

The Marching Band Monster

Adrian D. Griffin

Being the first-chair trumpeter in a high school band program can be somewhat daunting. These students face many responsibilities that band directors may easily take for granted, including leadership, superhuman chop strength, limitless high range, and endless free time to practice to make All-State.

Of course these are exaggerations, how many of us really do want these things from our top trumpeters, whether we consciously realize it or not?

The physical “chop” stress of playing first chair all year can be eliminated by ensuring these students *always* have good warm-up and warm-down time, as well as using the daily maintenance routine (see above).

While the function of the warm-up is well-known, a good warm-down is equally important. Trumpeters’ muscles will tighten after a long workout, just like the muscles of a runner after a marathon. The warm-down gives these muscles a chance to stretch and loosen before the instrument goes back in the case.

It is very tempting for students to simply pack up and race out the door after a long rehearsal or practice session. They are usually tired both mentally and physically, and have other things to take care of, including homework. However, the next day, the result is muscles that are tight, rigid, and unresponsive. The few minutes of warm-down are well worth the trouble.

To avoid performance injuries and bad performing habits arising in marching band, I would approach marching band from a concert band perspective, as far as the students’ playing is concerned. They need to play with a beautiful, rich sound, little tension, good breathing, appropriate dynamics, and good posture. They need to maintain excellent self-care routines in terms of warm-up, warm-down, strength training, and lip care.

Issues during the marching season

Playing on tired lips: Students must avoid pushing their lips past their limit; otherwise, serious bruising or injury can result. If their lips are very tired, they should take their performance level back from 100% to 50% or 30%. They may do this by playing softer, less aggressively, and taking high parts down an octave when feasible. Doing this for one rehearsal will help them regain strength and avoid injuries that can take them away from the trumpet for a lot longer.

Ideally, students should not play on sore lips; they are not professionals in a job situation, and there is no reason to flirt with the risk of injury. Crucially, though, if the student experiences actual *pain* in their embouchure when beginning to warm up for the day, they should take that day off from playing, and should not play until the pain is gone. If the pain is not gone after four days, they should consult a professional and, if the problem is not resolved, see a doctor.

Switching to a high note mouthpiece: If the lead trumpeter is unable to play the high notes on their standard symphonic mouthpiece, they should feel comfortable requesting to move to a lower part. While switching to a shallow high note mouthpiece is an option, this can result in major sound and technique issues.

If the student *does* want to try the high-note mouthpiece, they should work with a professional trumpet player to make sure their technique remains solid and that they are able to adapt to whichever mouthpiece they are using at the moment.

Intonation: The temperature difference between outside and inside can do severe things to the trumpet's intonation. Students will need to adjust carefully with the tuning slide, and listen to make sure they are in tune with the group.

Sweaty hands: The sweat in our hands contains moisture and acids that can eat away the finish on a brass instrument. After each practice, especially outdoor rehearsals, students should wipe down their instruments after each use, so that it stays looking good.

Dehydration / Over-hydration: Students need to drink enough water to avoid dehydration, heat exhaustion, and possibly passing out. However, if they drink too much water they can become sick from an imbalance of electrolytes.

Trumpet safety: Students seem to think that wherever they put their instrument, it will be safe – from the concrete field they are marching on to the grass. The only safe place for their instruments is in the case. They should take the cases with them to the field and return the instruments to the cases when they are on break and at the end of rehearsal.

Returning from marching band to concert playing

Trumpet angle: Many times the high trumpet angle from marching band carries over into the concert band after the marching season is over. Students need to re-adjust their head and trumpet angle when returning to seated playing.

Hand position: Students often adjust their hand positions when on the field, in order to balance the weight of the instrument or alleviate pressure problems. For example, some players adjust their left hand to hold the instrument with only their thumb and first two fingers, and may put their pinky in the hook to add pressure to get the high notes.

When returning to the concert band setting, the traditional hand position is preferred. This position allows for greater ease of slides, healthy mouthpiece pressure, and increased agility in the right hand.

Over-playing the instrument: Trying to fill the entire stadium with your sound can be a big job. When students move from the stadium to the concert hall they will often need to adjust their dynamic levels back.