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Marching, concert bands hear different drummers

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When Cedar Crest's band marches onto the field, it doesn't exactly wow the audience. Uniforms are basic gray slacks and blue blazers _ no plumes, gold buttons or racing stripes.

There is no field show. Members march "only enough to get from one end zone to the other," according to trumpet player Dan Shay. They play the Cedar Crest fight song, then let the football team do its job while providing some pep.

In Susquehanna Township the band is a show in itself. Members wear red and white uniforms covered in red sequins, white helmets with feathers and red capes. The band has won Chapter 6 Tournament of Bands championships five of the last eight years. Many expect it to rank high in the Atlantic Coast Championships next weekend.

The difference is not necessarily a matter of talent or coaching. It goes to the way different schools view marching bands: Are they there to support sports teams, teach music, entertain in parades, or engage in competition?

Cedar Crest administrators decided more students would stay involved in music if they didn't have to spend so much time marching, said Cornwall-Lebanon School District Superintendent John Menser. A lot of students like music but don't particularly like marching band, he said.

The band's numbers were dwindling yearly until it stopped competing a few years ago, band director Mike Wolf said.

Students practice only three days over the summer, not two weeks like many bands. They rarely practice after school, freeing them for other extracurricular activities.

Andriana Shultz, who plays trumpet, said if she had to choose between band and sports, she'd quit band.

"A small minority want to be in marching band, but when they hear how much time it takes, they say 'Nah,'" Wolf said. "Our band here is to support the football team and generate spirit. Schools that compete have a different perspective."



Susquehanna Township drum major Lauren Chestney said she thrives on competition.

"We learn so much about music and how to work together," she said. "We get to know each other so well. We do this more for ourselves than the football team."

Dane Hildebrand, director of the Mechanicsburg High School band, said competing in band tournaments teaches teamwork, character, discipline and time management.

"It is the ultimate team sport," he said. "There is no one on the bench to come in for you."

Marching band is purely voluntary in both Mechanicsburg and Susquehanna. In Susquehanna Township, participants don't have to be in concert band, or even play an instrument before joining.

"If they're willing to play, we're willing to have them," said band director William Perbetsky.

Until 15 or 20 years ago, most schools required anyone who wanted to play in a concert band to join marching band as well, Hildebrand said. Some schools still do that to ensure enough musicians in the marching band, he said.

Hildebrand said the marching band might be smaller, but its members are more enthusiastic if it is voluntary.

Marching band and concert band require very different skills, band directors said. "I defy anyone to justify marching band on the basis of a musical education," Wolf said.

Central Dauphin High School's band used to compete, but no more, said Jim Milbrand, band director for 33 years. "I'm a lot happier with my marching band," he said. "I didn't feel competition met our needs."

The Central Dauphin band is still very active. Members do three exhibitions and seven parades a year _ largely because the parades can pay. The band got \$400 to participate in a recent parade in Manheim and \$1,000 for winning a prize.

The time commitment for marching band can be tough, but Perbetsky said students still can do it all if the band is run efficiently.

"We do it for the kids, the audience, the football teams," he said. "Good bands can take care of all of that at once. And our kids are up to their ears in extracurricular activities. We want our kids to have a life."

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