

The birth of color guards in the Pacific Northwest



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First off, let's define what a color guard is. Back in the Civil War, every regiment carried two flags -- the regimental colors and the national colors. Accompanying those flags were riflemen. Their job was to protect the flags when they were in battle, lest they were captured by the enemy.

Hence the term color guard as they were protecting / guarding the "colors." This use of flags to identify friend from foe in battle goes way back beyond the Civil War; by some estimates thousands of years. There are reams of historical data on this, so we won't belabor the subject here.

Back in the day we did not use the term "winter guard." We just said "color guard" for both winter and summer activities. In this article we will be using "winter guard" to differentiate between the two distinct activities.

As far back as the 1920s there were VFW and American Legion color guard contests in the Pacific Northwest. Back then they were what we'd call drill teams today. Think color guards without the military equipment; rifles, flags etc.

The Seattle Thunderbirds were the first PNW corps to add an all-girl color guard in the fall of 1959. Their drill master was Rod Stubbs who in 1966 co-founded the Cascade Cadets (Seattle Cascades) with Jack Avery, the founder of the Thunderbirds.



1967 Cascade Cadets (Seattle Cascades)

Prior to 1960, color guards as we know them today did not exist. The only color guards were in the American section and were primarily male. (Praytell we do not

have to explain what an American section is to you 21st Century drum corps people. Maybe another time perhaps.)



ca 1963 Flamingos Salem Oregon



1961 Seattle Thunderbirds Color Guard Jacket
Back Left Sleeve Right Sleeve



1962 Seattle Shamrocks

The first "modern" winter guard contest hosted by a junior drum corps in the PNW was the Seattle Thunderbirds Mid-Winter Competition held April 1, 1962 at the Sand Point Naval Air Station in North Seattle.

They had three color guards present -- the Thunderbirds, Seattle Shamrocks and the Leathernecks senior of Portland, OR. The show was but one of many diverse activities available to participating corps at the competition.

We have photos of these corps in 1962, but unfortunately, none of the first contest. The Shamrocks had 10 girls in their guard. The Thunderbirds had 14 to 16 guard members and the Leathernecks had five or six men. Yes, you heard me right, men. The Leathernecks were an all-male senior corps comprised of former U.S. Marines. Pretty cool.

SALEM, OREGON
February 12, 1966

GROUP	SCORE	PLACEMENT	PLACEMENT	PLACEMENT	PLACEMENT	PLACEMENT	PLACEMENT
1st	100.0	1st	1st	1st	1st	1st	1st
2nd	95.0	2nd	2nd	2nd	2nd	2nd	2nd
3rd	90.0	3rd	3rd	3rd	3rd	3rd	3rd
4th	85.0	4th	4th	4th	4th	4th	4th
5th	80.0	5th	5th	5th	5th	5th	5th
6th	75.0	6th	6th	6th	6th	6th	6th
7th	70.0	7th	7th	7th	7th	7th	7th
8th	65.0	8th	8th	8th	8th	8th	8th
9th	60.0	9th	9th	9th	9th	9th	9th
10th	55.0	10th	10th	10th	10th	10th	10th
11th	50.0	11th	11th	11th	11th	11th	11th
12th	45.0	12th	12th	12th	12th	12th	12th
13th	40.0	13th	13th	13th	13th	13th	13th
14th	35.0	14th	14th	14th	14th	14th	14th
15th	30.0	15th	15th	15th	15th	15th	15th
16th	25.0	16th	16th	16th	16th	16th	16th
17th	20.0	17th	17th	17th	17th	17th	17th
18th	15.0	18th	18th	18th	18th	18th	18th
19th	10.0	19th	19th	19th	19th	19th	19th
20th	5.0	20th	20th	20th	20th	20th	20th

1966 Salem (OR) Optorama Competition
Full Corps Floor Show Contest
Color Guard Contest - Nine Guards
Individuals Contest

In 1962 the only Washington / Oregon junior corps that allowed female membership were the Thunderbirds (since the fall of 1959), the Seattle Shamrocks (since 1961), the Longview-Kelso corps (WA) (since 1961), the Renton, WA, Blue Angels, established in 1961, and the Salem, OR, Flamingos (since 1962). Of these, some didn't have a winter guard so they didn't compete in the Thunderbirds' contest in Seattle.

Corps that went co-ed added an entirely new activity for those not musically inclined. Back in the 1960s and 1970s, girls were roughly 10% of the musicians in the average corps. With the advent of the modern color guard, more girls could join corps and experience the camaraderie and fatigue the rest of us felt. The more corps that went co-ed, the more color guards were created and the more winter guards flourished.



1967 Flamingos, Salem Oregon

1967 Seattle Thunderbirds
at Salem Optorama



In the PNW, color guards were a female dominated activity. When I say "dominated," I mean 100% girls. I personally do not remember a single guy marching in any color guard, winter or summer. That being said, the Seattle Thunderbirds created an all-male color guard in 1963, comprised of guys from the percussion and brass sections. They were called the Thundermen and walloped their own girl winter guard in competition.

All that did was make the girls mad and broke up some relationships. To this day, those guys are still wistfully basking in their accomplishments. Who wouldn't, right?



By 1966, 22 of 32 PNW drum corps were co-ed and the annual Thunderbirds Mid-Winter show boasted 14 color guards in competition. The last remaining single-



1973 Seattle Shamrocks

sex corps (three of them) were from Western Canada. Two of them went co-ed in 1974, one added girls and one added boys. The last Canadian all-girl corps (Alberta Girls, Edmonton) never went co-ed and closed their doors in



1977 Argonauts, Salem Oregon

1977. In the old days color guard drills were silent. The only music was the marching of boots, the sound of aluminum flag poles smacking the gym floor and the rhythmic clack-clack-clack of rifle straps hitting their metallic trigger



1976 Seattle Cascades
American Legion Jr National Champions

guards. Alas, all things change with time.

Long Live Drum Corps! --
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