

Standing 'O' - Judges: Why Don't We Ever Agree With Them

Contributed by Rob Stein
Monday, 24 September 2007

This article is geared towards directors and staff members, as we shed some light on why we often find ourselves disagreeing with our judging panels. Throughout this article, we explore various common disagreements between staff and judges, and the root from which these problems are manifested. The purpose of the article is to aid directors and staff members in understanding the judging process, as well as the scores that are received. Please keep in mind the thoughts and opinions written in this article are solely my own, and do not represent any specific judging organization or group.

Judges: Why Don't We Ever Agree With Them

As competition season begins, we approach the standard competition rituals; getting off the bus in a crowded, loud parking lot, attempting to tune in cold weather, watching our students perform their hearts out, and then...judges critique. This final event of the evening can be stressful, for both staff members and judges alike. This article is meant to shed some light on judging, scoring, and why often times the staff may not agree with the numbers and comments they are given. Please note that all ideas and thoughts expressed in this article are mine alone and do not represent any specific judging organization or group.

First, let's discuss the main reason for the usual tension: what you may see as a director or staff member, compared to what a judge may see. When considering this aspect, it is important to remember that, as a judge, the job is to be as objective as possible. Most of the time, especially in marching band, a judge will see you once and once only, with a possible exception of championships. A judge usually does not know where you are coming from, the improvements your program has made, etc. As educators, it is our inclination to always look for the positive at performances. When you think about it, it is somewhat amusing; at rehearsals, we look always try to find mistakes; always looking for things to clean. At performances, we always look for the good and don't focus nearly as much on errors we may see. A judge, as previously stated, is viewing your band for the first time, and sees everything for what it is. So, while both the director and judge view the same show, the perspectives can be (and usually are) different.

Second, let's consider some more responsibilities of judges to better understand what a judge goes through on a show day. On a long day, a judge can view many, many bands. On a championships day, it can be an all day affair of anywhere between 20-40 bands! Let's break it down to a single group or category; meaning you are at a regular show and there are ten bands there, all in the same classification. While judges must be objective, they must also be cautious. If your band is on 3rd in the order of bands, there are still 7 more to go, and judges only have two bands to compare against. If they set your number too high, and there are 7 bands left to go, there could be some huge issues at the end of the night for everyone. This aspect of numbers management is extremely difficult for a judge to do, and takes some solid experience.

Now, let's name some common disagreements; there is the most common 'the score is too low.' Others may include we don't agree with the comments on the sheets, or maybe we don't agree with the spread between our band and the band closest to us in the scores. I think it is at this time we must refer to the most important factor of scoring — the rubric on the back of the sheet. Here is an example of a visual effect sheet:

Effectiveness

Box I

Overall design of visual repertoire is hard to understand and evaluate. There is a noticeable interpretation problem caused by a lack of program coordination. Repertoire lacks creativity. Design elements such as staging, impact points, and climaxes are non-existent.

Box II

Designers exhibit some knowledge of good effect by understanding the basics of repertoire effectiveness. However, there are frequent inconsistencies throughout the program. Repertoire displays the beginnings of creativity. Program coordination, if any, generates few impact points and climaxes.

Box III

The design team is occasionally successful in achieving good repertoire effectiveness, but there are a lot of times when it is not maximized. Interpretations of the visual program generate some interest and occasionally synchronize. Although there is inconsistency, there is a presence of creativity throughout the show.

Box IV

Advanced design techniques are apparent throughout the visual program and are usually maximized. Designers understand the concepts of visual effect and frequently implement them when coordinating the design of the program. It is apparent that creative concepts exist, but are not always consistently executed.

Box V

Repertoire design consistently incorporates ideas to maximize effort. The design team has a superior understanding of program coordination with the ability to consistently captivate an audience with fascinating visual performances. Effect is always pushed to the extremes with varying degrees of finesse, impact, and climax.

(Sub-Caption)

Effectiveness

Box I

An apparent lack of confidence exists among performers. Inadequate training is obvious as performers do not attempt to create any type of emotion or intensity. Audience interest is not present as visual impact points are absent.

Box II

Performers display some confidence through below average training and understanding of performance communication. There are inconsistencies in the concept of role within the program. There are few times that performers express emotion, mood, and intensity.

Box III

Training is obvious as an occasional attempt to communicate emotion, mood, and intensity. Performers understand their role within the program but are seldom sure how to express it. The program includes periods of intensity, emotion, and mood that keep the audience's interest for the most part. However, these performance qualities are rarely maximized. Performers exhibit an average level of confidence.

Box IV

Performers are well training and understand their role within the program. They frequently communicate emotion, mood, and intensity. The program is often entertaining, fascinating, and interesting to the audience - but hindered by breakdowns. Performers display above-average confidence and frequently maximize performance qualities.

Box V

Performers display an advanced level of training and understanding of their role within the visual program. They consistently communicate emotion, mood, and intensity throughout the performance, creating a fascinating and interesting program. The performers excel at entertaining the audience by maximizing all performance qualities. A superior level of confidence and professionalism is evident.

(Total Score)

Each sheet should have a rubric on the back of it explaining the qualifications for each score category. Many circuits use the "box" system, where each score category is broken down into a different box. For example, from an 80-89 may be a box 4, etc. The main difference between the lower and higher boxes is usually consistency. For lower boxes, you may see words like sometimes, or infrequently. As the boxes get higher, you will see words like usually, always, or consistently. Rather than concentrate on the number itself, I believe it is more important to concentrate on what the number represents. For example, your band receives a "box 3" score in musicianship. You refer to the rubric and see that the description of a box 3 score does not fit your band. Box 3 says you sometimes play in tune, and you think you consistently play in tune; I believe that would be a valid argument.

In regards to scoring, it is also important to remember that different marching band circuits hold various aspects of the performance higher in correspondence with your score. For example, in one specific circuit I participate in, 60% of the score is musically oriented, and 40% is visual. In another circuit, it's switched. So, in circuit A, a band that plays really well and marches at a mediocre level will come on top over a band that marches really well and plays at a mediocre level. When planning your show, it is important to know how important each aspect of your show is competitively.

I have also found in my experience that sometimes it seems like judges concentrate more on finding mistakes than looking for positive aspects as well to commentate on. Sometimes I receive what I refer to as a "tick tape," or a tape that is more of a play-by-play of the show, calling out mistakes, and not really recognizing any positive things throughout the show. I believe that sometimes, some judges lose sight of the fact that this is an educational activity for students and educators alike. I believe that I, as an educator, should be able to play every single tape I get for my students and they should be able to learn from it. If something this serious happens where you get sheets or a tape similar to the above description, it is your responsibility to contact your specific judging association and see what their process is for that situation. Please remember this is not to say that this happens frequently, or all judges do it, but simply to recognize it does occur and what your course of action should be if it does.

So, to recap, there are many reasons why we, as educators, may not agree with a judge's evaluation of our program or performance. Some of them can include a disagreement in numbers, comments, or that they were too negative and did not attempt to view positive aspects of your show. Again, I believe that almost all disagreements stem from the fact that a judge is usually viewing your program from the first time, and sees it from a completely different perspective than you do. Something extremely difficult in your show that may have taken you two months to clean and was finally clean for the first time all season, to a judge, is just clean and he/she did not see the hard work you put into cleaning that specific section; hopefully, however, he/she will recognize the difficulty of the repertoire in that respect. Or, perhaps something you may perceive to have been a small problem in your band's performance may have been viewed as a more significant problem by your judging panel.

This of course can stem the question, "Well how important are scores anyway?" In my article, "Competition: How Important Is It?" I state my opinion on that subject. Overall, my opinion is that while this activity has many competitive aspects, I believe some of its main purposes are to allow our students to enjoy the thrill of performance, make friends, learn life lessons, and hopefully make some great memories. To let the opinion of 7 or 8 people who have the extremely difficult task of judging numerous groups in one night make or break your season would be losing sight of what I believe is the objective of this activity: to give your students the best experience and education you can, and not to worry about things you have no control over.

Publisher's Note: Rob Stein is a co-founder of Standing 'O' - Marching Arts Specialists. Rob is a graduate of The University of the Arts in Philadelphia, PA, holding both a Master's degree in music education, and a Bachelor's degree in trumpet performance. As a music educator in both the private and public setting, his experience includes extensive work with drum corps, marching bands, jazz bands, wind ensembles, pit orchestras and private lesson studios. Rob started his

drum corps career marching with the Jersey Surf Drum and Bugle Corps for 6 years, spending 4 in the horn-line, and 2 as drum major. Rob finished aging out with 2 years as a member of the Concord Blue Devils playing upper lead trumpet. Rob is a judge for both USSBA and Cavalcade of Bands circuits, and is also a member of the brass staff for the Bushwackers Drum and Bugle Corps. Currently, Rob teaches elementary instrumental music in the East Windsor Regional School District in East Windsor, NJ, and is a member of the adjunct faculty of the School of Music at The University of the Arts in Philadelphia, PA, teaching marching band education.

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