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My First Night on the High School Marching Field:

The sock tans may fade but the memories will last forever



What does it mean to be a band kid? Most people have visions of instrument playing dorks that spend their summers going to band camp and their weekends practicing a half time show on a football practice field, and most people wouldn't be wrong. For the band members, however, marching band is much more. Morgan was just another high school student with confidence issues and no real direction in life until she joined the color guard Tennessee High School's marching band. Dancing in the color guard built up her confidence and made her part of a "band family" during those difficult high school years. The night of her first performance, she stepped into the spotlight, was immediately bitten by the performing bug, and hasn't looked back.

A Little Fish in a Big Pond

Fall 2007 was the beginning of my freshman year at Tennessee High, confidence was not a word in my vocabulary. I was (and currently am) very short so I looked like I should have been starting middle school, and the river of students that filled the hallways between classes swallowed me whole. I had huge frizzy hair, braces, and I typically wore hoodies that were so large the sleeves went down past my fingertips. I struggled with everything from finding which classroom I belonged in to bringing the right books to class. I was scared, but I decided to join the color guard in the marching band and that was the best decision I made during my high school career. Tennessee High was so the biggest school I had ever seen and there were a little over 1,000 students enrolled. The first two places I could confidently find were the band room and the practice field because I had just spent my last two weeks of my summer at bandcamp learning the basics of marching and how to hold a flag. Trying to find a room in an obscure hallway or walking into a classroom that I hoped was the right one was enough to make my palms sweat and my stomach drop, but when I saw another band kid in the hall or sitting in the cafeteria I knew I was going to be okay. I have no way of knowing how many hours I spent with 150 other students trying to perfect a 10 minute marching show, but in all those hours I gained so much more than marching technique and dance routines, I gained my band family.



The First Game of the Season

It's almost 6:30pm on a Friday evening in late August. You can smell fall is on the way, but the air still holds the heat of summer. I step into the Tennessee High School Castle stadium for the first football game of the season. The stadium is called the Castle because, well, it looks like a castle. It's made entirely of stone and has four large turrets, one in every corner. It's tradition for the band to tap the tin maroon and white sign hanging over the stone entryway, it's supposed to be good luck. The Mighty Viking Band walks in a row, each tapping the worn indentation in the middle of the sign. I have to give a little jump to reach it. I can hear the roar of the crowd.

The stadium that holds a maximum of eight thousand isn't even a quarter full, but I could have sworn there were at least half a million in attendance that night. In reality, there are a few hundred individual conversations happening about the game, the weather or if someone wants a hot dog from the concession stand, but I hear thousands of excited voices wondering which songs are in the half time show this year and what color the flags are going to be. In reality, I know the crowd is here for the football game, but right now my heart tells me they are here to see me perform. It's time to grab our show flags and line up to march onto the field. I can feel the grass crinkle under my shoes, it's uneven and there is a pebble in my shoe, but my mind is racing too fast to remember the rock for very long. I seem composed, from my perfectly hair sprayed sock bun to my brand new uniform that still smells like the plastic bag it came out of. I think I'm ready.

All week the returning members of the band have been talking about this moment, our first performance, and all week I've been wondering what I'm going to feel when I finally step onto the field.

The marching band is called to attention and all one hundred and fifty band members begin to march toward the field keeping almost perfect time. I can feel every atom in my body vibrating and my cheeks already hurt from smiling, but I focus on keeping my feet in time with the drums.

"Left...left...left...2-3-4" I whisper to myself. Then my brain starts whirring faster than my heart. Rapid fire questions keep zooming through my brain. What if I drop my toss? What count am I in the ripple?

Will the grass make my flag wet? If my flag is wet how will I catch it? Which yard line to I set my flag



on? All the while my feet are keeping pace, "left...left...left...2-3-4". I don't think I am ready. The guard instructor is waiting at the edge of the field. As we pass him he reminds each member of the color guard "Your performance starts now", I can feel his words rush through me like liquid mercury.

Surprisingly, my body knows where to go, I walk to the 45 yard line and place my flag, I flash a smile to the crowd, I don't even notice half of the crowd is in line for the bathroom and the concession stand.

Finally, I take my place on the field under the bright stadium lights. The announcer's voice suddenly booms out "Please welcome...Tennessee High School's... Mighty Viking Band" and the crowd gives a thunderous applause as the drum majors begin the show. My heart calms, my thoughts stop racing, and I know this is the moment I've been practicing so tirelessly for. I am ready.

The music ends and the crowd cheers while the drum major turns to give their salute. I stand in the position I should have caught my flag in with a half genuine, half forced smile on my face. I'm in such a daze, I could have sworn I just blacked out for the entire show. When the band director begins to lead us off the field, I drop my smile and dash to pick up my flag that landed about six feet in front of me instead of in my hands where it should have landed. Once again, my mind begins spinning, thinking about everything that just happened. Anything that could have gone wrong, did. I could have cried, I could have been hard on myself and I could have given up, but I marched off that field with a smile and a full heart because I knew what it was to be a performer. As the Mighty Viking Band, we made our way back to the band room. The guard makes piles of brightly colored flags and rifles while the hornline, woodwinds and drumline make their way to the instrument cases. The band room is filled with chatter, as any room full of high schoolers will inevitably be, but I remain silent. I'm floating through the motions of rolling up my flags while my memories of the show start to come back. I'm asked over and over "How was your performance?" and of course I answer it was great, but I remember flashes of moments like messing up a section of work and being late for an entrance. In all actuality I wasn't lying, my performance was fantastic because the smile never left my face but my execution was less than par.

Today

Looking back to my first night, I could get misty eyed talking about how good it felt to be on the field, and how much I learned and grew. I could talk about being part of something bigger than yourself, like one single cog in a perfectly aligned clock, but if I were to be completely honest when I think back to that first performance I gave I know one thing to be absolutely true: that show was horrible. I looked like a baby giraffe learning how to walk. I dropped tosses, I forgot both flag work and drill, and I know If I had been in the crowd watching freshman Morgan I would think "Oh that poor

girl, what is she even doing”. Still, when I put on my uniform that night and every performance night after that it was like I suddenly grew three inches taller. When the band marched through the halls and into the stadium we were one unit holding everyone's eyes. When I was on the marching field all the stadium lights were on me and for the first time in my high school career this ugly duckling felt beautiful. In those few fleeting moments a performer has on the stage nothing else matters. From the test you just got back in french class to the thing you spilled on your shirt and the arguments you've had with friends, every worry melts away because all that matters is this moment.

Today, I am a college senior and a seasoned performer. I have eleven marching seasons under my belt including eight seasons with Tennessee High Mighty Viking Band, one season with the Music City Drum and Bugle Corps, and one season with Southeastern Independent Winterguard. In all those seasons I've logged countless hours practicing on football fields and practice fields, in school gyms and on parking lots, and more back yards than I can begin to count. I've been on school busses, in caravans, and even spent a summer on tour and living on a greyhound bus, but why?



When I break it down logically, there is no way for me to explain why I would pour my blood, sweat and tears into a half time show, but if I could go back and do it all again, I would do it in a heartbeat because marching band gave me something more. I gained my confidence and family members that I'll never forget.

The shows change and the performers come and go, but at least for me, every performance is the same. I feel the same butterflies and the same nervous ramblings go through my head. Even reality

skews in the same way that can make hundreds of people feel like thousands and minutes feel like hours. I have aged out of marching band, but I will never forget those moments when the world quieted and it was just me and my flag. I will never forget what it felt like to pour my heart onto the field. Because of marching band, I will always have a reason to feel beautiful.