from the school, it allows us to do all our local traveling, but if we take any substantial trips, like last year when we went to Florida, it comes straight out of pocket.

“The kids know that we’re expected to be one of the finest bands in the country, and they believe that whatever we write and prepare they can do.”

SBO: What about the students that can't afford the \$125 fee?

GB: No student is left out of band because they can't afford it. We'll make it work for them one way or another, whether they donate some time working in the library or help out in the band room, nobody gets left out.

SBO: How do you deal with instrumentation when you have no feeder system?

GB: Since our freshman come from so many different schools, we have no control over what instrument they play and what their abilities are, so from one year to the next we never know what we're going to get until they get here. We're always going to get around 70 new kids, but 68 of them could be flute players. Using the information that we get in May, when the kids start enrolling at the school, we put together a plot of what we know we have, and what we're going to need. Then we go around and find out who would be willing to change instruments.

SBO: How many of the incoming freshman march their first year?

GB: The band has grown so large that we have to control the size. It used to be that we marched all the freshman,



but now we only march between 50 to 60 percent of them, which are those who already have the musical ability, or play an instrument that we need to

fill a gap. This year we're getting a ton of saxophone players, and if I let them all march we'd never get a quality sound outside, so instead of playing them all, we look to an alternative solution. The primary goal is the music we play, and if we compromise that, I don't think we'd do anybody any favors.

SBO: What are some of the alternatives?

GB: With an overabundance of one instrument, like the saxophones this year, we do one of three things. In some cases they don't march, but that's a very small percentage. In other cases we get them to switch to lower brass. The third option is playing on an alternate system, so we can use two freshman for the same spot. In order to make sure that we get as many kids that can play to benefit from the experience, we double-assign freshman so they both learn the same spot in the drill, and they trade off. It's never a matter of picking the better of the two kids on any given show, because I try

not to create any overly strong sense of competition. When they share the same spot, it's an even trade-off no matter the circumstances.

SBO: How do you get a student to switch instruments?

GB: We have a policy where the band parents subsidize the student's first 10 private lessons on any new instrument. Private lessons here are \$14 for half an hour, and we're saying that it's worth that money to us for somebody to switch and fill in an instrument, as long as the student is serious about learning to play the instrument.

SBO: What is your policy with private lessons?

GB: We have teachers who come in during school, and the student are able to use their study hall time or band time to take private lessons. I feel that getting a student to study privately is important enough that I don't mind if they miss part of a rehearsal once a week. When a student sees that we're committed to private lessons, they become committed to private lessons

too. The private teachers are professionals from the Chicago area who teach during school, and continue on into the early evening as well.

SBO: Do you require every kid to take private lessons?

GB: We don't pressure the kids into taking private lessons considering it's a monetary thing, but we do talk it up and let everybody know that it's a very important part of learning.

SBO: Describe the typical week for a student in the Marian Catholic band.

GB: Band meets one period per day, which lasts for one hour, and the marching band practices that period during the marching season. After school, they're committed to two additional rehearsals. First, the entire marching band meets one night every week, on Wednesday nights from 6:30 until 9:00. The other commitment is really the key to our program. The kids have to attend two sectionals per week that last for 90 minutes each. The section gets together on their own to discuss times, and then recommend



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to us what times they think are best for them. The reason we do this is because it gives them a chance to work around other after school commitments, like athletics or clubs.

SBO: Do you lead the sectionals?

GB: My assistant, Marc Whitlock, and I share them. We also have two other adult volunteers who come in from time to time when they can fit it into their schedules. Nobody has sectionals on Wednesday, because it's just not smart to have them before the entire band rehearses. In the past we tried to schedule two night rehearsals but, with the intense academic demands at this school, it was just too much for the students, especially the upperclassmen. Because most of the sectionals happen on Mondays, Tuesdays, or Thursdays, many of them are happening at the same time. What Marc and I will do is float from one section to another. While we're not with the section, the section is run by section leaders.

SBO: How does that work?

GB: Each section is broken down into squads of four people. Take our clarinet section, for example. Our clarinet section this year has 32 students, broken down into eight squads of four. One student is section leader, and then there are seven more squad leaders. These squad leaders, who are always upperclassmen, help teach as well. The reason why this system works so well is because as soon as the squad leaders take on the position of leadership and responsibility, everything takes on a whole new meaning for them. Suddenly, because they are being held responsible for their squad, these students are now vested in the program. They are no longer standing there waiting for somebody to tell them what to do next — they are actively looking for what's going to make their

squads or sections better. Now as soon as these leaders start to teach, they also start to learn. Because they have to analyze what's going on, their ears get better, their skills get better, and they become better players as well. By teaching younger kids to become better performers, they are themselves becoming better performers. One of the keys to the way I've been able to keep the marching band at the level that it is, is because of all the student investment in the program. Most of the kids coming in here as freshman don't play very well, but instead of one teacher trying to help 70 kids work on their embouchures or helping them with their scales, we basically have one teacher for every four students constantly watching them and helping them.

"The primary goal is the music we play, and if we compromise that, I don't think we'd do anybody any favors."

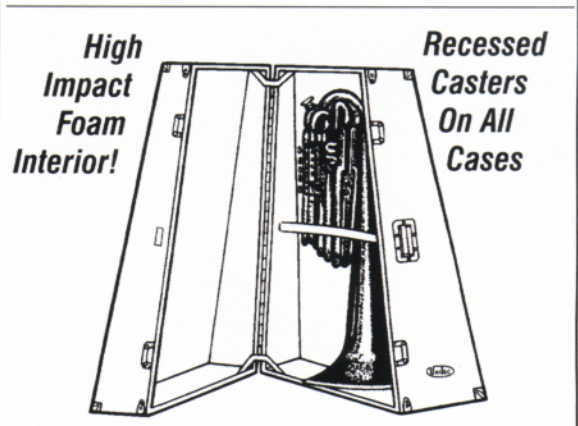
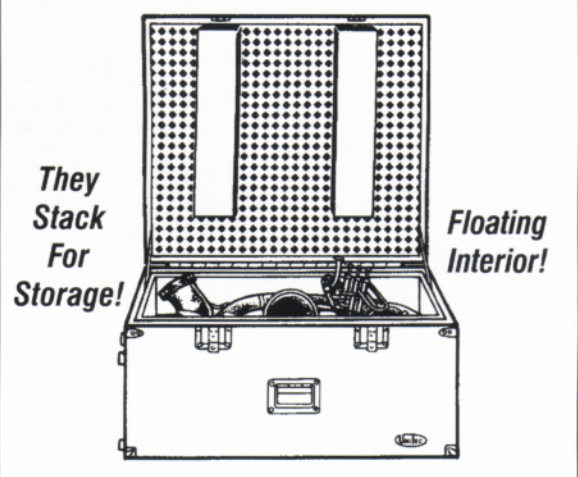
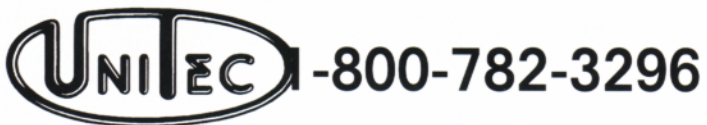
SBO: That's a great system. How long have you been using it?

GB: I've been doing it for years. I was here 10 years before I got my first

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assistant, and until that time I was leading all the sectionals, percussion, and color guard myself. Breaking everything down just grew naturally. I grew up marching Big Ten-style squad drills, so breaking down my band into squads was an obvious organizational tool. In the environment in which we perform now, many of the bands we compete against have a substantial number of staff members. We have three: myself, Marc Whitlock, and our color guard instructor, Jennifer LeSeth. We are the only three paid staff members, aside from a couple of other parent volunteers. But with the help of student leaders, we're able to cover a lot more ground.

SBO: What about musician-athletes? Do you allow your students to participate in other after-school activities?

GB: Of course. The athletic director at Marian has been here one more year than me. He and I have learned to work very closely together over the years, and he's just as supportive of the band as I am of athletics. We've set up a system where we share the kids. In most cases, we prioritize the students' obligations: A performance is more important than a practice, and a game is more important than a rehearsal. Sometimes there are situations when two things happen at once, and when this happens, I'll find the coach, and ask them who they need for the game. There's no need for a student to miss a contest when he's going to be standing on the sidelines at a game but, at the same time, there's no reason for me to take the starting quarterback when there's somebody else who can march in his or her place. We purposely take the decisions out of the hands of kids so they aren't put in the middle and forced to make a decision. By working together, we've always been able to maintain very successful sports teams and a very successful band. It seems

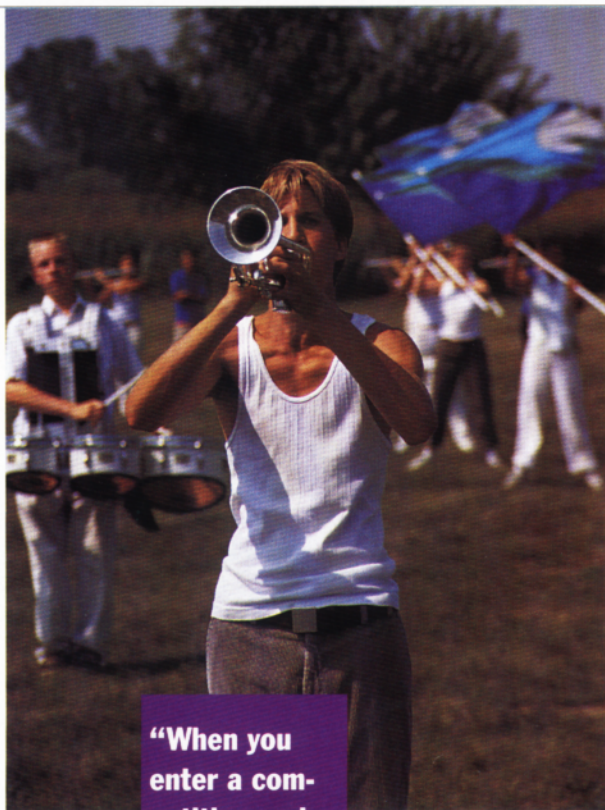
that coaches or directors who are always the least willing to work together are always the ones who have the worst programs.

SBO: How often do you compete?

GB: We do five contests a year. There are many bands that do more, but it seems that five fits us the best with the way we learn shows and our general time frame. We do two local shows, the Illinois State Championship, the Bands of America regionals, and then the Bands of America Grand Nationals.

SBO: How do you prepare for marching season?

GB: We don't have what you would traditionally call a band camp. We start off with three four-hour days for incoming freshman in June. That's more for us just to get in touch with these kids because we've never met them before. After that session, we begin entire band rehearsals one night per week for two and a half hours, where we begin basic marching and playing just as a refresher. At this point, we hand out only a small portion of the fall marching music and we don't learn any of the drill. We'll go over pep-band tunes, the school song, and that kind of material. Our band camp is more of a workshop here at school. It starts two weeks before school starts, and it averages four hours every day except Sundays. Then once school starts, we'll switch into the schedule that we talked about earlier.



"When you enter a competitive environment, there are things there that don't exist when you're playing at your home football game."

SBO: Who writes your drills?

GB: I do. I originally learned to write Big Ten-style drill, which is completely different from drum corps-style drill, but when I came to Marian I started learning corps-style by watching and evaluating tapes. Actually, in the days before video

tape, I would take a camera to band contests and snap pictures. Now I write drill for other people as well as myself.

SBO: Do you use computers to write your drills?

GB: I have a computer program, but I'm still not comfortable with it for two reasons. First, I don't know the program well enough to get all of my ideas into it, and it doesn't quite create drill the way I do. I think the comput-

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er programs are getting closer to the way I write, but I'm still not confident that they can do everything I see yet. What I use instead is a system of clear plastic laminate that I write on with a dry erase marker over a Plexiglas board. Using this method, I can get six formations in a row and watch their development, kind of like the way a cartoonist draws animation. Everything here is done in-house. I write the drills and music arrangements, Marc Whitlock writes the percussion arrangements, and Jennifer LeSeth writes for the color guard.

SBO: How do you select your music?

GB: My own personal taste is a factor, as well as the style that the band works best in. We pick music that is going to be challenging enough so that it has enough substance to last us until November. The music has to have enough substance so the kids can continue learning the entire time we're playing it.

SBO: How important is winning?

GB: Winning is not important at all. Competition is important because of the sharing involved. When we talk about performing in competitions, we do talk about the judges because they are the ones who are going to listen and watch the hardest. We never talk about how they score and what we have to do in order to impress a certain judge. But we do discuss the importance of performance concepts such as tone quality and intonation. When you enter a competitive environment, there are things there that don't exist when you're playing at your home football game. There are judges with critical eyes and ears, and other bands who know and appreciate exactly what you're trying to accomplish. Competitions are important on that level, but not in the sense of winning or losing. I've learned how unhealthy it is just trying to win competitions. I've seen bands that work really hard to win a competition col-

lapse once they won their trophy because that was all they were about. If the goal is simply to win, I don't think that's a very healthy one.

SBO: What's your teaching philosophy?

GB: All of education is about the students and preparing them to be better, healthier, deeper people. It is about helping them to be capable of lifelong learning, attaining success and happiness. In my specific circumstance, music is the main tool. I use music to help the kids to be more aesthetically appreciative while touching their souls at the

same time. Because the band is a small community, a by-product of our work is that the kids learn much about life as well. Everybody here carries their own part of the load and, as a result, we will succeed or fail together. We always use the word pride, but we use it as an acronym — Personal Responsibility In Daily Effort. It's been on my wall here for years. The philosophy reaches deep into the humanity of these kids, as well as their musicality.

SBO: How long did it take you to reach this level of success?

GB: I guess we reached a consistently high level of performance around 1985. The symphonic band had established a tradition of fine performance and the marching band was very successful at a national level.

SBO: What caused it?

GB: It was a combination of many things with the overall gradual building of the program from the standpoint of staff and students. The students were learning to play and march better and their expectations were constantly high. We had established the addition of color guard and percussion specialists, two people who had a profound impact on our advancement — Kari Zimny and Ward Durrett. I was learning to teach more effectively and becoming a better musician and writer. One specific example is that in 1985 I made great strides in the way that I scored for woodwinds, which helped us to create a more true band sound.

"Everything in our program is based around the symphonic band, and that caused our marching band to improve."

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Technology

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UpClose

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SBO: Where does marching band fall in the overall scheme of music education?

GB: Concert band is the centerpiece of our program. It's the single most important thing we do and is the center of our instrumental music education. When we start marching band in the fall, we spend a lot of time on the basics: basic tone quality production as well as basic marching techniques. Marching band at Marian is really a study of basics for concert band. We develop expectations of standards. In our marching situation, our older kids grow while helping our younger kids. In concert band, our older kids are on their own and go to a whole different level of musical expression.

SBO: Finally, how are you able to maintain such excellence in your program year after year?

GB: On a personal level, I love it. We play some of the best literature ever written. I enjoy the challenge of helping the freshmen to grow to be capable of performing

that great literature. I relish marching season. I love the challenge of creativity, the staff working together, writing music and drill, and teaching the students to perform what has been created. It's exciting to watch the kids grow and to share the time with them. On the professional level, we teachers and students all share an equal vision. The kids know that we're expected to be one of the finest bands in the country, and they believe that whatever we write and prepare they can do. Every year we're all willing to work to make that happen. If you look at the number of hours we work compared to some other programs, it is less, but it's not the amount of time we put in, it's the sincerity and intensity of effort. We don't put in a lot of hours by design, because we feel that it's far more important to stay in balance with all of the rest of the kids' lives. It's important that we don't compromise our standards, but it's also important that it's not an obsession. I want these kids to go to dances, and I want them to get involved in sports and clubs. It's all really important to their development. 🎵

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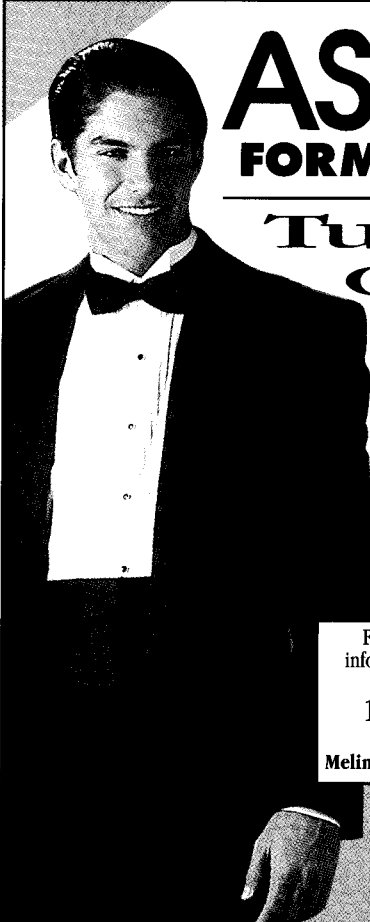
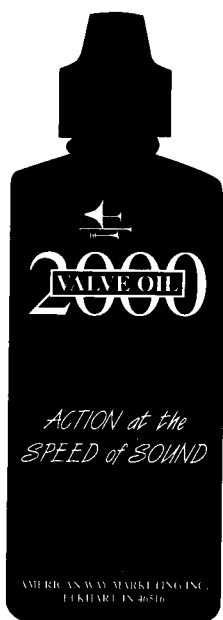
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