Alumni

March Madness

By
Thomas Vinciguerra ’85CC, ’86JRN, ’90GSAS
|
Winter 2012-13



Mark Steele

It’s been said of the Columbia Lions that if they didn’t have Sid Luckman ’39CC, they’d have no luck at all. But with the arrival of new head coach Peter “We Will *Not* Be Defined by the Past” Mangurian, who led the improved 2012 Lions to a 3–7 record, the team has received its marching orders. The goal is excellence.

Will the band follow suit?

Tough call. Sure, the Columbia University Marching Band has made its share of fumbles, incompletions, and last-second scrambles. Sure, when the Lions lost to Cornell in 2011, giving the team an 0–9 record that threatened to produce its first winless season since 1987, the band performed a send-up of “Roar, Lion, Roar” that began, *We always lose lose lose / By a lot and sometimes by a little* — leading the athletics department to ban the band from the final game against Brown. But don’t say this group can’t find the end zone: after nearly four years of research, the Columbia University Band Alumni Association has compiled a comprehensive database of its hundreds of living graduates and is establishing a nonprofit foundation to provide financial support for the students’ antics.

What took so long? “We just never got our act together,” said association president Samantha Rowan ’96BC.

On October 19, Homecoming eve, more than seventy-five active band members, former ones (“bandcestors”), and friends gathered for the first time in the Columbia Alumni Center. The evening’s festivities were set against the backdrop of a display-case exhibition of marching-band memorabilia curated by Dan Carlinsky ’65CC, ’66JRN; J. Donald Smith ’65CC; and Stephanie Tarras ’10BC. Among the clippings and posters and pictures was a 1904 photograph of the eight young men — seven undergraduates and a high-school clarinetist — who founded the band that year. Surely those gentlemen could not have anticipated that their humble ensemble would someday create such socially engaged spectacles as the 1979 birth-control show, immortalized in a newspaper photo showing the band in the formation of a chastity belt. Steve Holtje ’83CC recalled a tribute to the rhythm method in which he and his compatriots formed a calendar. “Given the band’s geometric skills, it probably wasn’t recognizable,” he said.

Former head manager Stan Adelman ’67CC remarked that the band stopped marching in precise formations and began its familiar “scrambling” technique in 1964 when they got to the Yale Bowl just fifteen minutes before the half. There was no time to drill. “The drum major blew the bugle call, we went on and off in five minutes, and that was the beginning of the scramble,” Adelman said. “It worked so well we kept it in. We knew we couldn’t take the field with a two-hundred-piece band, so we decided we had to do something different.”

“It’s a unique sense of humor,” said band member Alison Murdoch ’16CC, who uses a drumstick to beat a pot adorned with stickers advocating the legalization of

another kind of pot. (She chose this particular vessel, she said, because of its “very good diversity of sounds.”) This is a group that plays such other quasi instruments as the washboard and the “world-famous lenthopipe” (as in “length of pipe”) and celebrates touchdowns by performing pushups under the whip of head manager Peter Andrews ’14CC. Yes, the whip.

Perhaps a strain of sadomasochism is to be expected, given the gridiron history, but bandcestors can also point to a tradition of insufficient funds, a paucity of instruments, inadequate rehearsal space, and poor togs, which at one point included discarded Coast Guard outfits. Once, in the late 1980s, just three band members — on violin, kazoo, and cymbals — showed up to play and form a “C” at halftime. “The three of us lay down in staple shape,” said violinist Catherine Censor ’90CC. “I broke two strings.”

The high jinks of the self-proclaimed “cleverest band in the world” have long extended beyond Baker Field (now the Robert K. Kraft Field). In 1994, the band played outside the Ed Sullivan Theater, demanding admission to the *Late Show with David Letterman*. That got the host’s attention. “You know how in your heart of hearts,” Letterman told the audience, “everybody really hates marching bands.” He was just kidding. He let the band march through the studio, and, seeing its mismatched attire, which included an inner tube and a cow outfit, he delivered a $2,500 check (the money went toward new sweaters). Every April 15, members serenade last-minute income-tax filers at the main New York post office across from Penn Station. And, of course, the band noisily storms Butler Library twice a year on the night before the organic-chemistry final in what the *Spectator* this semester called one of the “best Columbia arts traditions.”

A rich legacy, sure, but one not always appreciated. A 1951 report issued by concerned alumni declared, “There is absolutely no incentive for a student in Columbia College to become a member of the band.” And though the athletics department reversed its decision to bar the band from the 2011 season finale after band manager Jose Delgado ’12CC apologized for “the incident” involving “Roar, Lion, Roar” (the Lions, blessedly, won the game, to finish 1–9), the charges of poor taste were nothing new. In 1968, in a letter to the athletics department, Joseph Lang ’19CC assailed the players for calling Vice President Hubert Humphrey a “soda jerk,” suggesting that “last Saturday’s garbage might well have been composed by the SDS, so vicious and vile was the content, and perhaps it was.” He concluded, “Do what a band is supposed to do: MAKE MUSIC!”

The day after the Alumni Center reception, at the Homecoming game against Dartmouth at Kraft Field, the Lions took a 10–7 lead into halftime. Then something else peculiar happened. Figures in blue-and-white rugby shirts darted onto the field and raced chaotically around each other, while the announcer paid tribute to the visitors from New Hampshire:

“This year the rush yield was higher than expected, meaning that an estimated 99.99999 percent of the Dartmouth population decided to go Greek! Of course, this has nothing to do with Hanover’s social scene. Everyone knows that Dartmouth students rush frats because a constant flow of cheap beer is the closest thing Hanover has to running water!”

Then, “in honor of all the Dartmouth pledges who will be blackballed,” the scurrying members congealed into a pentagonal structure somewhat resembling a frat house. Then they played Michael Jackson’s “Beat It.” (Then Dartmouth beat Columbia, 21–16.)

According to Peter Andrews, today’s bandcestors applaud the current group’s edginess. “A lot of the alumni want us to push the envelope even more,” he said. “They say, ‘In *my* day, we burned Baker Field to the ground.’”

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