

Advice For Marching Band Drum Majors: A Dozen Considerations

As a marching band director, conductor and adjudicator, I have specific ideas about what I look for when considering a drum major and what is expected of them throughout the year. I have composed a list of a dozen items that I feel are necessary attributes for a good drum major to have.

Each band director will have their own ideas about what constitutes a good candidate for a drum major or a good drum major. This list is not exhaustive but it does provide a good framework for thought.

There is one pre-requisite that all drum major candidates must have before any of the following is considered and that is a strong desire to actually be a drum major. Some people may have all the qualities listed in this article and more but if they don't really have the desire to become a drum major then they should not consider it as a matter of practicality.

1. Drum majors must be masters of meter, rhythm and time:

A drum major that does not have a good sense of rhythm and an "internal clock" to keep and provide a tempo is not much use on the field.

2. Drum majors must be clear and concise in their conducting patterns:

A drum major that does not provide a clear ictus and an even takt is doing more harm than good to the ensemble. Clear, large, easily visible patterns are more useful than fancy and ornate ones.

3. Drum majors must be respected by their peers:

A drum major that does not have the respect of their peers will find themselves having a very difficult time being in the leadership role.

4. Drum majors must be respected by their directors:

A person that has not earned the trust and approval of their directors will find themselves not being a drum major in the first place.

5. Drum majors need to be disciplined:

If a drum major is undisciplined in their day to day routines and with their course work, they will not be disciplined on the field. In order to be an effective drum major, scores and routines need to be memorized, resolving field placement issues needs to be second nature and there are a host of other things that need to be organized, deployed and implemented by the drum major. Unorganized people will find these tasks daunting if not impossible.

6. Drum majors must have a resilient personality:

Being a drum major is not for the meek. There will be times when you will feel pressure from both your peers and directors. Drum majors need to be able to channel all the feedback they get, both positive and negative, into the proper places and learn and grow from it.

7. Drum majors must have a commanding presence:

The drum major must execute their whistle commands and vocal commands with authority. They must direct with confidence. They must act the leader, play the leader and become the leader that the drum major role demands.

8. Drum majors must have the heart of a servant:

The drum major is not an all glory role nor should it be thought as such. In actuality, the drum major is a servant on multiple levels. They serve the ensemble, they serve the composers, they serve the directors, they serve their school or organization and most importantly they serve the musicians and drum majors of tomorrow by providing a model and blazing a path for them.

9. Drum majors are part of a team and they need to be an integral member of the team:

The drum major is a key component in a larger *community, the band itself*. The best leaders are both leaders AND “team players”. The drum major doesn’t have to have all the answers; however, they need to know where to get them and more importantly: how to work through them when needed. The band is a group and every single person has their own important role.

10. Drum majors need to be in good physical shape:

Directing the ensemble from the field is exhausting. Drum majors are called upon to climb ladders, run up and down the field, wield the mace, direct while moving backwards and deal with a lot of other mental and physical challenges. A person who is not in shape may find themselves in a medical predicament that they do not want nor need to be in.

11. Drum majors need to be huge supporters of the band and inspirational:

There are few people that can inspire the band to get “pumped” like their own drum majors. Drum majors need to be able to inspire the band to be the best that they can be and after a hard day of performing or rehearsing, the drum major needs to not only reflect on what needs to be fixed but also what was done well. The band members require constant encouragement and feedback.

12. Drum majors need to realize they are human too.

Often times it seems the weight of the “world” is brought to the shoulders of the drum major. A drum major is not super human, nor are they expected to be. A good drum major is able to let down at times and enjoy what is happening around them. Mistakes will be made, learn from them. I was once told that perfection is the enemy of true excellence. Nothing will ever be “perfect” but we can make things better and we can be excellent! True perfection is unattainable and if you focus on every little thing that is going wrong you will never realize the amazing things your band has accomplished on their journey.

The drum major is not alone in these roles and the burden of these responsibilities is carried by many. The directors, advisors, officers, section leaders, squad leaders, and the members themselves all share and are part of the “community”. To be an effective leader you must be able to see the “big picture” and realize that every single band member have large roles to play. All members are part of the “whole” and when the band is excited about being the band (*Esprit de Corp*) and everyone is functioning in their capacities – success will follow.