

# The Record

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## **From amateur to champions, hard work elevates Passaic High School band**

When the 101 young members of the Passaic High School band file onto the field at Boverini Stadium to close the football season Thanksgiving Day, they will finish a long march from novice troupe with little musical training to a disciplined ensemble that just won a national championship.

Members of Passaic High School's marching band getting ready for the USBands championship at MetLife Stadium last week, where they finished in first place in their group.

They return to the playing field having won a USBands competition at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md., on Nov. 10, and a state championship at MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford the following day.

They did it with mostly poor youngsters with little musical experience. The band also was relegated to marching around the gopher holes in 3rd Ward Memorial Park, much to the chagrin of neighbors who complained about the constant rat-a-tat-tat of the rhythm section, as Boverini Stadium underwent a \$5 million renovation.

"We're not the band with the most talent," said band director Chris Rusza. "But we are the band that worked the hardest."

In a city where poverty and violence often conspire to tear apart schools and the sense of community they seek to forge, the Passaic High School Marching Indians found a way to stay in step and in tune. Passaic, with a median income of \$31,000 is the seventh-poorest city in New Jersey and the poorest in North Jersey. Nearly half of its adults are foreign-born, and half of the children do not live with both of their natural parents, according to the U.S. census.

Into this social void has come the band, which in recent years has grown to become one of the most popular activities at the high school, owing mostly to its open-door policy. Most of the students who join have no formal musical training.

Rusza said when he became band director in 2002, there were 22 members. Now there are 101, and anyone who wants to join can join.

"We take everyone," Rusza said. "The only requirements are that you have to keep your grades up and you have to be willing to practice hard."

Kimberly Sabando, a senior, couldn't play a note when she joined the band as a sophomore. They handed her a clarinet and she started practicing. She remembers the moment when the noise she was making first turned into music. "At first, I was just making sounds," she said. Now she leads the band as a drum major. "Hard work dominates talent," she said.

Practices can be grueling. The band comes together in June, just after school lets out and begins practice in the sweltering heat of summer. The heat inevitably gives way to the cold and winds of autumn.

As is the case with athletes, the marching band doesn't get to pick the weather.

"If your mind can handle it, then your body can," said Joanne Majdanski, a senior and member of the color guard.

Working through a 7½ minute marching routine, with everyone moving in lockstep while playing music, would be a challenge for even the most skilled musician. Try twirling a flag and catching it in 40 mph winds.

With superstorm Sandy in the weather mix, the band couldn't practice for a week while school was out, which Rusza believes helped the kids mentally.

"They were inside for more than a week, so when we finally could practice, everybody was ready and focused," he said.

There's a growing body of evidence that arts and music help students to focus in other areas of school as well. Marching band disciplines the mind and sharpens the focus; music requires both precision and abstract thinking.

The experience likely taught a lot of band members lessons about teamwork, discipline, and confidence-building — learning that is not easy to quantify by testing, said **Susan M. Taylor, director of the Newark-Montclair Urban Teaching Residency Program at Montclair State University**. Activities like marching band encourage social success, which can propel a student forward, she said.

"The whole band just became role models for the rest of the kids in the city," Taylor said.

Taylor, who spent 38 years as a teacher and principal in Newark public schools, pointed to a study in her district in which elementary school students were taught the violin by members of the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra. Students in second, third and fourth grades were given violin lessons for an entire school year. Their academic progress was measured against a peer group that didn't take violin lessons.

The children who studied music scored higher in other academic areas as well. "There is a cognitive stretch that happens," Taylor said. "Music stimulates thinking, feeling, making connections, symbolism, extracting meaning and relating them to the concrete."

Alejandro Tavarez is the leader of the trumpet section. On the field, he's in charge of commanding his section to move in formation. A senior, he's also grown up with his horn, having joined the band in middle school. He's applying for a scholarship to The Juilliard School in Manhattan to study music.

"The band is like my second family," Tavarez said. "As a section leader, I give credit to the people in my section when things go right. And when things go wrong, I take more of the blame."

In winning the national championship, Passaic High School finished first among 16 other schools from Virginia, Florida, Pennsylvania, Maryland and other states.

Israel Santana said being in the band taught him teamwork and self-sacrifice. He was playing trombone when Rusza asked him to switch to tuba, a larger and more physically demanding instrument.

"What I learned is that it's more than just marching around and playing music," he said. "It's a cause. You're putting a smile on someone's face."

For the seniors, Thursday will be their last official performance, although Rusza is open to taking the band out during the off-season if it is invited to perform. For some, Thanksgiving will be a bittersweet moment.

Senior Selena Navarro said she grew up in the band. “Before I was in the band, I was crazy,” she said. “I wanted to do things my way. Being in the band has really made me a better person.”

Another senior, Alan Barranco, the captain of the color guard, said the band taught him self-confidence.

“If you believe that you can hit the note, then you can,” he said.

The Thanksgiving Day football game against Clifton will be the 86th renewal of the rivalry. The game begins at Boverini Stadium on River Drive at 10:30 a.m.

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