

The Pursuit of Excellence: Using Competition as a Tool to Achieve Excellence

by Dean Westman

Some of the most rewarding musical moments that I have known have come from ensembles that never “won” a contest. Maybe it’s the fact that I enjoy the music much more than the trophy. Maybe it’s because I believe that people are much more important than placement. Maybe it’s that I was born and raised a Chicago Cubs fan, but some of the greatest groups of young musicians that I have been a part of never won a championship. Bands of America is focusing on The Pursuit of Excellence. I would like to take a minute to focus on the word pursuit. For right now, let’s call the Pursuit of Excellence the Journey Towards Excellence. Let’s talk about the journey.

I want you to take a minute to do the math on this. Roughly calculate how much time your band spends on the journey towards excellence. For a Texas high school band like SFA, the math is fairly simple. We are allowed to rehearse eight hours per week. We are given one extra hour before each performance and we spend one hour each day in class time. An average Texas high school band spends 14 hours per week for 15 weeks. That comes to around 210 hours of rehearsal. Now let’s add to that all of those performances that are not competitions. In Texas we call those performances football games. For some of us, it’s the best part of a football game. At SFA, we perform our show at ten football games. A typical performance day for us on a game day lasts about six hours. We arrive early, we play often, and we are the last ones to leave. Sound familiar? That takes us up to a total of 270 hours on our journey towards excellence.

Hopefully, all of you spend some time practicing your instrument. Many of you are incredibly dedicated to the pursuit of excellence on your instrument. I have been around students who practice three hours a day. Let’s give a more realistic number. Let’s say that you spend 30 minutes a day practicing your instrument. Do the math on that and you add around another 50 hours. That takes us up to 320 hours working towards excellence. Now remember that this is for a band that is only allowed to rehearse eight hours per week after school. Many of your programs might have a Saturday rehearsal that lasts eight hours. For some of you, your band might spend 700 hours on your journey towards excellence.

Now let’s talk about the amount of time you actually spend competing. The SFA show this past fall was eight minutes long. We attended one Bands of America Regional, BOA Grand Nationals, three levels of UIL Marching Contest, and our district band night. Counting all prelims and finals you get a grand total of 72 minutes competing. We spent 320 hours working towards excellence and one hour and 12 minutes in competition. The bottom line is that my marching band spent less than 1/2 percent of our total time “competing.” We spent over 99 percent of our total time in the pursuit of excellence!!!

So, what’s the point of our little math project? It’s obvious. We tend to focus on less than 1/2 percent of the total marching band experience. Can you imagine how rewarding and enjoyable the experience could, should, and would be if we were to really soak up the journey? Doesn’t it make more sense to focus your energy on the

over 99 percent of the experience known as the pursuit? The journey is where you forge your lifelong friendships. The journey is where you truly make your memories. I would challenge any of you to take the time to ask a band director who has won the Bands of America Grand National Championship to tell you a story from that year. Ask Greg Bimm from Marian Catholic or Alfred Watkins from Lassiter. Ask Bill Watson about the 1993 season at Spring High School. I can promise you that they will not tell you what place they got in Visual General Effect. I can guarantee you that they won’t talk about the spread between their band and the band that placed 2nd. They will talk about the journey. They will talk about the wonderful kids that were in the program. They will talk about a rehearsal in the snow or driving rain. They will talk about some funny things that happened at football games along the way. They will talk about how much the members of their programs cared about each other. They will talk about the pursuit of excellence.

This leaves us with the question of “why do we compete?” Personally, I don’t even like to use the word compete. I don’t attend Bands of America events to compete. I attend to perform! I attend because I want my students to have the experience of playing for an incredible audience in a first class facility. I attend because we get positive and constructive feedback from the judges, regardless of what place we finish. In the end, I would like to think that what drives all of us is the thrill that we feel at the end of a performance. Is there a greater feeling in the world than watching an audience stand up and applaud after you have just played your heart out? Isn’t that feeling the real reward? I know 200 students in Sugar Land, Texas who will tell you that the love of performance is the driving force in their lives as high school band members.

Maybe that is why the experience with the Bands of America Rose Parade Honor Band was so very special. We were not there to compete. We were not there to win a trophy. We were there to make new friends and make music! I have been in the competitive arena for almost 15 years, and I tell you that my week with the Rose Parade Honor Band was one of the most positively life-changing experiences that I have ever had. I made so many new friends. I saw a group of over 300 students from all over the country become a family right in front of my eyes. I got to work with the most incredible group of band directors and band members in the world, and in the end we made wonderful music together!

Enjoy the journey my friends. The pursuit of excellence is what it is all about. Instead of getting all caught up in the competition, go out of your way to support every band member from every program that you come in contact with. Don’t be a competitor, be a fan. Instead of creating a post on the forums that predicts who is going to win a regional, create a post that discusses the journey. Share those stories and memories with each other. Being a part of a high school band is something that you will remember for the rest of your life. Enjoy the journey!



Dean Westman is former Director of Bands for Stephen F. Austin H.S., Sugar Land, Texas. Dean joined Bands of America as Educational Director in 2005.

Pursuit of Excellence...

Pur-sue (p r-soo') v.: 1. To advance along the course of; keep to the direction or provision of, as a path, plan, or system. 2. To apply one's energies to....3. To follow persistently...

Ex-cel-lence (ek's -l ns) n. : 1. Possession of eminently good qualities; great merit, virtue, or goodness. 2. A superior trait.

Bands of America's mission is "to create and provide positively life-changing experiences through music for students, teachers, parents and communities." For 30 years, Bands of America has been in its own "pursuit of excellence" to achieve that mission. From the beginning, this quest has consumed the hearts, minds and energies of hundreds of BOA employees and supporters, thousands of teachers and volunteers, and millions of students and parents in communities across the nation and around the world. Creating and providing "positively life-changing experiences" with the pursuit and achievement of excellence always has been the prevailing mantra of Bands of America and its people.

Competition and recognition of superiority never have been the mission, goal or design of BOA. Excellence (and the achievement thereof) has been the challenge and pursuit Bands of America has sought for itself, its participants and the hundreds of thousands more that we touch each year as music students, spectators and observers. We count on their direct involvement and "ripple effect" benefits that result by way of our participants' examples and service to the larger community. Bands of America is the result of a vision of its founder, Larry McCormick, to make available to and assure the highest caliber of opportunity for young men and women to become better people using music education and music performance as a vehicle.

Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs even though checkered by failure, than to rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy nor suffer much because they live in the gray twilight that knows neither victory nor defeat. – Theodore Roosevelt

The pursuit of excellence is a constant at Bands of America. From the Board of Directors, to the president, the staff and volunteers, the constant standard is excellence defined by pursuit of a standard that flirts with the goal of perfection. We set principled and lofty goals for ourselves and have 30 years of history supporting and sustaining the value and validity of the effort.

At BOA, change is a constant, embraced and a valued part of the effort. From a humble summer band camp beginning in Whitewater, WI as Marching Bands of America, to a nationally recognized and embraced Bands of America that includes premier events in marching, concert band and orchestra, BOA's pursuit of excellence, like that of its participants, encourages and embraces risk-taking, creativity and hard work. We clearly believe in the concept of "no change equals no growth."

As it has been throughout our history, in fall 2004 we refocused our emphasis on the importance of the journey, - the importance of the "Pursuit of Excellence." The benefits of the pursuit of excellence will be our recurring theme and emphasis. We expect to place a focus on our mission and the principles that we believe lead to the achievement of excellence through experiences in music that are positively life-changing.

For us at Bands of America, after 30 years, we recognize that we are just at the beginning of our never ending pursuit to provide the most excellent and "positively life-changing experiences" through music available anywhere and to anyone.

The Dangers of Competition: What Can We Do About It?

(From the BOA Rules and Procedures Handbook)

Probably all of us have seen situations where the desire to win at any cost took over a program and eventually destroyed it. The win-or-else philosophy and education seem to be at odds here. This line of reasoning does not leave any room for "failure" on the part of the participants or for the inevitability of someone else being better. The performers in such groups tend to lose self-esteem when they are not successful. They see themselves as failures at life, for the intensity of this approach is all consuming and becomes one's whole life for the time of the involvement. They tend to be envious of performers in other groups and see them as the enemy, to be defeated, put down and vanquished.

Burnout, the inability to cope with the intensity of participation, happens with increasing frequency due to the all-consuming nature of the winning concept. The participants in groups who run under such a philosophy tend to look back on the negative side of the whole experience if they do not reach their ultimate goal. But what about the benefits of competition? Properly handled, competition can be a microcosm of life. We can learn, stretch our abilities and strive for goals that we would otherwise consider to be unattainable. We can learn to work together for common goals and to cope with each other's inadequacies as part of the lesson of life. Not coming in first becomes neither a failure nor the end of the world if the participant has grown as an individual and has improved his performance.

With this can come the recognition that the participants in other groups are just as dedicated and are working for the same things, making them fellow seekers of the new ultimate goal of individual excellence of performance. They are to be admired and congratulated when they succeed and encouraged when they fall short. They become friends and PEOPLE rather than adversaries; this is more significant and longer lasting than any trophy, which only becomes tarnished and is eventually retired.

Being a winner in the microcosm of competition as well as the full-scale game of life really is a matter of being encouraged to excel. Everyone who knows more about himself as an individual and his potential for achievement is indeed a winner, and a winner of the highest sort. Having tried, he needs the encouragement to try again, and again... this is where we as judges begin to enter the picture more effectively. We can have a great deal of influence on how the performance feedback will be accepted by the virtue of the approach and quality of our input through our commentary. That is our intent and goal. We can help to create and foster an appropriate climate for a positive experience.

BOA By the Numbers



“Being part of the Honor Band of America was not only one of the greatest experiences of my career, but one of the greatest experiences of my life.”

**Sam Atkins
Student,
Hurst, TX**



Total high school student event participation annually:

70,000

Total annual event attendance—participants, teachers, family members:

270,000

Total school music programs reached:

25,000

Total number of page requests on www.bands.org in 2004:

18,217,564

Total number of unique visitors to www.bands.org in 2004:

366,305

Total online registered member base:

85,000

Total average attendance at each of 15 Regional and Super Regional Championships:

9,000 for one day Regionals and up to 20,000 for two day Super Regionals

Total average annual attendance at Grand National Championships:

50,000

Demographics



"I learned more in seven days at BOA than I did in an entire semester of college study."

**Kendall Carrier
Summer
Symposium
Band Director
participant
Bradenton, FL**

- More than 70,000 high school students participate in BOA events annually
- Total attendance at BOA events each year, students & family members: 270,000+
- Millions of teens, family members and schools are reached by BOA Newsletters, Web site, video programs and other print materials
- BOA's Web site (www.bands.org) has over 85,000 opt-in "members," as well as 500 paid premium members and membership continues to grow
- www.bands.org received over 10.5 million hits and over 78,000 visitors in the first three weeks of November 2004 alone, and over 101 million hits and 991,000 visits in 2004.
- 97% are high school graduates; 76% attended college; 40% are college graduates*
- 56% of households have two or more children under 18 living at home; 82% have one or more*
- 75% of the Bands of America audience identified those companies currently at the National Presenting and Corporate Sponsorship levels*
- 80% of respondents rated their overall Bands of America experience a 7 or higher (on a scale of 10), 22% rated their experience a ten — that translates into 216,000 participants and spectators a year who rate their Bands of America experience "far-above-average" to "excellent"*
- Over 70% of the respondents to the survey were over the age of 25*

* Source: Independent Survey

The Power of Music Education in America

- Instrumental music education involves three million plus young adults, male and female, 13-18 years old
- Musical students comprise 15% of total school enrollments and are in the top 26% of their class academically*

* Source: Independent Survey

Students with coursework/experience in music performance scored 55 points higher on the verbal portion of the SAT and 38 points higher on the math portion of the SAT than students with no coursework or experience in the arts for a combined total of 93 points higher. * Source: Profiles of SAT and Achievement Test Takers 2000, The College Board

Americans Support Music Education

The following stats were gathered from a 2003 Gallup survey on "American's Attitudes Toward Music, Music Making and Music Education:"

- Musical instruments are being purchased by American homeowners at the highest levels since 1978
- 54% of households surveyed have a member who plays a musical instrument; in 48% of households where at least one person played an instrument, there were two or more additional members who also played an instrument
- 97% of respondents agreed that playing a musical instrument provides a sense of accomplishment and is a good means of expression
- 80% believe that playing an instrument makes one smarter