

Two-way players hit the right notes

Beverly High students juggle football, marching band roles

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By Julian Benbow, Globe Staff | October 26, 2006

BEVERLY -- Players like Pat Bailey and Greg Pierce can throw Beverly's offense on their backs and carry it for four quarters. But when the second quarter ends, it's Ben Comeau doing the heavy lifting when he straps on a tuba and lugs it around for the halftime show.

Comeau, a sophomore who gets most of his playing time with the junior varsity squad, stands 6 feet 2 inches and weighs 195 pounds, a good frame for a defensive end. But at halftime, he goes from the Panthers sideline to the middle of the field to march with the band -- in cleats, shoulder pads, and vivid orange football jersey.

Comeau said he'd rather stick out than not be in the band at all. "I'm built for football," he said. "But I'm built for tuba, too."

Comeau is one of three Beverly football players to pull double duty with the marching band. Sophomore Mark Perry serves as a backup offensive guard and defensive end, and struts with his saxophone. Junior Zac Anderson is the marching band's version of former Pittsburgh Steelers quarterback Kordell Stewart -- a trombone-baritone-trumpet player who splits time between tight end and defensive end during games.

Anderson was the lone double-teamer last season, internalizing notes, songs, and marching steps for band instructor Ray Novak, and ingesting formations, plays, and signals for football coach Dan Bauer.

"The memorizing part wasn't exactly the hardest but it was definitely a challenge," Anderson said. "But during the football games, I just try to make sure I'm focusing on the game, just making sure I don't mess up."

Anderson doesn't get much playing time with the varsity, he said, but the few minutes performing at halftime are a breeze compared with whatever work he gets on the football field.

"There's not as much stress when you're playing as opposed to football, when you have to make sure you don't do something stupid like let the guy get past you," he said.

For Anderson, Comeau, and Perry, running from two-a-day football practices to band camp in the summer is a workout in itself. Comeau bounces from football practices in jersey-drenching heat to perform marching drills in tandem with his tuba.

"It's not easy, but I get through it," he said. "It gets pretty hectic. You're pretty exhausted."

"It's a hard thing to do," said Perry. "But when you're in high school, you do a lot of different stuff. It's fun to get a bunch of different activities and try to get as many different aspects of high school life as possible, just to get to be with different people. It's tough but it's all worth it when it's over."

Comeau decided to play football as a freshman. He had relatives who had played the sport, and figured he wanted to get in on it, too.

Perry's football experience goes back to Pop Warner. He said he considered giving it up when he arrived at Beverly High in order to focus on his music, but couldn't. There's just something about grunting, grass stains, and helmet-to-helmet contact that the marching band can't offer. "For a little bit, I thought I was going to do band, but then I started to kind of miss football," Perry said. "So I decided to play football last year, and I've been doing it ever since."

It helps that the team's coach has a story he likes to tell about a certain football star and undercover musician.

One day after practice, Perry said, he was talking with Bauer about how the band experience was treating him, and Bauer mentioned how New England Patriots star Tedy Bruschi played the saxophone in his high school band.

"I thought that was pretty cool," Perry said.

The list of pro athletes with band on their resumes includes New Jersey Nets swingman Vince Carter, a drum major at his Dayton Beach, Fla., high school and in college at North Carolina; and Orlando Magic veteran Grant Hill, the former Duke University star who has turned his piano skills into television sitcom sketches.

Perry said he realizes that no matter how many times he shakes the Magic 8-ball, a pro football career probably isn't in his future. And as much as he loves the music, that's a long shot, too.

"I really do enjoy both," he said. "I love playing football. I definitely like music, but I really don't see football being a part of my future. I kind of always wanted to be a teacher."

Which is probably why it helps having a coach like Bauer and a band instructor like Novak.

"I respect both of them a lot," Perry said. Rather than pulling him to one side or the other, Novak and Bauer encouraged him to make it work with both.

The football coach "likes when kids are well-rounded instead of just focusing on one thing," Perry said, adding that he thinks Novak "likes it just as much as coach Bauer."

And after nearly hanging up his cleats, Perry is glad he decided to stick with the team.

"You talk to some people who are in the band and they say that maybe they wanted to play football, but

they couldn't do it. Then there were guys who were jocks in high school who wanted to play in the band, but they didn't do it because they just wanted to play football.

"You've just got to do it. You don't have to pick one and stop the other one. You can do both." ■

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