

# 2007 Tuition Series

## Teaching & Educating

Presented by Greg Wilson - Principal of the College of Piping

### Introduction

Proper, correct teaching is indispensable. This is true for any discipline; piping and drumming are no exceptions. But, having said this, do we actually have a problem with good quality tuition of piping and drumming in New Zealand today? When you consider that most of our bands in respective grades are not of a prize winning standard in the same grades overseas (particularly Scotland and Canada), it possibly means we have a lower standard of teaching in some areas – or maybe just a lack of access to good teaching? We have some notable exceptions: the top three bands in Grade 1 in New Zealand would not be out of place in the Grade 1 competition at the World Pipe Band Championships in Scotland; indeed, the Manawatu Scottish Society Pipe Band went through to the finals of the Grade 1 Worlds at their last outing there in 2005.

Our Juvenile Bands are gaining momentum and are starting to develop some real potential. Again, the top three bands in this grade are achieving a high standard and have benefited from consistent, quality tuition. But when we take a good look at the bulk of the bands in Grades 2, 3 and 4, we do not *generally* measure up to the standards being achieved in these grades overseas. Further, it is also generally acknowledged that the standard of pipe band drumming in New Zealand falls far short of the international standard over all grades.

But it is not all about pipe banding I hear you say. Our solo pipers have enjoyed considerable success overseas in recent decades and drumming individuals have been able to slot into top class drum corps overseas with relative ease. All true. So we do have some piping and drumming talent here in New Zealand but we have yet to convert the potential we have in piping and drumming into achieving higher standards across the Grades.

Quality teaching will have a better chance of producing a quality output. Given our relatively large number of Grade 3 and 4 bands not achieving an international standard within their grade, we either lack quality teachers, access to quality teachers, or

both. Or perhaps there is an amount of apathy out there and a 'we've always done it this way' type of approach from some bands. Inevitably, some bands will be content to be a 'social' band – but this does not excuse them the responsibility of being a good advertisement for the pipe band movement.

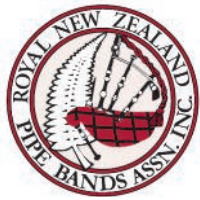
Whatever, we have a responsibility to ensure the pipe banding movement not merely survives, but flourishes in New Zealand. We are competing with a myriad of other activities that interest the younger generation and we need to step up to the mark. We need to be replacing ourselves with at least 2 quality pipers or drummers to ensure the movement grows and standards are raised. How do we do this? An important part is effective marketing (and it is far easier to market a quality product!), recruitment and retention, and above all, quality teaching. There is no single silver bullet solution as all of these factors feed off each other.

### Teaching and Education Tools

By far the best tool we can have is an experienced and high quality teacher providing weekly one-on-one lessons. We do have some of these in New Zealand and need to develop more of them. The RNZPBA College of Piping and Drumming will be developing a teachers certificate as part of its piping and drumming curriculum which will provide a pathway for pipers and drummers to learn how to teach effectively and to achieve great results with their students.

An essential aid to teaching and learning is a high quality tutor book. The older generation of pipers out there





will well remember the previous versions of the Logan's Tutor and the first College of Piping Tutor. Drummers will have had the RSPBA publications. All very good for their time. But standards have improved, particularly in terms of the standard of instruments. Rope tension drums are a thing of the past, the chanter pitch is higher with a truer scale and great leaps forward have been made in the production of reeds and sticks. There are also more players achieving a greater degree of technical proficiency world-wide than ever before. This should all add up to an improving standard of pipe bands (and it has), however we are somewhat behind the global trend here in New Zealand. Be very, very sure that unstructured teaching off bits of photocopied scraps of manuscript paper has had its time. It has never 'cut the mustard' and never will.

The standard of tutor book has improved out of sight compared to 50 years ago. Many make good use of technology and are able to reach out to a far wider global audience than in previous generations. CDRoms within these tutor books contain video clips that show world class exponents teaching or demonstrating all the rudiments and embellishments there are in drumming and piping. These tutor books are relatively affordable – between \$50 - \$95 each depending on the exchange rate and cost of postage. When one considers their benefit, their lasting impact, and the sheer quality of these productions, it is indeed a small price to pay for getting the best start possible on your chosen instrument.

What tutor book should I use? It really does not matter, and comes down to personal preference. Perhaps a good approach is to look at who wrote the tutor book and what their particular standing in the piping/drumming community is. I recommend you have a look at the tutor books listed above.

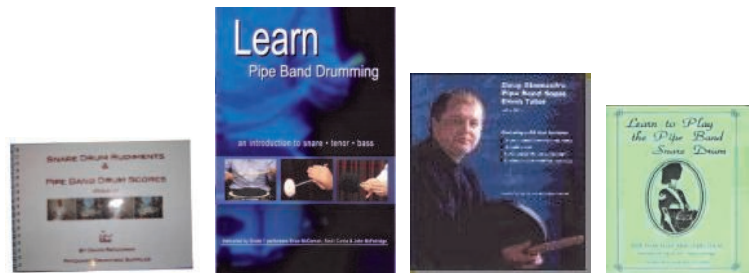
For those pipers out there with a hankering for some piobaireachd tuition (and it should be all of you!), the College of Piping has a very good introductory Piobaireachd Tutor Book with a CD Rom and the National Piping Centre is in the final stages of producing their Piobaireachd Tutor, also with a CD Rom.

## Piping



From left to right :  
The National Piping Centre Tutor Book  
The College of Piping Tutor Book series  
Jim McGillivray's Rhythmic Fingerwork  
John Cairns' Bagpipe Solutions series

## Drumming



From left to right:  
David Farquhar Snare Drumming Rudiments  
Learn Pipe Band Drumming DVD  
Doug Stronach's Pipe band Snare Drum Tutor  
Learn to Play the Pipe Band Snare Drum by Allan Chatto



## Accessing Quality Teaching

Yes, it is all very well to say that we need more quality teaching and teachers, but how do we go about accessing them? Well, I have seven main options for you, and you can use all or any combination of these. Remember that progress is made through consistent practice and guidance. It is of little use seeking help a matter of weeks before a competition or event.



**Option 1: One – on – one tuition.** If you are lucky enough to live within striking distance of a good teacher and he/she is able to take you on, then this is the single best way of improving your playing standard and knowledge.

**Option 2: Online Lessons through Video Conferencing or Skype.** This is becoming increasingly popular, particularly for those who are relatively geographically isolated or live in a non-piping/pipe band drumming country. Lessons are available from some of the worlds top pipers through the National Piping Centre and others in Canada and the USA also provide this service. In New Zealand, Don Gannaway provides an online tuition service, and the Otago Pipers Club has a monthly Piobaireachd video conference with yours truly. With the more popular uptake of broadband internet services, many more teachers across NZ will be able to provide Skype (or equivalent software) piping/drumming lessons.

**Option 3: Telephone Lessons.** Just having a phone connection gives us the opportunity of accessing some good quality teaching. Again, this needs to be negotiated with the prospective tutor in terms of availability and price. Not really a good option for a beginner piper or drummer.

**Option 4: Tape/Mini Disc/MP3 Lessons.** This is a really good method of gaining feedback on tunes you are currently working on. It has the advantage of you being able to record your tunes at your leisure and for the teacher to listen and provide feedback at his/her convenience.

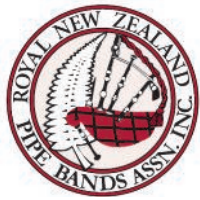
**Option 5: Summer Schools.** Attendance at the annual RNZPBA Summer School is a great way to give your piping and drumming a boost in a short space of time. World Class Principal Tutors are engaged along with a very good line up of NZ tutors. Summer School is not just for the youngster; it caters for all levels, ages and stages. Summer School must be used in conjunction with another method of gaining regular tuition as its effect will diminish as the weeks following its completion go by without the reinforcement of regular tuition.

**Option 6: Occasional Weekend Workshops/Seminars.** These tend to be specific to an area, usually arranged by the local pipe band or pipers club. They can also be very specific in content depending on what the outcomes sought are. Again, this option must be used in conjunction with another method of regular tuition.

**Option 7: RNZPBA Visiting Tutor Scholarship.** Pipe Bands have the option of applying for one of these scholarships through the RNZPBA Education Group. Normally, funding is available for up to six visits from a piping and/or drumming tutor to help the band and respective corps improve their collective performance.

The basic point I am trying to make here is that it is no longer good enough to use relative geographic isolation as an excuse for not gaining good quality piping or drumming tuition. Yes, it is a little harder if you don't have the expertise living within easy reach, but tuition programmes organised with some effort are likely to have very good results as the people involved, both student and teacher, value it more. Good quality tutor books with first class video demonstrations of technique and rudiments mean that there is precious little reason (or excuse!) for poor teaching of basic technique. Sound teaching of the basic rudiments in drumming and technique/embellishments in piping is essential. They provide the foundation building blocks





for everything that follows. If we get the foundation wrong or it is sub-standard, there is no chance of producing a quality product. Those who teach piping and drumming have a responsibility to ensure they are teaching correctly and must make every effort to do so. Choosing not to do this is lazy and irresponsible. There is no such thing as a free lunch – we must get used to paying for our tuition. Again, both student and teacher will tend to value to lesson more if there is an appropriate level of remuneration involved.

To be a good teacher requires well developed communication skills. You need to be able to communicate with older as well as the younger generations of learners. A good piper or drummer will not necessarily be a good teacher. They may not have the ability to pass on their knowledge and skill for whatever reason – maybe they

were a relatively natural learner who did not have to think too much about the technique/rudiments and picked up things with relative ease. Similarly, someone who has not reached an advanced stage of proficiency in piping or drumming may in fact be an effective teacher. Because they perhaps struggled to get the basics right and to develop fluency in their playing, they may well be better equipped to pass on different techniques/methods of learning than those to whom piping/drumming came naturally. Communication is a key ingredient of an effective teacher.

There are some good recent teaching initiatives that are worth a mention at this point. The formation of the Auckland Pipe Band College, the Central North Island Academy of Piping and Drumming and the Southland folk are getting a province-wide teaching programme underway. There will be others as well. These initiatives will provide a solid framework within which good quality tuition can be delivered. This, coupled with the fine teaching going on at John McGlashan College, St Andrews College, St Kentigern College and Scots College, shows that there are pockets of good teaching going on throughout the country. There are many more individual examples as well. The task now is to make this more mainstream.



## RNZPBA College of Piping and Drumming

The RNZPBA College of Piping and Drumming has a series of proficiency certificates that pipers and drummers can be examined for. These range from Preliminary to Advanced and Senior proficiency levels. Whilst not a teaching tool in its own right, the

curriculum does provide a measure of quality assurance that students of piping and drumming are being taught correctly. This is particularly important in the NZ pipe band scene where by far the majority of piping and drumming teaching is done within individual bands, with little or no external validation.

It is a source of continual

disappointment to me that more pipers and drummers do not take up the challenge and go through the learning steps required to gain certification at various levels. Some teachers may think the curriculum is not extensive enough and therefore not valid. These teachers would do well to understand that the curriculum is not a substitute for a tutor book. It provides a series of questions and exercises that give a clear indication of the level of proficiency of a student and any deficiencies they may have at a particular point in time. End of story. The further development of technical and musical fluency and repertoire is over to the teacher.

Some teachers may feel inadequate or exposed as their knowledge and proficiency levels are below what is required. As teachers of piping and drumming, we have a responsibility to ensure our students are being taught correctly. Making sure they have all the skills and knowledge to pass certificates within the RNZPBA Piping and Drumming curriculum is a responsible way of demonstrating this. It gives both the student and their parent/guardian the confidence (and satisfaction) that their child is being well taught.

Passing examinations is not what we are all about. We want to be able to play to our potential. The RNZPBA College of Piping and Drumming



certification process provides a tiered system of markers or reference points which will allow us to confirm the teaching we have received is of the right quality, and this will assist us to reach our potential. Communication, as we have covered already, is important to the way you teach. To have experienced a course of study helps your ability to communicate it. There is no substitute for good individual teaching.

### Sustainability

I have put this as a main paragraph heading of its own, because I believe it is of vital importance. Any teaching programme that a student (or a teacher for that matter) embarks upon must be sustainable if it is to produce results. Sustainability relates to both the financial and time aspects. A programme must be affordable for the student and provide reasonable return for the teacher; otherwise either the teacher or student will lose interest. The programme must also have continuity so that an individual lesson is provided at least once a week for the vast majority of the year, and for successive years.

### Conclusion

It is not my intention to be inflammatory or accusatory in this tutorial – and I trust my words have not come across in this way. The general standard within each grade for our pipe bands is behind that of the international standard and it irks me that this is so. We have great potential in the NZ Pipe Band movement to do well internationally in all grades. The key to improving our standard is community-wide consistent quality teaching in sustainable programmes. Our students deserve to have the opportunity to reach their potential as individual musicians and our bands do as well.

Teachers of piping and drumming must school themselves up and insist on teaching from a quality tutor book and ensure they are teaching correctly. External quality assurance should be part of this through the RNZPBA College of Piping and Drumming certification process. There are many avenues that can be investigated to access good quality teaching. Pipers and drummers resident in the back blocks of wherever do not have the excuse of no access to quality tuition. Where there is a will, there is a way (or at least seven ways in my opinion).

Good quality teaching is fundamental to the successful future of the pipe band movement in New Zealand. We can carry on as we are now and we may produce the occasional international standard pipe band at whatever grade level. Or we can knuckle down to the business of accessing quality teaching programmes on a sustainable basis and have a much better chance of raising the standard in all grades. Quality, access, sustainability, communication and a determination to succeed are the keys.

*Greg Wilson*

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