

Carroll County Times Newspaper Article

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GEORGE WELTY/STAFF PHOTO

Mark Lortz is busy among high school marching bands. Besides being Westminster High School's band director, he also does musical arrangements for

Ready for the 'Climax'

The Atlantic Coast Championships this weekend may hold a long-awaited title for the Westminster High School marching band — and its director

By **STEPHEN SNYDER**
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Mark Lortz was happy. It was Tuesday, Election Day, but even though the students at Westminster High School had off, the grounds were hardly deserted. In the auditorium, drama students rehearsed their fall production. On the practice fields, football players went through passing drills.

And in the stadium, the Westminster High School marching band, hot off its Tournament of Bands chapter championship Nov. 2, ran the same 16 bars of its show over and over.

The band members had been there since noon and would stay till about 5 p.m., even though the air was getting colder and the sky was threatening rain.

But Lortz couldn't have been happier. In the seven

years that he has been Westminster's director, the band has won five consecutive TOB chapter championships and an equal number of Maryland state band championships.

But in all those years, Lortz's band had not won the top prize: a TOB Atlantic Coast Championship. It came close, awfully close, missing first place by a couple 10ths of a point on multiple occasions.

This year, however, could be Westminster's year and Lortz knew it.

Right then, just days before the weekend's ACC in Scranton, Pa., Lortz should have been nervous; he should have been on edge. But he wasn't. Instead he smiled. He joked. He got excited, hopped up and down, shouted exclamations when he saw something he liked, which was often.

"The last week is usually my favorite," said Lortz. "It's when the kids are the most excited and when the music is the best."

Pocono Mountain High School. That had been his Achilles heel.

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Lortz

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For years, Westminster placed second behind the Pennsylvania school. But in July, Pocono Mountain split in half. Both Pocono Mountain East and West were relegated to different groups for smaller bands, leaving the field wide open for Westminster to march all over everyone.

Lortz wouldn't say this. Instead, he demurred, claiming he hadn't seen a lot of the other bands, that he liked to think they'd win, but didn't know, couldn't know, for sure. "We'll see," he said.

But his eyes, and that confident smile, told a different story. "Nothing is going to stop us," they said, "not the cold nor the rain, nothing."

"The weather has plagued us all season," Lortz complained. "We stay in it though, even in the pouring down rain, as long as there's not lightning."

The band was rehearsing the end of its show — or, as Lortz said, "the climax" — which he arranged using music by 20th-century Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich and his own compositions.

Lortz, wearing a blue coat, blue knit hat and blue sport pants, sat in the press box with co-director Brian Drake and color guard director Jean Coulet du Gard. In front of Drake lay a microphone, which he used to bark commands to the field: "Trumpets, you're behind," "Mellophones, don't stick out so much," and his favorite, "Do it again."

Each time the band stopped, senior AJ Dobbins, the band's drum major, yelled, "Check it. Set it," at which point the band members looked where they should be and adjusted.

Then they waited for a command from on high and did it all again. This happened repeatedly, the band going over the same couple measures again and again, until they were perfect.

From the press box, Lortz watched his band. He made comments to Drake, who relayed them through the microphone. At one point Lortz rushed down the bleachers to rehearse a line with the percussion pit section. The players looked slightly demoralized, their hands bundled in gloves, many of them wearing Westminster High School band jackets.

"You're not cold," he said, as

Strike up the bands

The Tournament of Bands Atlantic Coast Championships are being held this weekend at Lackawanna County Stadium in Scranton, Pa.

Westminster High School was scheduled to perform at 9:49 p.m. Saturday. Century High School performs at 9:28 a.m. today. Liberty High School performs at 1:31 p.m. today with North Carroll High School immediately following at 1:45 p.m.

Atlantic Coast Championships is the end of the Tournament of Bands marching season. TOB, one of the largest competitive band organizations in the country, is divided into 13 chapters encompassing nine states.

For more information, visit the TOB Web site at www.tob.org.

demanding directors, often at the exact same time they're being funny.

Partway through the rehearsal, Lortz decided to have the students run a lap around the track and, while they were running, Drake sang the theme from "Rocky" over the loudspeaker.

This year, one of the things the band has worked on especially hard is endurance. Lortz even brought Jeff Sanders, a strength and conditioning coach for the Ravens, to the group's band camp in August.

Physical conditioning, Lortz said, is important.

"Not only are you running around on a huge football field," he explained, "but 60 of [the students] are blowing into an instrument."

Lortz and Drake both went to the Peabody Conservatory. Lortz also spent time as a percussionist with the Cadets of Bergen County Drum and Bugle Corps out of New Jersey. Between 1991 and 1995, he worked as a music and percus-

sion tech at Liberty High School.

Now he arranges marching band music for about 10 different bands throughout the country as a second income. This year he arranged the music for a band in California as well as Liberty and North Carroll. The directors tell Lortz the music they want to use and he transforms it into a short, seven- or eight-minute program.

"He kind of knows to add a little bit here and take a little there," said M. Joseph Fischer, band director at Liberty High School. "He turns it into his own composition."

Fischer played with Lortz in the Cadets of Bergen County and said that he deserves a lot of the credit not just for building Westminster's marching program, but Liberty's as well.

"There was already a standard established here when I arrived," said Fischer, who has directed Liberty for the past two years.

But Lortz would rather his

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"The kids are die-hard. A five-hour rehearsal on a day off. The kids should be credited."

Mark Lortz
Westminster High School
band director

students get the credit for their success.

"The kids are die-hard," he said looking down from the press box. "A five-hour rehearsal on a day off. The kids

should be credited."

Then, with about 45 minutes left in rehearsal, the sky, which had been threatening rain all day, finally began to spritz. Suddenly, Lortz and Drake had a decision to make. Did they keep going on the field despite the rain, or did they move to the parking lot and lose precious rehearsal time?

"They say it's getting slick out there," Drake said.

"By the time we moved there, it'd be over," Lortz said, almost to himself.

"If you're marching properly, this should not be a problem," said Drake.

Lortz nodded, but a moment later he picked up the microphone.

"Just for insurance purposes, we're going to have to move to the parking lot," he told the

band. They had time, but only if they started moving now. Lortz wasn't about to let the rain beat them.

The next moment, Lortz was bounding down the bleachers to help the pit crew move its xylophones and vibraphones.

"Jen Matthews," he called out to one of his students, "just for the record, it is not raining."

"What happened to your weather channel, Mr. Lortz?" she teased.

Water dripping down his coat, Lortz responded with another denial.

"It is not raining," he said, but what he meant was, "Nothing's going to stop us."

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