

Mark Tarrant of **Kidsgrove Scouts**



Prior to seeing Madison in 88, what were you doing? Were you involved in drumming/percussion?

I was 18 when Scouts came to England, and as luck would have it they came to my hometown of Coventry, UK. I bunked off school for a couple of days and watched them rehearse. At that point I was a drummer in a local marching band called Templar Knights. I'd been involved with drum corps in one form or another (I started out in Boys' Brigade) since I was about 7. I used to play a trumpet. The funny thing was that I got cut from the horn line because I was rubbish – the staff put me on snare instead: best thing that ever happened to me!

Have you always lived in the U.K.?

Yes. I lived in Coventry from birth until I was about 25, when I moved away with my now wife, Alison, for work. I also spent a year in 1993 living in Holland teaching Jubal, after I aged out from Scouts. Alison and I now live in Keele, Staffordshire (which is about a 10-minute drive from Kidsgrove Scout's corps home).

What lead to your being involved with Madison?

Prior to '88, I'd seen a couple of videos from DCI and it took me a while to get into it – too American for my liking! It's fairly hard to describe how it was to see a DCI corps "live" in the UK. I was an immediate convert! Almost straight away I decided that I was going

to march DCI as soon as I could. Of course, no one believed me until it looked likely to become a reality. I realised that if I was going to improve as a drummer, I needed to join a corps who could help me develop as a player and marcher: in Templar Knights I was one of the percussion instructors – it was a bit like the blind leading the blind. So the next year I joined the Sunrisers from Birmingham, UK. In Sunrisers we had staff who had either marched in the States or had secured places for the following year. The great thing about being part of Sunrisers – and probably the most important thing for an aspiring player – was the sheer volume of information I had access to. This was never going to happen in my previous corps. And this is really the biggest piece of advice I'd give to players who aspire to march in DCI: make sure you're getting plenty of (the right) kinds of information that will help you learn. There are not many corps around who can offer that. As their track record shows, Sunrisers were quite unique for their time in their ability to nurture players in this way.

[From Madison to Kidsgrove, how did those events unfold?](#)

When I marched Madison I was also involved with Sunrisers in the off-season and continued teaching Sunrisers after my age-out through the '96 season. I was also fortunate enough to be a member of percussion staff with Madison from '94-'98. 1998 was my last year involved with drum corps on a full time basis until I moved to Keele in 2001. I did one or two things with Kidsgrove over the next couple of years but not very much really. It wasn't until winter of 2004 that I got involved full time with them. Why? That's a question I (and Alison) ask myself quite often!

Seriously though, there are a few key reasons why I got involved with Kidsgrove. Having a few years out from drum corps was good for me as it gave me time to reflect on *why* I like drum corps, rather than just going through the motions of teaching, as can sometimes happen. I came to realise that I still have something to offer and (I think!) I offer it with considerable enthusiasm. Related to this is the fact that the players in the line really want to learn and get better as a group. One of the things which kept me coming back each week during the winter, was that the guys were so appreciative of having someone working with them and pushing them. And they were so polite – insisted on thanking me for helping them! (I suspect this was a deliberate ploy on the part of Phil Brown (the caption head) to get me to come back the next week!

Another reason why I got involved was that it was a chance to work with a couple of old friends from Sunrisers: Phil Brown and Gavin Morgan. I marched with Phil in Sunrisers in '89-'90 and Madison in '92, and I was teaching Madison while he was teaching Capital Sound (also from Madison). I taught Gavin in Sunrisers so he's naturally good! Seriously, though, Gav is a great educator and writer and it's a pleasure to work with him. Working with these two guys and the rest of the staff at Kidsgrove is very much like working with a DCI corps. Next year the staff will be even better: we have a couple of guys aging out who will be joining us on staff. This opens up some spots in the line for new members, which is always exciting. I'm looking forward to next season already, and 2005 isn't even finished yet.

More than all these things, though, is that Kidsgrove is just a top quality organisation; in many ways very similar to Madison. It exists so as to ensure that all the members have a positive educational experience. What more could you want from a drum corps? This is what keeps me coming back each week.

[Teaching at University, what lead to this?](#)

As I got towards the end of my undergraduate degree (1996) my tutor at university suggested I pursue a research degree in psychology – a PhD. I hadn't thought about another three years of studying, but it's what I did (and it gave me another couple of summers in drum corps!). Working in a university is a natural career choice after a PhD, but it's not just about teaching: a large chunk of my time is spent doing research. I sometimes inflict my work on members of the drum corps community. I must say, they have been most obliging so far, so thanks guys!

[During your time in the U.S. did you ever experience any cultural differences?](#)

I'm going to get my psychologist's hat on now. If I had been in the US as an "individual" – say, taking a gap year from university, then I think I would have picked up on more cultural differences because I would meet many different people in many different circumstances. But, I wasn't there as an individual in that sense, but rather as a member of a social group – a drum corps. My own research on group psychology tells me that when we think about



ourselves – when we *define* ourselves – as part of a group (rather than as individuals) we will approach and react to things as group members. So, in this sense there weren't any major differences because we were all doing the same thing, living by the same standards, pursuing the same goals etc. This said, one major difference between US and UK culture was that whenever I talked to Americans I had to repeat almost everything I said very slowly: they just couldn't keep up!

What abilities would the perfect drumline person possess? Fast rolls? Good rudimental understanding? Attitude?

The first two are not important for a new member: we can teach players to drum fast and we can teach rudimental understanding. Attitude is of course important: you've got to be willing to listen and learn. Players have got to come to rehearsal ready to think. You can have the best hands in the world, but if you're not willing to use your head then there's no point. Fortunately, Kidsgrove has lots of committed players in the line. This doesn't mean that they're all drumming "gods" by any means, but there isn't anyone in the line who doesn't turn up for rehearsal ready to learn.

When designing a show how does percussion fit in? Are the brass parts arranged and then the percussion, or is it a collaborative effort every step of the way?

Luckily for us, Kidsgrove's brass parts are also written by a former Madison Scout, Terence Smith, who marched lead soprano for Madison in 1994 & 1995. He writes the horn score first, and by that point the percussion staff can usually tell how we are going to feature the different voices of the battery. The frontline score is written by Taras Narhirniak, who wrote the frontline parts for Madison for over a decade, as well as some of their original compositions (1997 Pirate show, 1995 drum solo, 1993 closer, and many more). When he gets his hands on the horn score and starts writing he always comes up with something amazing, so we're extremely fortunate to have him on board. The percussion score is then written between four members of staff. We email ideas to each other and the piece gradually develops until we come up with a book that we are all happy with and which we are confident is going to challenge our players. At the end of the day our players are tomorrow's instructors and it's our responsibility to develop them in all areas.

It's always good to have the snare parts developed primarily by a snare player and the tenor parts by a tenor player and this is where I think as a staff we get it right. We're not interested in writing a show that is based purely on simple 16th note passages with a few accents here and there just so things sound good from G.E. We want our music to sound good, while *at the same time* challenging our players. The players in Kidsgrove Scouts drumline are musicians and we as staff; feel it is important for every member of the line to feel that they are being developed as musicians. This means that they have to learn to read, play and teach a range of challenging phrases.

In just about every aspect of any instrumental music there are always students wanting to know how to "get good quick" or if there are any shortcuts to faster rolls/faster or even singles/better flams/one handed rolls/etc. etc. etc.

In any aspect of percussion, do shortcuts exist? What is the answer for those who are looking for the quick fix?

There's no quick fix, and for a very good reason: if we could flick a switch and make ourselves great players, there would be little sense of personal achievement in being a drummer. Sit down one night and play accent-to-tap for a couple of hours straight and see how rewarding it is when you pick your sticks up the next day and nail it! In Kidsgrove we spend a large chunk of our winter programme working on fundamental playing skills (8s, accent-to-tap, rolls). Some players might find such rehearsals tedious, but I guarantee that the players who will be the strongest at the end of the year are the ones who treat the exercises as a personal challenge. We deliberately make our basic exercises as "listener-friendly" as possible, to counterbalance the "boredom factor" that some players might experience. Having a big drum line, (we have the biggest line in DCUK) helps with this, as we know we can write musical parts which utilise all subsections (snare, tenors, bass) to maximum effect. The big line is also a major asset when it comes to writing the show music of course: we can afford to write very technical passages for one particular subsection (e.g., snare), because we know the strength of the sound from the remaining subsections (e.g., tenors / basses), ensures we can still contribute positively to the musical ensemble, and deliver in GE. From playing in big drumlines myself, I know there's nothing like the adrenaline rush that is gained from contributing to a rich and full percussive sound. For this reason, we're committed to fielding a big line year-in-year-out. Next year for the

first time we plan to make all the music and exercises for our winter programme available very early on our website (www.kidsgrovescouts.org). There'll also be sound files available so players can hear how it will sound when the line is together (we write music using Sibelius and playback using Virtual Drumline). Potential members as well as current members are encouraged to visit the website early and regularly. This way we'll be able to hit the ground running when we start the 2006 season. The material should be available early in November. Come check it out!

When arranging for the front ensemble, because we're outdoors and not in a typical orchestral setting, what things differ between the two styles? Is it simply playing louder or trying to project farther outside while playing with good sound quality (compared to when you're in a theatre or hall designed acoustically as opposed to a stadium)

I think this mainly comes down to three things: quality of equipment, appropriate mallet selection and technique. If you are missing any of these you are going to struggle with your front ensemble cutting through into the stand no matter how loud your members play. Amplification has made things easier for DCI corps in this respect and after seeing Blue Devils in Europe this year I do think it is the way forward, and may even be of benefit to UK corps where horn lines are a lot smaller. The big advantage of amplifying the front ensemble is that you would see an identical technique and approach to drum corps percussion equipment as you see in a concert hall. I'm sure that this is a good thing for the activity.

There was an article in Modern Drummer/Drum! (or another popular drum set magazine) a few years and it was something along the lines of drum corps drumming working against what you try to achieve in drum set drumming.

Is drum corps drumming detrimental to a drum set player? Why? Why not? Helpful?

I'm not much of a set drummer so I asked my colleague Gavin Morgan for his thoughts on this. This is what he said:

"Many people would agree with the above claim and they wouldn't be completely wrong. I know some great drum set players who are terrible at snare drumming and also some great snare drummers who are not good kit players. I've been playing kit for

about 20 years and I am completely self taught. The one thing I'm sure has made me the player I am today is the understanding of music, time and most of all rudiments, all of which I have learned through doing drum corps. Of course, as a set drummer, you have to learn to play more relaxed and use different grip, technique and so on or you wouldn't physically get around the drums, but all the things we take for granted in drum corps (flams, paradiddles etc.) make me a much more musical set drummer. Using rudiments with your hands on different drums or cymbals can create some very interesting and complex sounding grooves especially when you explore the different variations of the rudiment. Another good example of how skills learned in drum corps can help the set drummer is beat displacement. This is an area of more advanced drum set playing and can completely throw some drummers off, but for someone who has learned how to play "the grid" in drum corps this becomes a lot easier to master.

One other thing we always stress in a drum corps drummer is the importance of "playing to your feet". This skill alone can form the basis of the most simple 4/4 rock type beats that we learn as beginning set drummer (bass drum on counts 1 & 3 and the back beat 2 & 4 on snare drum simultaneously with the left foot on the hi hat). As we learn more complex grooves this concept becomes less apparent but it remains fundamentally the same – placing beats with your hands and feet in correct relation to each other to remain perfectly in time.

Let's also not forget that in the early years of drum set playing, jazz and big band was the really the only style that was being played and if you wanted to make a living as a drummer you had to be able to play all 26 snare drum rudiments. Rudiments were essential to this style of playing. Drum sets were in general quite small, often just a 4 piece arrangement with hi hat, a ride cymbal and a crash cymbal. The crash cymbal was usually placed between the hi hat and the mounted tom and hit with the right hand, however if the drummer was to play a fill around the drums and end up on the floor tom to his right, then he would have to adopt a paradiddle somewhere in the fill to be able to reach the crash cymbal with his left hand, if he didn't then he would struggle to reach the cymbal in time with his right hand.

To sum up, although it is not essential to have experienced drum corps and snare drum rudiments to be a good set player, having this experience has made me a stronger, more musical player with a greater understanding of what I am trying to achieve when playing the drums."

Kidsgrove performs in DCE, is there a considerable amount of money that is needed to compete in DCE because of more travel compared to DCUK?

We're performing in DCE twice this year and are committed to going next year as well. And this is another thing which is great about Kidsgrove: travelling to DCE costs the corps a lot of money and takes an enormous amount of planning. However, only a fraction of the cost is passed on to the members. I think this year they pay just £25 each per trip. That's a bargain! The corps has to do a lot of fund raising behind the scenes to make this possible. The teaching staff also pay hundreds of pounds out of their own pockets to fund it of course!

Are there major differences in judging or what is expected between the two circuits?

I think both judging systems expect the same thing really but the major difference is that the DCUK judge is in the stands and the DCE judge is on the field. There is an argument for both sides as to which gets a better "read" of the show. The style of writing and the standard of playing that we have developed at Kidsgrove gets great credit in DCE because the judge can get "up close and personal" with the battery and front ensemble and therefore see and hear the difficulty of the book better than if he was in the stands. In DCUK the judge gets a better view of the total package as he hears it all together. I don't know if one is better than the other: in an ideal world of course we'd have a field and stand judge.

The first thing that comes to mind when thinking of DCE is the potential for extreme language barriers. Is this a problem as you move about from show to show?

It's not too bad really. Most of the organisers and judges in Holland and Belgium (where DCE shows typically take place) speak very good English (if not with a weird accent!) so we get by. I also speak Dutch (I taught Jubal from Dordrecht, Holland in 1993). I'm not fluent by any means but can speak enough to get by if need be.

What is a typical season like for Kidsgrove?

After DCUK finals (early October) we give the members a few weeks off. We'll then have an end of season banquet and this marks the start of the new season. In the winter we'll rehearse every other weekend and they'll be one or two camps along the way as well. This is very much the same way that Madison ran their winter programme when I was marching and teaching. The good thing about this schedule is that it gives the members every other weekend off: this makes it more manageable for those who have to travel from different parts of the country (we recruit from all over England – and this year we even have a drummer from the US. He doesn't commute of course!). The schedule also allows all of us to do other, non-drum corps, things. We think that's important. When we do meet, though, rehearsals are deliberately very intense. As well as ensuring we get the job done, this gives the players a feel of what to expect should they decide they want to march DCI. As I mentioned earlier, I was lucky in my early years to have been taught by some of the best people in the UK who gave me all the information I needed in order to achieve my goal of marching DCI. We as a staff are committed to giving all our members the correct information so they can do the same.

Our first competition is in June, but we'll give a couple of public performances before that. For our winter programme to be effective it's essential that the players in the line work on the areas we tell them to between rehearsals so that they're ready for that first performance: having a comparatively light winter schedule only works when everyone puts in the effort in individual practice. The minute it looks like it's not working out we will have to start rehearsing more. But past experience in Kidsgrove tells us we won't have to do this. The development of the website with the winter programme available for everyone is a really exciting addition to the programme for next year and should help us have a great winter.

Teaching at University, what is the type of percussion that is the primary focus of studies?

As far as I am aware, universities don't teach marching percussion: if they did, I think Kidsgrove would have a few such members.

Because of Madison's visit to the U.K. in 1988 there are quite a few people from the U.K. who were at one time part of Madison. From that visit quite a few people "got hooked" on it. Blue Devils toured parts of Europe this past summer, do you think they will leave the same impression? Will it inspire people to do the same as what others did (going to Madison)?

Exposure to DCI corps is much more common these days than it was when I was thinking of marching – lots of people travel each year to DCI finals and so get to see their favourite corps a few times before auditioning. This was relatively unheard of until fairly recently. Of course, there will always be people who only get to see a DCI corps when a corps comes to Europe and that is wonderful: the experience as a "naïve" listener is in many ways more exhilarating than as an "older" listener – you are so much less critical. In fact, we have a guy in the line this year who will be marching DCI next year. Until Blue Devils came to Europe earlier this summer he had no idea where he wanted to march. Seeing a DCI corps for the first time helped him make up his mind. We're doing all we can as a drum staff to help him fulfil his dream.

Coming from U.K. to U.S. what is the process like?

When I did it, getting a visa was a bit tricky. I had my visa application rejected at first, and so had to go to the US embassy to apply in person. I had to present evidence of my ability to fund myself during my visit as I was not eligible to work. Basically, while I was in Madison I lived on whatever I had saved beforehand. I worked full-time in an insurance company for two years before I went. It was all worth it of course.

When you were marching was the subject of amplification (in DCI) ever brought up? How do you feel about DCI corps using it now? Since there are not only instruments being amplified, how do you feel about "voice overs" or talking during the show?

I don't ever remember anyone suggesting amplification when I was marching. When they passed the rule a couple of years ago my first thought was that this would be the death of drum corps. Now that it's here, I can certainly see a benefit to amplifying the front ensemble (see my earlier answer), but I don't get the point of narration at all!

Do you believe DCUK will or would move to using amplification?

I imagine that DCUK will one day allow it.

The amplification question comes up and those opposed to it are often accused or actually are against any type of change. Is there a type of rule change that would be acceptable? DCUK's recent change in the location of the front ensemble, is this change acceptable?

I think that rule changes are good as long as they benefit the whole activity in the UK and all the corps involved, not just the ones who can afford it. As I said above, amplification in the front line has its benefits but I feel it would take some time over here before seeing all corps using it. Simple rule changes like the one you mention are a bit of a no-brainer and for most corps over here it won't make very much difference at all.

At the beginning of the season what types of goals does the corps set? What do you strive for during the season?

We only really have one goal and that is to get better each year both as an organisation and as a drumline. We have achieved this goal every year over the past decade and looking forward into the future I see no reason why this should change. At the end of the day Kidsgrove Scouts exist to make sure that the members get as much out of their time with the corps as possible. This way, we hope that when members age out – and if we as a staff have done our jobs correctly – they will then go on to be instructors themselves. I know I speak for the rest of the staff when I say that nothing would give us greater satisfaction than watching a drum corps show in twenty years time and seeing former Kidsgrove Scouts members teaching their own drumlines.

Since the DCUK season is not setup as DCI, do you find it more difficult to "clean" the drumline? Would it make it easier if you had 12+ hours everyday?

I don't know about "easier" but most units would undoubtedly be of a higher quality if they had more rehearsal time. However, we

have to remember that this is a hobby for most people and so more rehearsal time is just not realistic. I think we strike a good balance at Kidsgrove between rehearsal and time off: we achieve a lot in the time we do spend together. Personally, I can't see a tangible benefit to rehearsing 12 hours or more. In Madison we focused on rehearsing efficiently: our philosophy was that while on tour we shouldn't have to rehearse for 12 hours if we could achieve the same end-point in 8 hours. By and large, it worked. Rehearsing smart is the key to its success. What other activities do participants spend 12 hours each day doing? There aren't many. Physiologically, it's very difficult to perform a task at a high level for more than 8 hours – that's why most people work for 40 hours or less each week. We need time to relax each day, both physically and mentally, so that we can start the next one fresh.

[Do you think DCUK at some point will have a travel schedule similar to DCI?](#)

We would have to introduce marching in school / university music programmes; if that happens then the age limit would have to reduce so that school / university age people could participate (many current members have full time jobs). Until then, it's just not possible and, if anything, I suspect it will go the other way – opening up to a wider age range and continuing as a weekend activity.

[During your drum corps "career" how have things changed since you were first active compared to today?](#)

Surface features have of course changed (e.g., various rules changes), but the basic experience for the members has changed very little I believe. You have to do exactly the same things in order to achieve a high standard of performance now as you did when I was marching. It all comes back to the same fundamental playing and marching skills.

[During your time with Madison, what is the one memory that sticks out the most?](#)

The crowd response. Every show.



Is there anything you didn't care for?

Powdered scrambled eggs!

During this season with Kidsgrove, what has been most enjoyable?

Just getting out on the field again after quite a long break has been a really enjoyable experience for me: seeing the line improve over the months as a consequence of the tuition they receive from the staff is very gratifying.

Has there been anything of particular difficulty for the corps or drumline?

The line has been very good all year at playing the fast, difficult stuff from the show. One thing that we have been perhaps less good at is the material which requires greater finesse: the slower tempo music played at 3 inches. As a result, we've spent a good portion of our time during the "summer break" working on this. It hasn't been difficult to achieve – it was just finding the time to spend on it. The line has come on leaps and bounds since and we're now strong in all departments.

What is the audition process like for Kidsgrove?

We don't have an audition process as such. Anyone who comes along can have a go at playing whatever they like, as long as we have openings. It's all very relaxed. We won't make a decision immediately but will let the player experience the line and learn about rehearsal etiquette for a few weeks to allow them to settle in. This way, we believe we'll see them at their best. After this, we'll consider where the player's interests best lie and discuss this with him or her.

Batman vs. Superman, who wins?

Superbaby. My 2 year-old son's an addict! He's also a future Scout!



If you weren't involved with marching percussion and drum corps, what would you be doing?

Playing lots more golf. Talking of which...



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