

## Hot Times: My Journey to the UW Marching Band

*EAT!... A ROCK!... EAT!... A ROCK!*

The chant of over 200 Wisconsin Marching Band members bounced off the cavernous walls of the band tunnel in the heart of Camp Randall. I could hear the roars of the crowd beyond the entrance and the drum cadence in the distance. Though the drums seemed miles away, the cadence pounded in my head and my heartbeat synchronized with the beat.

*TwEEEEEEEEEE! WHISTLE!*

The shriek of the whistle broke the booming chants as run-on began. Before I had time to recite my moves one more time, we were flying down the tunnel. As I made my descent out of the tunnel and into the bright sunshine of the sweltering September day, I felt the burst of adrenaline and stomach drop that would normally accompany riding a towering roller coaster.

I watched line after line reach the goal line and charge onto the field, my double time run-on step growing in intensity the closer I got. With a voice that hardly seemed my own, I joined my four-person line in yelling “one, two, ready hit!” as I hit the end zone. My run-on down the field and into position was like running across hot coals, my feet barely pausing to touch the ground with each step. I reached my spot in the block and quickly looked left, right, and forward to check my alignment. It seemed I had just reached my position when our announcer’s voice rang throughout the stadium:

*The Uuuuuniversity of Wisconsin, MARCHING BAND!*

Instantaneously, the “On, Wisconsin” fanfare began, louder than it had ever been at rehearsal. I finally registered the cheers coming from the sea of red in the stands, comprised of tens of thousands of fans. Out of breath and completely overwhelmed, I managed to force out only a few notes of fanfare. Once it was time to move, I focused completely on each step,

marching harder than I ever had. The songs flew by, “On, Wisconsin,” “Wisconsin Forward Forever,” “Shaft,” “Songs to Thee,” “God Bless America,” and “Star Spangled Banner.” Despite having each move memorized, I repeatedly checked my flip folder. I did my best to squeak an occasional measure of music out of my trumpet, but my mouthpiece kept slipping off my sweat-covered lips. My heavy wool uniform clung to my skin as I roasted under the blazing sun, but my intensity only grew. I spent more time looking left and right than forward, determined to stay perfectly in line. Each time I came to a hold, I searched for my shadow, praying that my plume hadn’t fallen out of my hat. Above all of these thoughts desperately competing for my attention, I could hear Mike’s voice in my head: “Stop at the top! Point the toe! Shorter notes!” I wasn’t sure if I was experiencing sheer terror or delight. Before I had registered what had happened, we began our last song: “If You Want to Be a Badger.” Once we came to a halt, I could barely see because of the sweat pouring down my face.

As the pre-game hype video began on the Camp Randall jumbotron, a million emotions washed over me. The adrenaline flooding my veins finally began to dilute, yet I was far from calm. My heart and head pounded incessantly as I tried to take in the sights and sounds around me. I had never been sweatier or more overwhelmed in my life. I was overjoyed and had never been prouder. As the football team prepared to come out of the tunnel, I became vaguely aware of the tears streaming down my face, an outpouring of not only everything I had experienced in the last 20 minutes, but also my entire journey to my first collegiate marching-band performance.

From the first time I saw my high-school marching band perform, I was hooked. I was in eighth grade at the time and didn’t know how I could wait another ten months before starting in marching band myself. I was blown away by the energy the band brought, whether during pre-game, halftime, or pep tunes and drum cheers during time-outs or other breaks in the action. I

was stunned by the brilliance that the visual element brought to the musicianship. The hundreds of football fans got to witness and appreciate the normally ignored talent of the band. Even though I was already eager and excited to begin my marching band career, I had no idea how amazing the experience would be.

When my time finally came to join the Marching Tiger Band that summer, I could not have been more thrilled. Some of my classmates found marching band to be lame or dorky or way too much effort, but it quickly became my favorite musical ensemble, and favorite extracurricular activity I had ever participated in. I was experiencing everything about marching band that I fell in love with at my first high-school football game, but I grew to realize that it was so much more. Marching band had a camaraderie unlike any other ensemble I had been in. Our band was so much more than a group of musicians: we were a family. Sophomores through seniors got to know and welcome the freshmen into the group from the very first practice. Instrument section pride was fierce, but the entire band ultimately came first. We bonded from the tedious cleaning rehearsals to the exciting last seconds of football games, from scorching August band camp practices to freezing October playoff games. I met great role models as an underclassman and developed into a senior leader, serving as drum major my junior and senior years. I formed incredible friendships and met some of the most amazing people I will ever know. I had beautiful memories from my high-school band experience as a whole, but the marching band memories will always be nearest to my heart. I knew that I had to continue with marching band in college, and it became my goal to perform in a Big Ten Marching Band.

Being the daughter of two University of Illinois alumni, one of them a former Marching Illini drum major, I had my heart set, for most of my life, on attending that school and being in its band. But as I went through high school, my dreams shifted north of the border. The

University of Wisconsin-Madison was slowly taking over as my dream school. Silly as it seemed, I knew that its marching band was a critical criterion of my ultimate university selection.

Spring of my junior year I attended the Wisconsin Marching Band's spring concert. One of thousands in the sold-out Kohl Center, I was completely blown away. The band played music from its shows that season, brought in unique guest performers, gave a rousing rendition of the 5th Quarter, and used pyrotechnics to contribute to already impressive showmanship. To top it all off, the nearly 80-year-old band director, Mike Leckrone, flew around the stadium on a trapeze! When the concert concluded with a heartfelt chorus of "Varsity," something had changed within me. That was the moment I became a Badger.

The following fall I traveled to Madison for a home football game to see the UW Marching Band in its prime. As the band members flew out of the tunnel and perfectly executed run-on, I had never been so enthralled. I was amazed that not only did they have the physical endurance to maintain the snappy high-step marching style, but they could play, and play loud, the entire time. As I watched that pre-game performance, I promised myself that next season, I would be out there as a proud member of the UW Marching Band.

I prepared every day for my marching band audition the summer after high-school graduation. In order to increase my chances of earning a spot on the field, I taught myself how to play trumpet and made the commitment to play it every day, even if just for ten minutes. I also trained myself physically, lifting weights, running long distance, working on my balance, and attempting the snappy chair step, even when moving around my house. Marching band was my ensemble, my sport. I was prepared to earn my place on the field.

When the first day of rehearsal arrived, accompanied by pouring rain, the combination of nerves, excitement, adrenaline, and determination filled my stomach with a healthy dose of butterflies. This was Big Ten Marching Band. The dreams and goals of the past few years were being put to the test on this very day. When rehearsal began after a seemingly endless lightning delay, freshmen lined up on one side of the 50-yard line, facing the current band members on the other side of the field. I was intimidated and fascinated by the people who surrounded me, but I had no time to be scared. I was on a mission.

That entire week, I truly gave it my all. I made sure to let my enthusiasm and love of marching band shine through in my personality, but also sought to be serious. I made it my goal to improve each time, focusing on the critiques from the directors, field assistants, and upperclassmen. Only occasionally cautiously comparing myself to my fellow freshmen, I focused on honing my own skills. Each day I finished rehearsal physically exhausted and mentally drained, but resolved to return to the field the next day with more energy than I had the day before, no matter how badly my body ached. The harder I worked and the better I got, the more confident I became that I would earn not only my uniform, but a place on the field. When the final band personnel was posted, I was ecstatic but not surprised to see that I had made the band.

Receiving my uniform was a dream come true in the realest sense of the phrase. After months of preparation, I was a member of the Wisconsin Marching Band. My spirits soared higher than the number of likes on my obligatory celebratory “proud new member of the University of Wisconsin Marching Band!” Facebook post. My tiny dorm room closet did not seem an adequate place for my uniform. The uniform represented not only my own hard work, dreams, and determination, but the legacy of hundreds of Wisconsin band members who came

before me. After hanging my uniform up, I promptly took it down and put it on one more time, taking a moment to soak in everything that had happened that week. The hardest part was over, and it was time to enjoy what was going to be an amazing season. Or so I thought.

At our very first official 2014 marching band rehearsal, the block was released. I was ready to see what rank I had been placed in and was prepared to have at least a pre-game spot. When I finally found my name among the hundreds on the block, my heart hit the floor.

Alternate.

I would not be marching every week. I didn't even know if I would march at all that season. Instead, I would be spending rehearsals marching on the sidelines and sitting out game-day performances. I held back tears as I attempted to find Rank 11, desperately trying to figure out what I had done wrong given all the positive feedback I had been receiving. I was devastated, but knew I had to get ahold of myself before meeting those in my new rank. Once I found them, with the incredible disappointment nagging me, I struggled to remember and put together each person's name with his or her band nickname. I tried to use my disappointment to fuel my intensity throughout rehearsal, but my heart remained heavy until I trudged my way back to my dorm. When I got back to my room, I looked at my closet. My uniform hung there, prepared for game day. I vowed then not to let my uniform ownership be in vain. I would get on the field.

The upcoming weeks at practice, I pushed myself harder than I had even during audition week. I focused on improving my playing and refining my marching. Each rehearsal was difficult knowing that I didn't have a spot to learn. I longed to be out there with my friends. My rank members helped me improve, giving me tips and encouraging me to keep pushing myself. I spent the first two games watching from the sideline with the other alternates as the band performed. I loved watching my rank and cheering them on, but aching sadness still filled me

each second of pre-game and halftime. I wanted my chance so badly, and it seemed like no matter how hard I was trying, I wasn't going to get there.

The Tuesday before our third home game, I arrived slightly late to rehearsal from my class that ran right up to the beginning of practice. As soon as I got there, I was mobbed by my rank; I finally had a pre-game spot for the game! My tenacity had paid off. I couldn't stop smiling. Weeks of pent-up sadness transfigured into unbridled joy. It was finally my time to shine.

There were so many breathtaking and beautiful memories from my first marching season: suiting up in uniform on game day for the very first time, doing a Lambeau Leap during the 5th Quarter after the Green Bay Packers game, being called off the sidelines by Mike during rehearsal to learn a spot for a memorized show with one-and-a-half rehearsals before the performance, performing a halftime show with my parents there to see, dancing to "Jump Around" as the perfectly powdered snow sparkled around Camp Randall in the middle of the Badgers' second half rampage against Nebraska, performing a bowl-game pep rally on the pristine white sands of Clearwater Beach, enjoying the countless laughs with my Rank 11 family, and so many more, but not one compares to my first pre-game performance.

The tears I choked back the first day of rehearsal were released that day on the field. The weeks of sore muscles made me strong for that performance. Every bit of sadness and disappointment I had experienced transformed into happiness and fulfillment. It was the end of the beginning and the beginning of the remainder of a season that gave me so much. It was filled with everything that marching band has brought to my life. The friendships and fantastic people are present in the excitement my rank had for me. Dedication, motivation, and tenacity in my journey to earning that first pre-game spot. Pride in one's work in the concentration of my

performance. And the pure joy of performance and living out a legacy in the raw emotion of 20 short minutes. Though that pre-game is over, the memory will stay with and inspire me forever as I continue my journey in the Wisconsin Marching Band, and far beyond.