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Innovative Marching: A look into the innovation of DCI

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Abstract

This paper analyzes unique innovations from five Drum Corps International (DCI) shows: 2008's show Spartacus performed by Phantom Regiment, 2011's show Angels and Demons performed by the Cadets, 2013's show $E=MC^2$ performed by Carolina Crown, and lastly 2014's shows Tilt performed by the Bluecoats and Fellinisque performed by the Blue Devils. In each judging caption I have explored how each show met the expectations of that caption, if it has a new approach to the caption, if that approach is truly innovative, and if it has been emulated. This analysis suggests that even if the judging captions can sometimes inhibit innovation in DCI, sometimes innovation is rewarded.

Introduction

Stadium lights blaring. Judges in green polo shirts take the field. Then the familiar words “Drum Corps International is proud to present...” are followed by a count-off to what could be the championship show. A corps is quickly on their way to present what months of hard work, dedication, sweat, and tears has produced. You can see a story quickly unfold within this twelve minute show. 152 people have memorized a 12 minute show. Horns snap to attention as they move through their memorized drill. Toes are pointed and shoulders remain square to the front. Their upper body and lower body seem to be two separate beings in one person. The silver brass shines under the lights. The trumpets are showing off their range again and you cannot help but smile at the gusto they have. The mellophones serenade us during the ballad and we are reminded of the sweetest of love songs. This show transports us to a different time and place. We are no longer reminded of our jobs or school. For the average listener this is something to listen and watch for entertainment, and that is all thanks to a judging panel. For the average person the judges just give out scores, but for these corps members these numbers mean so much more. These numbers are what they are fighting so hard for. The scores mean so much more than just a 98.125. These scores mean the difference between second place and being the best there is that season. This is the competitive world of Drum Corps International (DCI).

What is DCI?

Drum Corps International is a nonprofit organization that wants to organize and unify leadership for youth-focused competitive drum corps in North America. DCI wants to bring the life-enriching benefits and enjoyment of the marching music performing arts to more people around the world. They seek to do this by educating, engaging in competition, and promoting individual growth. There are two categories of competition, open class and world class, and just

shy of 50 corps in total. My focus will be on the world class. Judging has been a way for the corps to compete for the right to call themselves the best for that season. It is based on these judges in different captions that a corps can call themselves the best. Judging has been a great thing for corps becoming more innovative, but at the same time we see a lot of the same trends year after year. In this paper, I will look at how corps have been able to be innovative while still dominating under the judging captions. I am looking at the following shows: 2008's show Spartacus performed by Phantom Regiment, 2011's show Angels and Demons performed by the Cadets, 2013's show $E=MC^2$ performed by Carolina Crown, and lastly 2014's shows Tilt performed by the Bluecoats and Fellinisque performed by the Blue Devils. With each one of these shows I will analyze in each judging caption if they have met the expectations of that caption, if they have a new approach to the caption, if that approach is truly innovative, and if it has been emulated. Based on this research and analysis I want to prove that although judging captions can inhibit innovation in DCI, there is always going to be corps who prove that innovation can pay off if the right path is chosen.

What are the judging captions?

Judging is split into three main captions: General Effect, Visuals, and Music. General Effect at the World Championships is comprised of a panel of four, two looking at visuals and the other two at the music. These judges will either be analyzing musical effect or visual effect. On their website, Michael Boo, from DCI, explains them as "doing the romantic job... feeling what the show is offering and responding to what the show is." These judges are more in line to what the audience will be feeling and responding to. Visuals can be broken down into the corps proficiency; looking if the members are in sync together, visual analysis; these judges look to see

how well everything fits together, and lastly a judge for the color guard; looking to if the color guards are performing well or not, but are not judging based on their effectiveness. The last caption is Music which is broken down into a brass judge, two analysis judges, and a percussion judge. The brass judge looks at exactly what the name is the brass and how well they play. There are two music analysis judges and they judge on how well the music is performed: are the impacts at the right parts and are phrases properly placed, those might be some questions they look to answer. These are the different judging captions that each corps' score is earned.

Spartacus

The first show I want to look at is the 2008 show Spartacus performed by Phantom Regiment. This show is based off of the fictional gladiator revolt led by Spartacus during the Roman Republic. The ensemble is playing the role of the Roman soldiers while the color guard is playing the role of the slaves. The theatrics began from the moment the corps takes the field. The ensemble members mistreat the color guard by kicking and pushing them away. Three men in black uniforms (most likely members of high power) with capes, two blue and one red, take center field and one member refuses a handshake. This refusal in a handshake is quickly followed by one of those men kicking a guard member down and the man who refused the handshake comes to the guard member's aid. This is how the group sets up the scene all before judging has even begun. Not only did this show win first place, but it also took home the Percussion Performance Award, General Effect Music, Music Ensemble, and the Spirit of Disney Award. Spartacus helps to prove that innovation can pay off in the end.

The General Effect is something that I believe they accurately portrayed. They brought the story of Spartacus to life in a different way from the gladiator movies. It is a quick look into

how there is a fight between those in power. We get a glimpse before the judging even starts at the state of how the scene is. The ensemble members are high-stepping and everyone in white refuses to acknowledge the color guard until they are touched, which the white members become violent towards these lesser beings on the color guard. This set-up before the judging is very innovative. Corps were not using the “dead” time of getting on the field as an intro to their performance. Judges technically are not supposed to begin judging before the allotted time starts, but how is someone going to just ignore two minutes of theatrics. The corps was not judged based off of this, but I believe this to be one of the more innovative things a corps had done back then.

Not only was Phantom Regiment making use of “dead” time, they also recruited one of their members to play certain roles. The drum major played the role of what was possibly the ruler, three members playing roles of high officers (one of these members being Spartacus), and one male guard playing the role of a slave who is murdered. This casting of roles helps to make the story come to life and many corps have done this in many shows. Not only was this effective for theatrics, but it was also effective for their effect in general. They were very successful in this category because as an audience member, you feel for the guard members and how mistreated they were. There is a sense of hatred that brews from the moment they walk on the field. As an audience member you know you do not like the people in black besides the one who stands up for the guard member. If their point was to look out for the little guy or people who cannot stand up for themselves, then that came across strong. Although they did not win General Effect Visual they only lost the caption to the Blue Devils by .35 of a point. Where they lost to Blue Devils in visuals they almost made all their points back in the music portion of General Effect.

Visuals was another battle Phantom Regiment had to face with the defending World Champions, the Blue Devils. The portion of this score that helped Phantom inch closer to victory was their color guard score. The effectiveness of the color guard is what set them out from other Blue Devils. The brass' role in being part of the military added to the effectiveness as well. It was a clear picture in what a corrupt military and government looks like. A third into the performance one of the outcast slaves was given a title and an in to the military. It seems as if things are beginning to change. However things shift back when his lover is killed and the color guard joins together to try and form a coup. The color guard leader is killed and the official from the beginning comes over mourning the death. This is when he comes out and yells "I am Spartacus." Quickly running to the front of the field, he kills the drum major who is conducting. He then takes over leading the corps. The whole story telling of Spartacus is something that is often done in DCI; however, Phantom Regiment took it one step further. You are familiar with the story and know how it is going to happen, but do not expect for a fellow bandmate to kill off the drum major. It is entirely unique how everyone got into their roles for this show.

Music was where the Phantom Regiment was able to bring things home for their corps. They were able to win the Percussion Performance Award as well as Music Ensemble. I believe that they utilized what has been successful in the past and this is not where they showed how innovative they could be. The music was well performed and moving; however, it was not something that has not been done before. Most field shows are comprised of 1st movement, 2nd movement, 3rd movement, and finale. And usually either the 2nd or 3rd movements will be a ballad or slower piece. They did not change this structure, but where they made up for that was through their performance. Although it was not something new, you felt moved by this. You were able to follow along with the members and how there was this struggle between the slaves

and the central government. In an interview with Halftime Magazine, executive director Rick Valenzuela tells reporter Gregory M. Kuzma that “Spartacus was a show that was going to bomb or be an absolute hit.”(Kuzma). He took a major risk with this show and in the end it paid off. They even won the Spirit of Disney Award which is an award for translating imagination and fun into an educational experience. They were able to take this new idea and make the story of Spartacus into something people could talk about for years to come.

Between Angels and Demons

In 2011 angels and demons took the field in Indianapolis. The Cadets showed another way a corps can separate their corps. The Cadets split their corps into two factions, in white the angels and in maroon the demons. This split included every member, but the front ensemble and drum major who wore red jackets and white pants. The Cadets were able to take first in Visual Effect, Music Effect, Visual Performance, and Music Ensemble. On top of the score from that night they were able to walk home with the Donald Angelica Best General Effect Award and Best Visual Performance Award. This first place victory really seems to be something special.

They wore two different uniforms for this season and were casted the roles of either angel or demon to their members. What makes wearing two different uniforms special was that they were able to get into the character of either angel or demon. The angels did appear to be more prim and proper than their counterparts. Taking the field they were able to gracefully take their positions and wait for a proper horns up. Their friends on the other side were nothing like this. Entering from the other tunnel of the stadium the demons quickly made their presence known. They appeared to imitate the movement of the monkeys from *The Wizard of Oz* as they took the field. It is shown on tape that a baritone player flung his baritone past the endzone into what

seems to be the 4 meter mark. Once again an ensemble made use of their time before judging to show the audience and judges a little snippet into what kind of show they will be witnessing.

General Effect is where the Cadets showed how they could play with the emotions of their audience. They were able to always keep us on the edge of our seat, not knowing what the tricks the demons would play next. The judges award the Cadets in this category because they won both Visual and Music Effect. This is rightfully so. Not only were you able to see how chaos can consume these angels, but you also felt it. There was a figure that was passed through the horns of the demons while the angels played. It first started soft but as the men in red grew closer and closer to the white the figure got louder. It kept growing as the demons surrounded the peaceful angels. It seemed like such a chaotic time but the whole time you were consumed by how these demons were cornering their prey. It seemed like a game of cat and mouse, or more like the cartoon Tom and Jerry. Tom being the demons and Jerry being the angels. The demons were always close to getting a hold on the demons and winning but somehow they were able to break out. This breakout was usually cued by a release in music. The effect of this is perfect because you are able to see these demons try and get their way, but not wanting them to win the whole time. It is very fitting that the Cadets were able to take this whole caption as well as the Donald Angelica Best General Effect Award.

Visuals was another trophy the Cadets walked home with that night. Although it was not the whole caption they were able to score highest in Visual Performance as well as walk away with the best Visual Performance Award. They did perform in a way most corps would have never thought to. When most people think about corps performances it is all about being perfectly in sync with each other and making sure to stand up tall. Well the Cadets had a different idea in mind. The demons approached this loosely. From the moment they walked onto

that field the demons made it clear that they were not going to be part of the norm. They hopped onto the field as if they had just crawled out from the underground ready to wreak havoc on the world. Their sets did not feel entirely uniform either. Instead of taking direct paths to some sets, it seemed as though they would perform these scatter sets in between. There were portions of the performance where uniformity would be thrown out the window. This creativity was rewarded.

Music is something that the Cadets ruled as well. They were able to take home the Music Ensemble and Music Effect captions. When listening to the music by itself, without any visuals, there is a sense of fighting between chaos and order, or Angels and Demons in this case. The music is set up with an angelic voice at the beginning reciting a song from the 19th century by Shaker. The words are sung and at the same time there is chaos slowly creeping in behind starting with the percussion:

“I am an angel of Light
I have soared from above
I am cloth’d with Mother’s Love.
I have come, I have come,
To protect my chosen band
And lead them to the promised land.”

Snare drums lead the way and a bass drum keeps a steady pulse as metal and chimes are being played. The low brass slowly join in the chaos playing disarrayed chords, crescendoing on each note. By the last two lines of the 19th century song all of the front ensemble joins with short runs and quickly after the mellophones join those runs. The buildup is finally over when the whole ensemble plays the motif of the performance.

The most important part of a performance is the first two minutes and in this performance the Cadets are able to capture the audience with their music. Along with this the Cadets are able to keep people on the edge of their seat even at moments of impact. Usually these big impact moments will be ends of phrases usually with an authentic or half cadence of some kind, but they

are able to take it a step further. The cadence does go to a feeling of resolution, but in the end they change chords to make the cadence deceptive.

What keeps this feeling of anxiety within the listening is the front ensemble throughout the whole performance. They are quickly going through these runs which include these dissonant chords in them being played around 160 BPM. They were not only able to create this anxiety within their music, but also a sense of peace and relief during these angelic sections. Here things slow down and we are able to hear more ballad-like tones even though at some points the chords may sound in disarray because of a few wrong notes here and there. However when you hear “Amazing Grace” you cannot help but feel safe from these demons who have been dominating you the whole performance. This is where it would be the perfect place to stop; however, that would be cliché. The demons try to fight back but are overpowered by the angelic voice that returns again. The performance ends on a victory for the angels as wedding bells are played and long chords are played until the end.

The 2011 performance by the Cadets is a great way to showcase two sides in a group fighting. Unlike the 2008 show, the Cadets split their corps 50/50 with angels and demons. They were able to show how you can use a whole group. They did not just take three key members to make a small story people might miss on the first time around. The Cadets made it so anyone who was watching their show understood exactly what was going on, angels and demons fighting. Although the angels and demons were not playing entirely different music, the Cadets were able to clearly make the red and white uniforms separate and keep the audience engaged as the battle raged on.

E=MC2

In 2013 Carolina Crown performed their show E=MC2. This performance and show is all centered around Albert Einstein. Crown was able to earn top place in Music Effect, Visual Analysis, Brass, and Music Analysis. This show was broken down into four movements, “Discovery,” “Energy,” “Obsession: Mass... Attraction,” and “Speed.” In these four movements, Crown was able to pay tribute to Einstein and his discoveries through visuals and music from past composers. Crown was able to show and remind us how a full ensemble can be used to bring an idea together.

Crown was able to bring in points for overall General Effect because of their Music Effect scores. I believe Crown was able to win over the music effect judges because of their third movement, “Obsession: Mass... Attraction.” A good ballad will move people and that is just what Crown did. The combination of the lyrics from “Einstein in the Beach " Knee Play 5, with the brass behind made the poem stand out as the two “lovers' ' acted it out. This opera is mentioned throughout the whole performance. Starting from before the judging had even started, but it does make an appearance in the first three movements. The brief introduction in “Discover” and “Energy” helps to build up to the words, “Two lovers sat on a park bench.” They are able to bring out the emotion behind this story of love. What makes the effect of this section even greater is that the brass is showing off how expressive they can play. This ballad is not about showing off their upper dynamics, but their expression. It is a combination of the fluidity of the brass and the auxiliary percussion that bring these words to life. They were able to bring emotion into this performance and for General Music Effect that is a string factor.

On a visuals standpoint E=MC2 was not the best on paper; however, they had a couple visual references that anyone could pick up as a casual audience member. The start of the

judging they formed an infinity symbol that moved into blocks which then created the famous formula $E=MC^2$. Crown made up for their simple sets with choreography that their horns would execute during a hold. There are little things that Crown does throughout their show. In their movement “Discovery,” there is this point where the horns are quickly crescendoing and decrescendoing and as this is going on, on the back sideline the color guard is twirling these flags that seem to the color of the rainbow as this horn and auxiliary percussion line is being played. It is a small thing and brings the audience’s attention back with the switch of flags. Their energy in the end of the second movement brings the drive that is needed before their “love story” portion of the show. The visuals and choreography in the horns provides excitement. The main thing to note about their third movement is that they were able to perform this love story written by Philip Glass in *Knee Play 5*. They set up these two lovers who you think will be gone after this movement.

In their last movement, Crown has two visual references for their audience. The first is a triangular pyramid that could be thought of a reference to Einstein’s theory on light refraction. Their second visual is a Carolina Crown specialty, the famed crown itself makes an appearance. Inside this crown are two round props that are covered in a black material. A color guard member is shown by each one and as one sticks their arm inside one of the props an arm is shown to come out the other one. As the corps plays their final notes, the woman lover enters the prop and appears on the other side. A fitting reunion for the end of their show.

Carolina Crown’s music won the judges that night. They were able to win over the brass music judges as well as the music analysis judges. They were able to score two perfect scores from the brass judges that night. Crown’s music is able to captivate an audience. The integration of *Knee Play 5* from the Philip Glass opera helps to add story to the performance as well as the

theme from Also Sprach Zarathustra by Richard Strauss. These two pieces go together well because these “space” chords from the introduction, in the Strauss piece, help set the tone for the first movement of “Discovery.” The counting from Knee Play is very accurate to the actual piece. The use of this opera is something that corps often do not do. In the past, this was common; however, the works used were very famous suites from operas or ballets usually, like Scheherazade, Firebird, and Carmen. The use of “Einstein on the Beach” brought a new and refreshing thought to what DCI corps can do. The unique counting from Philip Glass’ opera brought a different flare to this performance. The horns were also able to perform these intricate runs that just leave you wanting to applaud for more.

The contrast in movements between the first and second helps to set up the scene. From “Discovery” to “Energy” is a totally different feeling. There is no more discovery or searching, but drive towards a destination instead. This drive pushes us straight into “Obsession: Mass... Attraction.” As I said before, the third movement is where the brass is able to capture the audience with their expression. One huge thing Crown is able to do well is that their brass sounds so clean. They are not muddled on any of the runs and the double tonguing sounds flawless. This is no wonder they were able to get a perfect score for their brass.

The 2013 show $E=MC^2$ performed by Carolina Crown is an example of how a corp can showcase an opera from this era of modern music. The incorporation of Philip Glass’ opera helped lay down the foundation for their story about Einstein through Glass’ Knee Plays. The use of this as well as some visual references is why they were able to claim a spot here. The use of poetry and lyrics is how they were able to be innovative and pave the way for corps to come.

Tilt

2014's show, although second place very much worth mentioning, Tilt performed by the Bluecoats. The Bluecoats were able to perform from a different angle. They brought in new media effects to their show as well as what their program coordinator, Dean Westman, described as "21st century music." Tilt was an original show that brought a new perspective to how a DCI show can be done. From "tilting" the field, to props, to their original music, the 2014 Bluecoats were able to bring this new innovative idea and place top 3 in the World Class Finals.

There will not be a comparison between the 1st place Blue Devils and 2nd place Bluecoats because each performed innovative shows this year and the Blue Devils were only .350 away from a perfect score leaving all the other corps in the dust.

The Bluecoats were able to take this original score and create something innovative. In an interview with the DCI Field Pass Podcast, program coordinator Dean Westman told Dan Potter about how the show first came into being. It started with the music and the decision to mess with the audience's perspective. From this conversation, about perspective, Tilt was born. The effect of making this new outline of the field helped set the stage for this performance. There were these scalene triangle props that the members were climbing on. The whole performance was completely out there. Even the announcement audio was warped. As an audience member, you are transported somewhere else during their 12 minute show. Members were often leaning during sets as they performed. The music seemed to take a different route as well. Unlike most shows, there was a heavy reliance on audio and electronics for this performance. Instead of performing across center field, during their most expressive line, they start from the left end zone and slowly add in the brass. However they are never completely flat to what we would consider to be front, instead they are keeping to their unique parameters they set with the orange side lines. It is so

effective to stick to these new parameters. This different set of lines is something people talk about when discussing the uniqueness of this performance. The Bluecoats thought of everything with this new perspective. It is so unique that the use of pitch bending at the end feels perfectly in place.

The premise of the Bluecoats' show is visually innovative. They were able to redesign the field for their show. Some things I did not mention before would be horn placement, as well as visuals that went with the pitch bends of sustained notes. The Bluecoats used different horns down and at attention than usual. Instead of being parallel to the body and perpendicular to the ground, they held their horns at a slight angle about 45 degrees when they were holding their horns near their chest. During pitch bends the members can be seen tilting their body with the note as they are halted. The drumline can be seen leaning forward during a break as color guard members are behind them seeming as if they are tilting the member. Visually this performance is layered with different ways for the corps to tilt and change the perspective for their show.

The music in this show is unique solely for Tilt. It brought out a new 21st century modern feel to this usually classical music performance. The Bluecoats were able to bring in electronics into the mix and even distort their introduction. From their introduction things take off musically in a new direction. The whole concept of this show is to view their performance from a different perspective and it all started from the music. The music is unique and when judging begins the horns are playing these two repeated eighth notes that are to be a minor third. It is creating this slight distance in the music. Accidentals seem to be thrown into the mix throughout this performance. This music is complex and seems to be moving between major and minor keys, or just because of the "tilt" it feels as if it is in a minor key for a moment. The layering of parts in this performance is just short of a masterpiece. They were able to take a simple line and add

more and more to it altering it slightly to create these chunky phrases. The use of electronics was a good call for this as well. The distortion at the end of some movements adds to the effect of this being on an angle. Sustaining notes on the electric guitar with a wah effect helps amp up the drum feature. It is interesting because during the expressive horn line sometimes instead of going down and resolving to one, they take it to a dominant chord and start their resolution pattern over. It really keeps the audience anticipating when the major impact is going to happen and makes it so much bigger than it would be.

The Bluecoats were able to take an original idea and masterfully create something different for DCI judges and fans. They took the idea of perspective and brought a new modern score to the classical mix. Their whole show is innovative. The visuals and music mixed together would have been enough for first, if it was a different year.

Felliniesque

In 2014, the Blue Devils brought us to the world of Felliniesque. A film world that featured the style of Italian filmmaker Federico Fellini. The Blue Devils dominated this year missing a perfect score by .350 of a point. Set in three “acts,” the Blue Devils performance earns them top marks across the board. What a season to take part in. They set the stage of a movie set and take us through different forms of Fellini: his religion, circus, and fantasy. They pay homage to this filmmaking legend and remind everyone of the ever changing Blue Devils. They received caption awards for Best General Effect, Best Visual Performance, Best Color Guard Performance, and Best Brass Performance. They took the concept of film and brought it to DCI.

The Blue devils were able to score perfect scores in both General Effect as well as Visuals on finals night. They could be found taking the field with their movie set lights and

camera placed here and there. Fellini's religion feels grand and sets the stage for the next movement. It is romantic and grander than life itself. For twelve minutes, the Blue Devils take you away from DCI and into a movie. They were able to capture this perfectly. There is not a sense of tension or doubt in their mind that they are the best and that is what adds to the overall effect of their performance. This show made you want to get up and dance with them during the fanfares. The choreography from the color guard mixed with the music from the brass brought the sexy Italian film scene. They were able to masterfully portray Fellini in their performance that at parts you forget this is even a DCI performance.

Visually the Blue Devils did everything correct, on paper. They achieved a perfect score and were rewarded for their work setting up this film. The presence of this performance is entirely different from a normal show. Through this demeanor, they were able to create a different way visuals can be used. The color guard was not just running around throwing flags and rifles, but they even played along with the band and had a choreographed spicy scene with the drum line. There are few times when the color guard acts with the ensemble members. This involvement includes them in the corps instead of having them feel like props to a show. Their involvement with the corps in this show is different from normal because they are not just dancing with each other but are acting center stage and ogling the snare line during their feature. The brass have a different feel to them visually as well. They do not seem to be marching from set to set, but things seem to flow almost as if they are dancing to their own music being played at times. This whole performance is romantic and different from what a normal rigid show is like.

Music is where the Blue Devils fell short, if you can even call losing .350 of a point falling short. The three movements, or acts as the Blue Devils are calling them, are broken up

into Fellini's religion, Fellini's Circus, and Fellini's Fantasy. The first act starts out mysterious with bells ringing. The trumpets come in with a fanfare and a solo rings out on trumpet as the rest of the section backs him up. Two minutes in and there has been no sign of the rest of the brass. Starting with a strong trumpet section is a way for them to show off. The trumpets are the stars and holding off on the rest of the brass' entrance just enhances the color. Once the low brass joins, there is a sense of power and force behind the wall of trumpets. Not even three minutes into the performance and they have captivated their audience. They were able to take scores from Fellini's most memorable movies and bring them back into light on their stage. The way the Blue Devils performed this brought a spotlight back on the great works of Fellini.

Conclusion

In the world of DCI, there is a stigma that corps should not stray from the status quo. Usually in competitions with judging there is not too much room for innovation, but these five shows are proof that maybe innovation is something judges are looking for. All five of these shows placed top 3 and four out of the five were first for that year's competition. Three of the five shows introduced new modern approaches to a field show. There is the incorporation of new 20th and 21st century ideas across the three captions. Visually a corps can be as creative as they want, proved with the Bluecoats' show Tilt which introduced a way to place the parameter of the field. Corps are beginning to incorporate more with audio and electronics like Carolina Crown's use of microphones for their performance of part of Philip Glass' opera. The Bluecoats also used audio electronics to pitch alter their sound for a couple chords. The use of full corps to act out a scenario can be demonstrated in the Cadets, Phantom Regiment, and the Blue Devils. Innovation

is how ideas can develop as time goes on. DCI began almost fifty years ago. It is thanks to innovation that this competition and tradition has not faded away.

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