

Caring for the Corps

AS TOLD TO JAIMIE SIEGLE



Left: Students gain clinical experience in the performing arts setting touring with the drum corps, a disciplined group of up to 150 performers that tours extensively each summer.

Right: Maj. Brian Dix, U.S. Marine Drum & Bugle Corps commanding officer, performs as the Body Bearers fire the ceremonial cannons during a concert at Marine Barracks Washington, D.C., this summer. (Photo by Cpl. Dan Hosack/U.S. Marine Corps)



Among the many facets of the performing arts setting is the drum and bugle corps, a niche of competitive marching band-like “troops” with touring schedules and routines that are not for the faint of heart, reflecting virtues such as precision, discipline and teamwork, corps members learn qualities required in the military setting but are valuable in any work environment. As if embedded into a battalion of soldiers, ATs who work with Drum Corps International teams participate in every aspect of “Cadet” life, from touring on the bus to sleeping on the floor.

Read on as Brian Seiler, MS, PES, ATC, and Alyssa McPherson, MS, LAT, ATC discuss the challenges, surprises and lessons learned throughout their summers working with corps athletes. Former U.S. Marine Derek Soloway, ATC, LAT, PES, a licensed athletic trainer working as a Level 3 Fitness Specialist at Henderson Hall, also describes his experience working with a unique group of Marine Corps soldiers.

What led you to the athletic training profession?

Brian Seiler: I knew from the time I spent with my athletic trainer (due to a track and field-related hamstring injury) that I wanted to go into some part of the health care field, but not where I was the center of attention. I decided on athletic training, instead of other professions such as PT or PA because of the opportunity to work with athletes at various levels and settings, as well as the continuous, on-going (i.e., traveling) nature of the job.

Alyssa McPherson: When I was in high school, I had a few relatively minor knee surgeries, but when I was ready for rehab,

my surgeon insisted that I see his in-house athletic trainer, as opposed to a traditional outpatient physical therapist. He felt so strongly about his AT's ability to understand the demands on me as a dancer and [the AT's ability] to return me to my same level of performance that when my insurance wouldn't cover the AT's services, the surgeon decided he would write these charges off. That was when I first realized how important athletic trainers can be in the performing arts and when I decided that was the route that I wanted to pursue.

Derek Soloway: I was in the process of being medically retired from the Marine Corps [at a Dolphins/Redskins game, and the topic came up as to what I was going to do when I was

retired. I noticed the guys taking care of the players when they got hurt. I went back and asked my AT. The rest, as they say, is history.

I was contacted by the [Marines'] Drum and Bugle Corps to see whether I could give them ideas on how they could mitigate the same injuries that they were seeing year after year. I had no experience with musicians and asked if they could put on a clinic to help me gain an understanding of what it was that they did. We developed a prevention plan based upon the training schedule and common injuries (overuse injuries such as tendonitis in the wrist or shoulder, or low back injuries). This past year was the first time in six years that they didn't have a single individual drop from training during preseason.

Where did you find the opportunity to work with the Cadets drum corps, one of the several competitive marching band/drum line teams that performs, competes and tours extensively each summer?

BS: I got involved with the performing arts, and specifically the drum corps setting, while teaching and completing research at the University of South Carolina as a doctoral assistant. USC has strong connections with the performing arts, not just within the city of Columbia but also with the Rockettes, so I knew athletic trainers were becoming more prevalent in performing arts. In fall 2012, a faculty member asked if I wanted to travel over the summer with the Cadets drum corps and gain some clinical experience.

Prior to obtaining the position with The Cadets, I spoke with a respiratory therapist that provided occasional care to the corps to get an understanding of the culture. At the time I accepted the position, I did not know what I was really getting into.

AM: A close friend who had marched several seasons of drum corps suggested that I look into one of the corps that he marched with, the Cadets. I spent the summer of 2010 as an intern with the Cadets, 2011 as their head medical staff and 2012 as head medical staff with the Madison Scouts. Since these three full-time summers on tour, I have continued to consult with four other large drum corps at the Drum Corps International (DCI) World Class level.

What types of injuries do you see among these athletes?

AM: We tend to see a lot of lower extremity overuse conditions. Metatarsal and tibial stress fractures, medial tibial stress syndrome, patellofemoral pain syndrome. We also see our fair share of acute sprains and strains. The battery, or the percussion players in the drum corps who march on the field into specific formations, tends to have a lot of hip, groin, and back issues due to the way they must move with their drum(s). With the color guard performers, elbow and shoulder tendinopathies are common, as well as concussions. Depending on the technique being used and the show that year (the "drill"), there may be a rash of particular injuries. All members are

prone to heat illness just from an exposure point, and prevention and education in this realm is absolutely critical for these groups ... Most corps will move from city to city every one or two days for the full length of tour. This can make coordinating advanced imaging, follow-ups and/or specialized care incredibly challenging.

Describe the ways in which the drum and bugle corps niche within the performing arts setting compares with traditional AT work settings.

DS: This setting is very non-traditional. The "preseason" for the United States Marine Drum and Bugle Corps, also known as the "Commandant's Own," starts off with 30 days of training in Yuma, Arizona. In season, the Marines of the Drum and Bugle Corps travel 50,000 miles, giving 500 performances in a year. In addition, the Marines have to meet the same physical training requirements that are expected of all Marines, on top of the aforementioned daily practice and a tour schedule.

The common denominator in this setting is the fact that the same tools that an athletic trainer uses to mitigate injuries in every other setting come into play here. As a student I was told that everything comes down to "knowing your anatomy." This, coupled with biomechanics and understanding the pathology of injuries is key. You [also] have to have an understanding of the military and its protocols, as well as demonstrate a commitment to learning their language and their subculture.

BS: I think an interesting facet of working with a drum corps is adapting to the different requirements of the unique activity. Although drum corps might travel with a few alternate members (mostly in the color guard), it's not easy to substitute one uninjured member for an injured one, like it is in athletics. To do so requires learning specific step counts and spots on the field to make intricate shapes, and it is usually a last resort option when a member is faced with a season-ending injury.

I tried to rely on my knowledge of athletic injuries to treat the injuries that I saw; however, this only went so far. My approach to treatment evolved into more of a performing arts approach, allowing for a quicker evaluation of injuries and providing specific treatments that could be completed during the member's own time. Rest was the best option for a lot of the injuries, but I had to think outside of the box because I had to keep them out on the field. For chronic injuries, I followed a similar return-to-play format as in athletics, taking the member through section-specific activities with and without their instruments/implements.

What is the health care coverage currently like for drum corps athletes?

AM: Medical coverage is varied. Generally, it is incredibly limited. Most other corps, if they have any medical coverage at all, use volunteers ... this makes continuity of care very difficult. Few, if any, have the advanced musculoskeletal knowledge that



The U.S. Marine Drum & Bugle Corps performs during a Friday Evening Parade at Marine Barracks Washington, D.C., June 6, 2014. (Cpl. Larry Babilya/U.S. Marine Corps)