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LIFE | SPORTS

The Battle for the Ohio State Band

A crackdown on band's 'unacceptable' culture pits school against alumni



The Ohio State University marching band performs. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

By SHARON TERLEP

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Just two years ago, Ohio State University's marching band was the toast of Columbus. Its creative marching formations, which included an outline of Michael Jackson moon-walking across the football field, attracted millions of admirers on YouTube and earned the band a cameo in a commercial for the Apple iPad.

But in a matter of months, the storied band has undergone a once-unthinkable turnaround.

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After a report commissioned by the school found the band's culture "sexualized" and "abusive" and fueled by inappropriate jokes and alcohol, Ohio State fired the band's director, Jon Waters, who in turn sued the school. Since then, two external candidates to replace Waters have withdrawn their names from consideration while a member of the band's staff was arrested in April on rape and kidnapping charges. On Thursday, the Wall Street Journal reported on a 2012 songbook privately distributed by band members that contained a parody mocking Holocaust victims (see story below).

As the band prepares to perform this weekend in an annual concert with the Columbus Symphony, several members said hecklers have called band members "perverts" and even asked them "who they had to rape" to get into the organization.

Waters, the former director who is suing Ohio State, said in a recent interview

that the band's culture was "unacceptable" but insisted he was ultimately blamed for a mess he inherited when he took charge in 2012. "They took 50 years of college behavior and silliness and tradition and put it all on me," Waters said, adding that he tried to improve behavior. "I was the culture reformer."



The Ohio State Buckeyes marching band performs prior to the Sugar Bowl against the Alabama Crimson Tide.
PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

In a statement, Ohio State said it remains "steadfast in our assessment of the band culture and the imperative for change." The school described the band as "insular" and said its members "shrouded their traditions in secrecy." The school added that before a new president arrived in July 2014, it "could have exercised better oversight of the band leadership."

The band controversy has opened up a deep rift between the school administration and a group that has held immense power over the band for decades: its alumni. Led by the Tdbbitl Alumni Club (an acronym for "The Best Damn Band in the Land" as it was once called by Ohio State football coach Woody Hayes) former band members have long been closely involved with the band. According to two reports commissioned by Ohio State, and interviews with nearly two dozen current and former band members, the alumni group not only raises money, organizes reunions, hosts current members on road trips and helps select the drum major, it also weighs in on matters as small as whether marchers secure their drums with harnesses or side straps.

Since Waters was fired last July, the alumni group and the school have become locked in open warfare. The alumni have bankrolled Waters's wrongful termination lawsuit and some Tdbbitl members are withholding donations. The alumni group mounted a public-relations campaign to protest the school's moves, releasing its own report, advising former band members on how to talk to school-appointed investigators and issuing "We stand with Jon Waters" buttons.

In a flyer for its annual golf outing last year, the alumni group mocked the university's moves as a "politically correct" attack by the "thought police." Mel Ponzi of Westerville, Ohio, the 80-year-old band alumnus who organizes the annual outing, which raised \$13,000 for the band last year, called the flyer "tongue-in-cheek."

We have fun and do things a little differently than most people," he said.

University administrators said they are working on an overhaul of the band's leadership and internal practices. A second investigation commissioned by the

university, which was overseen by former Ohio Attorney General Betty Montgomery, said some of the band's misbehavior and troublesome traditions stem from a segment of alumni who have "resisted the changes required by a 21st Century university and the law" and "encouraged traditions which are long past being considered appropriate."

Gary Leppa, an attorney and member of the band's alumni club who heads the group's legal committee, said the situation has "ruined" the relationship between the school and its band. "There are people now who are just walking around saying, 'What has happened to this place?'"

Fraternity-like Rituals

Formed in 1878 as a 12-member military drum-and-fife corps, the Ohio State band eventually grew to a full brass and percussion ensemble (with no woodwinds) whose 120 members were all male. Since the 1930s, the band has grown to 225 members and built a reputation for creative formations like the "Script Ohio" and funny, even slightly risqué spoofs. The band operates more like a big-time sports team than a for-credit course in the school's music department: Practices are long and the travel schedule is rigorous. But there is no shortage of applicants. "You really learn to work as part of a whole rather than as an individual," said Jack Lynch, who graduated last year. "There is something beautiful in that."

Over the decades the band developed fraternity-like rituals. "It was always a rowdy group," said Paul Droste, who served as director from 1970 to 1983. In 1972, the federal Title IX law forced the band to admit women, who "weren't wanted," Droste said. He recalled some members booing when he introduced the first women. "The thinking was we have the best band there is and we don't need women." Today, roughly 20% of the band's members are women.

Traditionally, the school has provided little assistance to the band, whose members paid to dry clean their own uniforms, according to former members and reports. Like a lot of large collegiate bands, Ohio State has always put older students in charge of younger ones. In response to the reports it has started to increase staffing and supervision.

Waters, a one-time band member and longtime staffer, was the first Ohio State band director who was not a faculty member. During his tenure, the job of looking after the members was left to two staffers, a director and an associate director, who enlisted the help of a handful of graduate assistants. Waters said he relied on "row leaders" and other senior members to help set the tone for younger members.

Band alumni were given wide-ranging access to current members, Montgomery's report said. They provided drinks, lunches and meal gift cards during summer sessions and practices and hosted "row dinners," at their homes. While the alumni's influence was "generally positive," Montgomery's report said, some alumni also upheld inappropriate traditions, such as games that required members to drink excessively and even perform in non-football concerts while "highly intoxicated." Band members also told investigators it was during these visits with alumni that they were first introduced to various versions of the songbook. The Tdbitl club declined to comment.

Recent band members said that while they do not remember singing "Goodbye Kramer," the song that mocks Holocaust victims, they do recall in recent years reciting other parodies that include anti-gay jokes and lyrics about rape and

bestiality. “There appears to be a small group of alumni that attempts to perpetuate traditions even when it is clear that the tradition is inappropriate,” the report said.

According to the university’s account in court filings, the first problems with the band surfaced in March 2013 when a female band member reported to Waters that she had been sexually assaulted by another member, prompting an investigation by the school. In the fall of 2013, another female band member reported that she had been assaulted by a male member of the band. Waters reported the incident, the university investigated and the accused student was expelled. A third, earlier assault accusation in 2012 also troubled university officials, the school said in court filings.

Amid these incidents, Ohio State’s provost, Joseph Steinmetz, met with Waters in November 2013 and asked if he should be concerned about the band’s culture. According to court documents and people familiar with the discussion, Waters told Steinmetz there was no cause for concern. “He denied the existence of any problems as ‘rumors’ and stated problems existed in the band’s culture fifteen years ago,” the university said. Waters disputes that account, saying he acknowledged problems and the university was content with his plan to remedy them.

Steinmetz did not take any action against Waters or the band. In court documents, the university said Steinmetz insisted the band continue sexual harassment prevention training it had started that fall and told Waters to enlist the school’s student life department for help in making sure band members understood what was appropriate. University documents show that band members and staffers received extensive training over several months in late 2013 and early 2014.

Still, when the mother of one of the women who had reported an alleged sexual assault complained to the university about the band’s culture, Ohio State decided to commission its first internal review. That investigation told of raunchy videos, excessive drinking, sexually explicit nicknames and songs that made light of rape and mocked gays and women. After its release, Ohio State President Michael Drake, on the job only three weeks, fired Waters.

As one of the masterminds behind the band’s innovative halftime shows, Waters was popular with alumni. With their backing he sued the university, alleging his firing was unfair and discriminatory.

Many former band members said they are embarrassed by the bad publicity but believe that the band’s jokes about sex and alcohol were harmless and the university’s depiction is overblown. “Maybe we are stuck in a past generation,” said trumpet-player Lindsay Conkel, who graduated last year. “I don’t think the intentions were bad...some people took it too far.”

Alex Carter, a 2007 graduate of Ohio State who is now a teacher, was in the band for three years. She recalls partaking in hazing of younger members, sometimes with sexual overtones, even though she had hated being a target of similar teasing. “Over time you internalize that behavior and it seems ok.”

Many band defenders say Waters was not to blame for incidents like binge drinking on road trips—something all parties, including Waters, describe as common. “I recognized things needed to change and as soon as I became director I set out to change them,” Waters said. He added that he felt it was better to get students to agree to changes rather than using a “sledge-hammer

approach.”

Band members say the culture improved somewhat during Waters’s tenure from 2012 to 2014, although the drinking continued and members were still given nicknames like “Downsy” (a reference to Down’s syndrome). Several members noted that Waters told the band to stop calling one member “Mr. Faggot” after another complained.

In January 2014, when band members attended a seminar on sexual harassment, one baritone horn player wrote on Twitter: “Just kick the women out of the band.” That member, John Flesher, a graduate student, said he regretted sending the tweet. “I realized it was a mistake and I took it down immediately,” he said. “It was supposed to be sarcastic but it’s not an appropriate thing to make a joke of.”

In April, Stewart Kitchen, a paid staff member who helped oversee the drum majors, was charged with rape and kidnapping of a student. Police say Kitchen invited a woman to his home on April 15 where he refused to let her leave and then forced her to have sex with him. Kitchen’s attorney, Thomas Hayes, said he plans to vigorously fight the charges.

Ohio State had pursued two candidates to replace Waters, the directors of the Illinois and Auburn bands. Both publicly withdrew in April. In May, the school named one of Waters’s assistants, Christopher Hoch, as interim director. Hoch is charged with implementing 37 recommendations outlined in Montgomery’s report, which include more staff oversight and beefed-up training to prevent sexual abuse. In a memo to a new university-created alumni liaison committee, Hoch said the band is banning alcohol at band functions. “As a member of the staff, I witnessed things that were inappropriate and that represented us poorly,” Hoch said. “We didn’t always have the leadership from the university...to combat all the problems.”

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