

# Effective Equipment Logistics for Marching Bands

BY NANCY A. CLARK

**T**he logistical challenges inherent with handling marching band equipment – when met properly – can positively reinforce the excellence and discipline necessary to stage an award-winning performance on the field. While every marching band program is unique, creativity and coordination are two valuable keys to success.



## Creativity: Sharing Ideas, Finding Solutions

While competitive on the field, most marching bands have a collegial, team spirit off the field and are willing to share their creative ideas and advice. Other programs can offer invaluable insights.

“Since day one, we’ve modified everything I don’t know how many times after seeing how others do it,” comments Wayne Ivers, band director at Marshall High School in Marshall, Minn.

In the staging area at competitions, Ivers and his assistants often walk around networking, observing, and asking questions. They request permission to look inside trailers to examine how different groups organize their equipment.

To provide flexibility for changing needs, the Marshall band decided not to customize any of their trailer interiors. Last year, their props included seven large backdrops, each 8’ x 18’, along with bases to support them; other years they have had no props.

Grand Rapids High School in Grand Rapids, Minn., travels with a 40’ trailer featuring E-Tracking along the inside walls, enabling equipment to be tied down or two-by-four lumber to be added as cross beams to create a second level if necessary.

Ivers says networking questions can also extend to on-field details; the Marshall band learned to effectively mic their marimbas by asking another band for advice.

Many of these parking-lot discussions focus on the creative transportation solutions utilized by marching bands – usually wheeled carts, racks, and other containers. While commercially-made options are available, some bands use solutions that are handmade by either band parents or students.

“A lot of our specialty equipment was built by our school’s technical education department,” says Dale Gunderson, band director at Grand Rapids. These technical programs – where students receive hands-on instruction in welding, wood-working, automotive repair or other skills – are often looking for meaningful projects.

"I buy the materials and these kids love to do projects," notes Gunder-son, who believes such cooperation provides valuable cross-curricular benefits.

Avon High School in Avon, Ind., has benefitted from hands-on creativity and expertise among its band parents, including adding a second level and built-in mechanical lift to the band's semi trailer. Other custom solutions built for the Avon band include wheeled uniform boxes, each designed to hold 15 uniforms during both off-season storage and travel. These boxes include space for shoes and several shelves for hats and other miscellaneous items.

Avon band director Jay Webb says some of his band parents utilize their expertise working at local firms that manufacture precision auto-racing components. As in auto racing, success in marching band often comes down to the right set of wheels.

"We've learned that high-quality wheels on all our carts make a big difference," explains Webb, who says that small, hard wheels do not roll well over varied surfaces such as grass, gravel, dirt, and pavement. Pneumatic tires offer definite advantages.

According to Ivers, Marshall's band ordered a heavy-duty marimba chassis with eight-inch pneumatic tires. "It's strong and sturdy," says Ivers, adding that a cart with small, indoor casters might collapse while being moved across uneven or rocky terrain. "We can use these carts indoors or outdoors – we can't afford to buy two sets of everything," he notes.

Before you purchase any cart or make your own, ensure it's designed for flexibility. Will its wheels work indoors and outdoors? Can it adjust to suit different sized equipment? Does it fit easily through a three-foot classroom door or inside a 6-foot-high trailer?

Ideally, any transport cart should serve double-duty by also providing storage capability. For example, the same cart might hold uniforms in a storage room but also roll outside onto a field, bus, or trailer for competition. This saves time both distributing and collecting equipment.

## Coordination: Improving Organization, Promoting Responsibility

Particularly during busy seasons, the challenging cycle of "pack-travel-compete-travel-unpack" demands careful attention to detail. As much as possible, successful marching programs strive to be organized.

"Logistics can be a nightmare," comments Ivers. "There's hauling, moving, storing, setting up, taking down – it all can interfere with the performing and teaching."

Ivers says they pack up everything in their trailers by the middle of August to be sure it all fits before hitting the road in September. He adds, "The more times you pack, the better you get at it."

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The Grand Rapids band trailer.

“Organization is our biggest asset,” agrees Gunderson. “When chaperones are helping with equipment, we meet with them each weekend to assign specific items to each person, rather than just telling them to grab something.” He also says that fostering a strong leadership team of students pays off because the previous year’s section leaders train the new students.

Each of Avon High School’s homemade uniform boxes is supervised by one or two “Box Moms” who are responsible for 15 students and their

uniforms. While providing logistical assistance, Webb says “Box Moms” also bond with the students. “They get to know their 15 kids pretty well during the season – it’s a special relationship.”

Consolidation can benefit the logistics of managing equipment besides uniforms. To improve the handling of electronic components like amplifiers, mixers, and synthesizers, Marshall purchased their own rolling rack system after seeing other bands use the same solution.

Ivers says it’s a tremendous advantage. “This saves a lot of headaches,” he notes. “We can organize our electronics and cords much better, just running one large composite cable from the rolling rack out to the performance.”

Along with a rolling rack system, reliable electrical power is another important factor for consistent performances, particularly considering the growing use of electronics in the pit area. “Whenever we’re running an extension cord to the field, anyone could trip on it and we’d lose power,” says Gunderson, who is considering buying a new-generation silent generator to eliminate this variable and source of anxiety.

Of course, the best and most reliable “power” for a marching band is the enthusiasm supplied by the students themselves. Most directors recommend harnessing this energy from the first rehearsal, trip or performance. This includes fostering responsibility by insisting that students take charge of their own equipment.



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“Kids need to take ownership,” contends Gunderson. “Once they enter the working world, nobody’s going to haul their laptop computer back and forth to work for them.” He believes students are fully capable and often have stronger backs than the adults.

Until last year, Marshall’s band re-

lied upon its “band staff” for logistical support. This group, which consisted of non-playing students and friends, handled most of the loading and unloading. However, Ivers says they were sometimes difficult to manage or count on.

“Our musicians weren’t paying enough attention, so we might get on the field and find we’re missing key equipment because so-and-so from the band staff wasn’t there to make it happen,” recalls Ivers. To avoid such problems, he introduced a new rule: ‘If you play it, you pack it.’ So far, this policy has worked out well, and he believes musicians are more careful with their own instruments.

How much equipment is being handled varies among programs, of course, although most directors agree that elaborate props seem to be less common today at competitions across the Midwest.

“In the 1990s, sets and props were pretty big,” recalls Webb. “Now I’m seeing more pit equipment and elec-

tronics, with fewer props.” Webb says his band has used very little props lately and been successful – Avon won the Bands of America Grand National Championship in 2008.

Trends may come and go, but logistical challenges are a constant theme for marching band programs. The precision teamwork exhibited on the field requires comparable behind-the-scenes planning and thoughtfully designed equipment. Through creative solutions and coordinated efforts, successful marching band programs can always develop their own winning formula. 

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