

# Behind the Scenes of an SEC Drumline: University of Georgia Marching Percussion Instructor John Cypert

By Gene Fambrough

As the fall football season approaches, drumlines all across the country have either already held auditions or will do so in the first days of “band camp” in July and August. In the world of major college football and marching band, it takes a special skill set to manage all of the aspects of a percussion program with the type of national exposure some of these schools receive. At the University of Georgia this fall, a familiar face will be on the sideline overseeing the percussion section. I was able to catch up with John Cypert to get a glimpse into his position with the UGA Redcoat Band, a position he has held for many years through several changes of band directors.

John serves as a music specialist at Duncan Creek Elementary School in Hoschton, Georgia, where he teaches General Music and co-directs the Duncan Creek Cardinal Choir. John has also served as the music arranger and ensemble director for Pariah Percussion Theatre (2003–04 and 2008–10) and Odyssey Percussion Theatre (2005–06). In 2000, John served as the percussion caption head and arranger for the DCI finalist Crossmen Drum and Bugle Corps from Newark, Delaware. John holds degrees from the University of Georgia and the University of Arkansas, and is currently a doctoral candidate in Music Education at UGA.

**Gene Fambrough:** *What years have you been teaching the UGA drumline?*

**John Cypert:** The 2015 season will be my seventeenth season teaching the UGA drumline. My tenure includes the seasons of 1993–1996, 1999–2000, and 2005–present.

**Fambrough:** *Describe the audition process that you currently use and how that evolved over the years.*

**Cypert:** This has definitely changed over time. For years, after an initial placement audition, we held “evaluation rehearsals” throughout the spring semester. At the time, we felt this

scenario provided the best opportunity for potential members to demonstrate their work ethic by improving week to week. These weekly rehearsals concluded with the drumline being “set” by the end of spring semester.

However, the increasing popularity of the WGI activity made it more and more difficult to schedule these rehearsals. We weren’t seeing the same group of potential members week to week because of pre-existing conflicts with their indoor-percussion rehearsal schedules. Having worked extensively in WGI, I understand all too well the importance of every rehearsal. As a result, we now hold UGA drumline auditions on a single Saturday in late April or early May after WGI percussion finals. We have discovered that it works quite well for us.

For our auditions, we stagger times for the various sections. For example, snare and quad auditions are held simultaneously during the morning hours in an ensemble



John Cypert



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environment. “Cuts” are made along the way until these two sections are “set.” Those not earning membership in these sections have the opportunity to return for bass drum, pit, or field cymbal auditions that take place at staggered times throughout the remainder of the audition day. While the entire audition process makes for a very long day—typically from 8 A.M. to 10 P.M.—it works extremely well for us.

**Fambrough:** *What is the typical size and instrumentation of the percussion section?*

**Cypert:** The University of Georgia Redcoat Band is typically 400-plus strong. It takes a lot of sound to compete with a hornline the size of Georgia’s marching band. Therefore, our lines are the typical “college line” size: 8–10 snares, 4–5 quads, 5–6 bass drums, 8–10 field cymbal players, and 13–16 in the front ensemble—though we have marched larger lines and smaller lines as well.

**Fambrough:** *Does this change based on the success of the football team?*

**Cypert:** While most of the drumline members and instructors want to see the Dawgs do well, I can’t say that I’ve seen the team’s success have an impact on the number of auditionees and, therefore, the size of the drumline. Sometimes, it’s mere logistics; we have “x” amount of seats in the stands of Sanford Stadium, “x” amount of seats on the nine buses it takes for the UGA Band to travel, “x” amount of instruments, and “x” amount of money provided to us by UGA athletics.

**Fambrough:** *What is the weekly rehearsal schedule for the band and percussion section?*

**Cypert:** The UGA Redcoat band rehearses for two hours on Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday evenings. Fridays are most often canceled on non-performance weekends. The drumline and auxiliaries also hold sectional rehearsals for two hours on Monday evenings.

**Fambrough:** *What is the yearly schedule like—camps, games, exhibitions, trips?*

**Cypert:** Band camp for the percussion section begins in early August. Percussion camp and full band camp will generally last about a week and a half before fall semester classes begin. The band performs at seven home games, two away games, and, at most, two exhibitions during the fall. The Georgia-Florida football game is our annual overnight trip that happens every year and, of course, any post-season championship games or bowl games.

**Fambrough:** *How many different shows do the Redcoats perform each year?*

**Cypert:** The Redcoat band performs three shows a year. The themes vary from classical



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to popular music to jazz. I have seen a wide variety of shows and repertoire performed by the Redcoat Band over my tenure. In addition to the typical three shows, the Redcoat Band will often perform “special tribute” one-time shows as well. These usually occur once per season at most.

**Fambrough:** *What percentage of members participates in DCI and/or WGI?*

**Cypert:** I would guess between five to ten percent. Students at UGA are extremely smart and are extremely dedicated to their studies. UGA drumline members are no different. They are driven to do well in school and are very understanding of the time commitment associated with DCI and WGI. Only a handful of the members typically have the DCI and/or WGI “fever.” I’ve had many members talented enough to participate in these elevated experiences; they just choose not to for whatever reason.

**Fambrough:** *How has the talent level of incoming students changed over the years, if it has?*

**Cypert:** It’s up for debate whether the increasing academic acceptance standards for the University of Georgia has had an impact on talent level of our students. During my earlier years of instructing UGA’s drumline, I had people come to Georgia for the mere purpose of marching. Most of these people were really strong rudimental drummers. Today’s college students are much different than they were when I started; UGA drumline members are highly intelligent in a wide variety of academic fields.

**Fambrough:** *How does this impact your writing, if at all?*

**Cypert:** I’ve developed my own style of writing over the years. While I most definitely

consider the talent level at hand year to year, I can’t say I’ve had to alter my writing too much over the years. I can recall a year here and there where I needed to truly and purposely compensate for the talent level.

**Fambrough:** *How has your writing changed over the years?*

**Cypert:** My writing changed more during my earlier years. My writing just works with what the Redcoats do. The guys sometimes poke jokes at me about my “style” since it becomes somewhat redundant to them. I’m sure to poke back though, since their lack of experience inhibits them from seeing the big picture at times. It’s all in fun, though.

**Fambrough:** *How many additional staff members do you use through the season?*

**Cypert:** In addition to me, there is one other batterie instructor, John Moates, and a front ensemble instructor, Jake Lyons, both former members of the Redcoat Band. For band camp, we will sometimes bring in others to concentrate on the various sub-sectionals.

**Fambrough:** *What is one of the biggest school traditions that the drumline is involved with?*

**Cypert:** I know for certain that the drumline guys enjoy their game day warm-up in front of the Tate Student Center adjacent to Sanford Stadium. It’s on asphalt in front of a big brick building, so it’s very loud. In 2001, Coach Mark Richt revived an old Georgia football tradition, the “Daw Walk,” where the football team players enter Sanford Stadium through a human tunnel created by the Redcoat Band and other crazed fans. The drumline’s “Tate Show”—or simply, “Tate,” as it is now called—occurs just prior to the “Daw Walk” and has basically become part of those festivities. Because of this conjunc-

tion, the audience is now extremely large! I would say at least 5,000 strong when considering the many viewing points. It's a lot of fun, and the drumline members and staff alike really hype on it!

**Fambrough:** *You've worked with several band directors through the years; any noticeable differences between them in terms of how they approach the percussion section?*

**Cypert:** I have worked with four different marching band directors at the University of Georgia. While each of them have had their own style, they have *all* understood the important role that the drumline plays in keeping the 400-plus member band together on the field. Because of this, there has been an expectation over the years, regardless of the director, for the drumline to perform at a high level, and when they don't, they have been held accountable for it through comments from the "tower."

There have also been occasions where I have been asked to alter segments of my arrangements for the benefit of the band. However, as mentioned before, because I share the common goals with the band directors and I too understand the important role that the drumline plays within the "big picture," my arrangements just "work" for the Redcoat Band. Over the years I have learned to write smart for the benefit of the band as a whole. I often have to emphasize my understanding of the drumline's role to its youthful members when they start complaining about "not rammng enough notes."

**Fambrough:** *As a teacher, you have your feet in two very different fields: elementary music and college drumline. What differences do you notice between the two?*

**Cypert:** From an educational perspective, the two settings are vastly similar. Teach-



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ing is teaching. I find myself using the same teaching strategies with UGA's drumline as I do with my students at Duncan Creek Elementary School in Gwinnett County. For example, after rehearsing a segment of music with the drumline, instead of telling the members what they're doing wrong to drag a roll, I'll ask them a question to elicit a response whereby they have to self-analyze the issue. This tactic is no different than what I use in the elementary general music classroom setting or with my fourth- and fifth-grade choir. It's just good teaching.

From a personality or behavioral perspective, the two settings are vastly different. As one would imagine, my relationships and interactions with the college kids are considerably different from those with my elementary kids. I merely use common sense for guidance.

**Fambrough:** *Any other comments you'd like to share about your experience?*

**Cypert:** Working with Georgia's marching band has been one of my greatest joys in life. It's where I met my wife and some very special lifelong friends. Professionally, I was able to use the opportunity as a stepping-stone to my involvement with arranging for and instructing a variety of WGI and DCI ensembles. Still, it's much bigger than that for me. Involvement with the Redcoat Band has become a family affair. Saturdays with the band in Sanford Stadium is not only very special to me but also my wife and two children. My children have grown up with the band, and I know it will always be a very special part of their lives.

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