

2007 Tuition Series

Preparation for a Band Contest

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Introduction

Preparation for a Pipe Band contest is a topic with wide parameters and could potentially cover all aspects of preparation for the entire year preceding the NZ National Pipe Band Championships. That is not the intent of this article. With the 2007 National Pipe Band Championships in Dunedin imminent, this tutorial article is primarily aimed at the specific preparations that should be considered in order to have the best chance of putting your bands best potential performance on the board in Dunedin. This will not be a prescriptive 'catch-all' article, but it will endeavour to cover the more important aspects.

As always, there are different approaches to any issue and there will be areas of this article that not all agree with. I am quite comfortable with that. If what you do differs to that which I have suggested in this article (and it works!), then all power to you. In the end, if the particular formula you are using for your band works well and produces the desired result, then you cannot be wrong. I would however, urge all who read this tutorial article to look closely at the principles behind the suggested preparation regime and ensure they have addressed them in an appropriate form for their band.

What are we trying to achieve?

I have for a long time believed that if a desired end result is known, then it is always best to reverse engineer the problem to define the precise steps that need to be taken to arrive in good shape at that end result. The end result we are dealing with here could be defined as "*Perform to the bands potential in the competition arena*". Many, maybe even most, will not have any argument with this end result or aim. However, it should be further defined or qualified. A band may well achieve the aim of performing to their potential (or even exceeding it!) at a contest, but at what cost: a frantic preparation period where tempers have become frayed, a deterioration of relationships within the band, a disproportionate amount of time devoted to the band in the last couple of months prior to the contest at the expense of personal endeavours, and the band as a whole generally exhausted after completing their events. Perhaps the aim or end result could better be defined as "*Perform to the bands potential in the competition arena, with the band well*

poised to transition to the next competitive season". This encapsulates the "what" is to be achieved, and has the vital qualifier on "how" it is to happen in order for the band to be in good shape post contest.

We have covered the "what" and the "how", and now we really need to look at the "why" to complete this part of the mission statement. Why do we do what we do in the pipe band context? I would contest it has something to do with enjoyment and making good music. Particular bands will also have their own specific reasons why they want to perform to their potential. Our aim could then be further defined as:

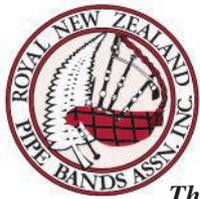
"Perform to the bands potential in the competition arena, with the band well poised to transition to the next competitive season in order to maintain existing membership, attract new members, and improve the musical standard over the next 12 months".

We have also added another element to the aim – that of a time constraint. Now the band membership knows what, when, where and how the aim is to be achieved. An aim such as this should be agreed with and well communicated to the band concerned - with the pipe major and drum sergeant leading the discussion. It is of no use whatsoever for the pipe major, drum sergeant and only a proportion of the band signing up to the aim leaving behind a significant proportion of the members. The aim will not be achieved.

A good potential by-product of achieving the bands aim at the contest is that it may well help to significantly raise the profile of the band in your local community. This is may be particularly important in assisting with any funding or grant applications to local community charitable trusts or other such organisations.

Some Specifics

There are a fair number of things to consider within each element of the band and for the band as a whole so that the best performance possible can be achieved. Here are the main salient points to have covered:



The Pipe Corps:

a. **Pipe Maintenance.** This is a fundamental (if relatively uninteresting) element. Poorly maintained pipes will never sound as good as well maintained pipes and will therefore not contribute to the aim. Aspects we need to address here are:

Hemping: All joints should be appropriately hemped with the yellow unwaxed hemp. The initial 4 or so feet of the hemp should be waxed with the black cobblers wax so it grips on to the wood of the drone or chanter. The Black pre-waxed linen thread should be avoided as it does not bed down well requiring the joint to be very tight, and once the wax wears off the thread, the thread itself is very abrasive of the black wood it comes into contact with. If our bagpipe is to endure beyond the present generation, properly hemped joints (please forgive the pun!) are vital.



Black waxed linen thread – not recommended

The blowpipe joint should have all of the hemp waxed as this is the wettest of all the joints and requires constant checking. If the hemp is not waxed all of the way through, it will swell making it difficult to remove and it may potentially crack the blowpipe stock.

Enemy number 2 would be PTFE tape, alias plumbers tape, or thread tape. It is fine to use one or two layers of this tape on the tuning slides only (just the lower tuning slide of the bass drone) but no where else. It does not aid in making the joint airtight, and may even assist the chanter to slide out of the stock during a performance.



Thread Tape – minimal use on tuning slides only

The Pipe Chanter: There are a couple of aspects here that require attention. The first would be to ensure that the yellow hemp on the bottom of the reed has been waxed with black cobblers wax. This ensures that it grips on the wood/plastic inside of the reed seat and will not come loose or fall out easily. The second is chanter tape. I firmly recommend the use of the thin electricians tape and to wrap the tape around the hole twice. This makes for a stronger hole and tape will be less likely to slip. It does require maintenance and the Pipe Major would be well advised to ensure he/she checks all of the pipers chanters at least a week before the contest. It would also be good practice to have a spare piece of tape on the sole of the chanter to use in an emergency.



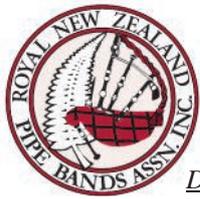
A double layer of this tape on the pipe chanter

There is a lot of 'surgical' type tape being used on pipe chanters. Besides not looking good, it tears too easily under the pressure of the fingers and its use is not recommended.

All pipers should have a plastic or blackwood (not a light wood) dummy stock, **without** a hole in the end to keep their pipe chanter in when not playing and when the pipes are packed away. The idea is to maintain a certain amount of moisture in the cane of the reed – not too much and not too little. If the reed is put away in a light wooden dummy stock or one with a hole in the end, the potential is there for the reed to dry out too much, giving it a higher pitch. If the reed is put away in a plastic or blackwood dummy stock when it is wet, then too much moisture will be retained and the reed will cultivate mould. After playing, if the reed feels damp to touch, it should be left out for 10 minutes to air and then be put away when it feels dry to the touch.



Plastic Dummy Stock



Drone Reeds: Whatever make or type of drone reed being used in the band, it is always advisable to leave a small amount of hemp on the reed seat end of the reed so that when inserted into the stock, the spare end is trapped between the inside of the stock and the hemp joint of the drone. It will be impossible for the reed to fall out of the drone during a performance!



Spare hemp end on each reed

Bags and bag covers: With the advent of synthetic pipe bags, a lot less maintenance is required here. However, it is strongly recommended that pipers remove their bag covers and ensure the stocks are firmly and correctly fitted to the bag and that the bag itself is not leaking. If the bag is leaking then it is a far simpler matter to replace it before a contest rather than struggle your way through the contest with a leaky bag, not able to perform to your potential.

Bag covers must also fit the bag – not too tight so that it prevents the bag from fully inflating and not too loose so that it is prone to slipping during a performance.

The Blowpipe: This must be one of the more neglected areas of bagpipe maintenance. Ensure the blowpipe is pulled through regularly to remove the build up of 'gunk' inside. Ensure pipers have a flapper type (or similar) valve and not one that is inserted into the bottom of the blowpipe – these will restrict the amount of air you can get into the bag in the same period of time and will therefore make your pipes harder to blow. The blowpipe and mouthpiece bores would also be worth looking at – anything less than about a 9mm bore will mean you have too much resistance in the blowpipe and your pipes will be harder to blow.



Flapper type valve recommended

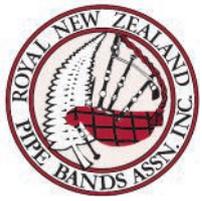
b. Music. All of the bands repertoire to be used at the contest (including any tunes used to tune up etc) should be well memorized by the entire unit – pipers and drummers. It is only when a tune has been well memorized by the entire corps (pipe and drum) that the real business of getting tunes played tightly together can begin. This requires a concentrated effort on the part of all individuals **early** in the season to ensure maximum time is available to the pipe major and drum sergeant to put the polish on the tunes and get them played as they desire in a finely tuned manner. Music and drum scores need to be learnt to the point where you're not merely thinking about what is coming next in the music, but also having a consciousness with regard to how such music is being played. Drummers need to have particular regard to timing and sympathy with the pipe corps and both pipers and drummers need to have special regard to timing within their respective corps. The 'what' needs to be looked after (tune/score memorized) as soon as possible and the 'how' (timing, expression etc) is where the focus of a bands attention should be.

I wonder how many bands at this late stage of the competing season are still having issues with mistakes and poor timing?!! At any grade level, mistakes are hard to forgive from any perspective – adjudicator, pipe major and drum sergeant alike.

Whilst not strictly 'music', it would be remiss of me not to mention attacks (starts) and stops in a performance. A good first impression is vital. The attack should be practiced individually and as a group relentlessly. It is a technical aspect of the performance that should be easily mastered. Likewise finishes. A poor finish will seriously detract from an otherwise very good performance. These also need to be practiced relentlessly as individuals and as a group.

Perfect practice involves using and exercising the brain because this is the prime instrument which is going to enable performance under pressure.

c. Sound. This is a critical area of your contest preparation. You must have achieved a 'sound' **before** you travel to a contest. By 'sound', I mean that the Pipe Major must be satisfied that all of the pipes are well maintained, with chanters pitched at the desired pitch and well matched to each other, and drones producing a nice rich and steady tone. The pitch is one area where there is significant latitude. If there is a predominance of weaker blowers in the band, then it would perhaps be wiser to keep the pitch down a little to help broaden the sound – a pitch closer to what the Grade 1 bands are achieving may not be desirable as you may end up with a thin sound with no breadth to it. A lower grade band with a predominance of weaker blowers may wish to aim for a pitch of around 448Hz (or 474Hz in the older



Korg tuner scale) whereas the higher grade bands may well be up around 454-455Hz (480-481Hz in the older Korg tuner scale).

If this is proving hard to achieve, then the Pipe Major should ask for some outside assistance to get the sound the band desires. Ask for this early, and have a few different people in mind that may be able to provide the help.

Drum tuning should be largely complete the day before a contest, minor adjustments only on the day: a loose snare, a slightly flat tenor for example.

d. Spare: The pipe major and drum sergeant should always have contingency plans for when the inevitable happens and things start to go awry. The pipe major should have at least one spare pipe chanter reed for each piper, a selection of the make of drone reeds the band is using and a couple of spare pipe bags. Other spares could include mouthpieces, blowpipe valves etc. If you don't have it, then you are bound to need it! Whilst we always hope that we can execute Plan A without any modifications, it is a very wise move to have options to cater for those things that will inevitably not go right.

In terms of drumming, the most important aspect would be to have a spare drum that is ready to go. Additionally, a couple of spare top and bottom heads along with some spare sticks would be essential. Anything else comes down to a spectrum from "leaving nothing to chance" to "covering what experience tells you is reasonable".

e. The Sound Check: Once at a contest, especially the National Pipe Band Contest where the band has arrived at least the day before they are due to compete, it is a good move to check everything to ensure the desired sound is being achieved. Personally, I would check all the pipes individually and then as a corps and make good any areas requiring attention. Drummers should be doing likewise. The band should then go through a rehearsal of their performances, but be very wary of playing for too long. For me, a 40 minute blow together the day before a contest would be ample – as long as everything is right. If it is not right, then the pipe major must locate the problem areas and rectify them before confirming the sound collectively once more.

Avoid the temptation to play for too long, especially if the sound is good.

f. The Big Day: This is the culmination of the year's hard work – and the band members need to give themselves the best chance of executing their performances to the best of their ability. Aside from ensuring the whole team has had plenty of sleep and an extremely moderate level of festivity the night before, the pipe major and drum sergeant need to prepare the team and the instruments for the final performances of the season.

Arrival at the venue and warm up.

The band should arrive at the grounds at a pre-determined rendezvous about 1 ½ hours before the scheduled competing time. This gives time for the band members to familiarize themselves with their surroundings and for the instruments to be warmed up to the task.

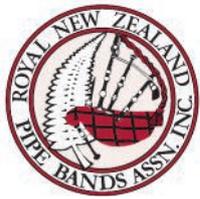
Drummers:

Drummers should spend about 1/2 hour preparing themselves before hooking up with the pipe corps. Drummers need to accept and understand the fickle nature of the bagpipe instrument and weather. In any event, you don't want to play yourself out before performing - while the brain is the biggest muscle, it is also the first to get tired. You need to develop the ability to switch on, and equally the ability to switch off.

Pipers:

The pipes should be warmed up and ready to go within about 25 minutes playing time. This will normally require pipers to meet 40 minutes before their scheduled playing time to begin their warm up. The pipe major should have a final run around each individuals pipe to ensure there are no glaring problems – this may also be done at the motel prior to coming down to the performance venue. The whole point of the warm up period is to prepare the instruments and the individuals for the performance. Too little playing will result in an unsettled performance. Too much playing during the warm up will tire individuals out and lead to a poorer performance.

Without trying to prescribe exactly how the warm up period is used – different people will have different equally valid opinions here – the total playing time should not exceed about 25 minutes and a breakdown could look like:



- 0-5 minutes:** Pipe Corps plays (possible street march tunes) whilst drones are being set.
- 5-10 minutes:** Any major chanter deficiencies rectified.
- 10-15 minutes:** Pipe Corps plays part of its set/medley to settle the nerves.
- 15-20 minutes:** Some one-to-one playing to further refine chanter sound as required. Chanter refinement should now be complete.
- 20-30 minutes:** Whole band plays – a couple of attacks, part of the set/medley.
- 30-33 minutes:** Band moves to final tuning area close to Point A (dictated by contest organizing committee).
- 33-38 minutes:** Whole band plays – a few more attacks and the remaining part of the set/medley. Final tune up.
- 38-40 minutes:** Band moves to Point A to commence its performance.

If it is a particularly wet or hot day, the pipes should be blown less. This is a guide only. Times can be amended to suit, but the important point is that the pipe major must have a plan. The band should also choose an appropriate area to tune up in. Given the number of bands competing and the peculiarities of the venue, an ideal spot to tune up in may not be available. Whatever the case, do not choose a tune up area which is a significant distance from Point A, or the band will spend too much of its 40 minute warm up period getting to Point A!

Make sure that the Drum Major (or a suitable appointed person) has synchronized their watch with the clock at Point A so that the Pipe Major is fully aware at all times how much time is left for the tune up.

Execution of the Performance: Once at Point A, the band is totally in the pipe majors hands. It is his/her job to settle the band down, ensure everyone is as relaxed as they can be and to get on and do the business. Whilst the band should spend as little time as possible at Point A, the pipe major must not rush the band into the event without taking the time to relax everyone.

With some adrenaline running through the system, it is easy to let tempos get a little quick. All members of the band need to be aware of this and should have had some practice at controlling the tempos at other contests during the year. Total concentration is required during the performance and an inward focus should be maintained – do not let the attention wander to where a particular judge is standing or trying to find someone in the audience. With the accumulation of good individual practice during the year, sound band rehearsals, and good management leading up to the day and on the day, the band stands a very good chance

of performing to its potential which is what it is all about.

g. ***The Aftermath.*** We all need to be realists. We need to be able to accept constructive criticism of our performances. Filter judging reports without emotion (analyse, accept or reject). Filter other less official reports and comments likewise. We did not hear the whole performance we played in. We did not hear the mistake(s) on the other side of the band or the piper cutting a chanter in and out. Others external to our performance have a better vantage point to hear these things. Judges are there to primarily rank the bands in order of merit and to provide some qualitative feedback. If you disagree with some of the feedback, that is fine – it will not affect where the judge has placed the band. It is fine to seek some further clarification from a judge on the bands performance – but do not expect a detailed blow by blow account of all the intricacies of your performance. You know your music inside out and have been playing it for at least a year. Particularly in the case of your medley, the judge may have heard it for the first time at this competition and may only provide specific comment on the sound, execution and integration, appropriateness of harmonies, the start and finish and some other detail (errors, tune selection etc).

It would be unwise in the extreme to get into a verbal duel with an adjudicator over your performance. It is unprofessional and you are not doing your band any service. It is a fact that cream floats to the top and the more often your band is putting a good performance on the park, the more likely it is that results will follow.

Summary

I hope this tutorial has provided some useful comment on the preparation of your band for a contest. It is not an exhaustive dialogue covering every aspect, but the main issues are highlighted. I firmly believe that we need to keep everything in perspective and remember what we are doing this for – the production of good pipe band music and enjoyment. Pipe Banding – like life – is a journey, and not a destination. We need to enjoy that journey and learn a few things along the way. The Pipe Band will still be there after the contest (hopefully!) and we need to be positioned to start the new season (after a short rest!) in good heart and mind. Regardless of results or level of performances achieved in the preceding season, we are only as good as our **next** performance. So lets look forward to that!

Greg Wilson