

Competition or Exhibition?

by

Pacific Northwest Drum Corps.com

Specializing in PNW Drum Corps of the 1960s and 70s

In the 1960s & 70s there was a basic decision to be made at our home shows; competition or exhibition? That is; do we compete at our own show or not?

Out of all the PNW shows from 1960 thru 1979 documented on our site:

- 82 corps competed in their own home show, and 19 of those corps won their own show.
- Only 12 corps chose to march exhibition at their own show.

At the time (1970s) I thought it was not cool to compete at your own show because the judging of the host corps was usually skewed in their favor. So much so that it still sticks with me today 50 years later. Good thing we now have objective data to temper those memories. Yes, home corps frequently scored higher at their own shows, but they did not always win their division (A, B, or C).

Back in the day we had local judges, not national judges. The guy judging your corps was an instructor or former member of another corps competing against you at the same show. How could there not be some conscious or unconscious bias? Was the judging malicious? No. Was it always above reproach? No. Did it lead to some screwy scores? Yes.

The only ways to get impartial judging was to import judges (nobody had money for that), or travel outside of the PNW.

Still, I remember getting beat at so-and-so's show and groaning at their score. Some shows we knew before we went in that was going to happen. We were painfully aware of the phenomenon, but that didn't mitigate the impact. What's the purpose of winning your own show, and giving yourself a trophy and your own prize money? It would seem to me that a host should bow-out and give someone else a chance to bag a trophy, but what do I know? (That's rhetorical, people. I can hear you all screaming "NOTHING!!"). And according to the data above, 12 exhibitions out of 94 shows, I am clearly the minority opinion on this one.

Example: During the July 25th 1964 Seattle Shamrocks (WA) "Music in Motion" show, the Shamrocks scored 72.00 for the win compared to their average score of 72.46 for the season, which usually placed them in third place behind the Thunderbirds (WA) and the Columbians (WA). Okay, the Shamrocks were judged consistently. The Seattle Thunderbirds and Pasco Columbians on the other hand were scored 69.60 and 69.00 compared to their season average scores of 77.84 and 78.74 respectively. The host corps (Shamrocks) won by 2.40 points because its two biggest competitors were scored 8.24 and 9.74 points BELOW their average scores for the season. PNW Drum Corps judging at its best (sarcasm implied). Per our records, that is the only show the Shamrocks won in 1964 when competing against both the Thunderbirds and the Columbians.

Exactly one month after the Music in Motion show, the Thunderbirds and Shamrocks both went to VFW Nationals in Cleveland Ohio. National judging had the Thunderbirds outscoring the Shamrocks by 9.35 points (65.70 TB to 56.35 Sham) instead of losing to them by 8.24 as they did at the Shamrocks' show. That's a 17-point swing. Did the Thunderbirds get 17-points better in one month? Hardly.



Top left: 1964 Seattle Shamrocks, Top right: 1966 Tri-City Columbians, Bottom: 1964 Seattle Thunderbirds

It should be noted that this is not an indictment of the Shamrocks' corps members themselves, but of the PNW judging system that was prone to the meddling of corps directors, instructors, and probably the DC Association itself.

Go back and read our article in the June 2021 issue of this fine publication called "Judging the 70s". It expands on the unique judging issues we faced living in the Pacific Northwest.

The only PNW corps that competed at their own show, and it didn't affect their score or placement, was the Percussion-Naut Patriots from Spokane Washington. In 1973 and 1974 they won 92% of the PNW shows they entered*. In 1972 and 1974 they also placed 21st at DCI Prelims, which was an unheard-of feat for a PNW corps at the time. They were an awesome drum corps. No question about it.



1974 Percussion-Naut Patriots, Spokane WA

I guess the question of the day remains unanswered; Competition or Exhibition? There are pluses and minuses for each. If we had a totally independent, apolitical judging system, it wouldn't matter, but the world of drum corps (past and present) does not function that way. Until it does, which should we choose?

Long Live Drum Corps!

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*Local shows excluding California corps i.e., Blue Devils et al.