

Spring 2009

# the View

a magazine for alumni and friends

**Playing to  
the crowd**  
on a worldwide stage

UNIVERSITY of WISCONSIN - EAU CLAIRE





**Spring beauty** Not only does spring beauty describe the flower pictured, but it's the actual name of this delicate little wildflower (scientific name: *Claytonia virginica*) found in Putnam Park in early May. The spring beauty and trillium are among the more than 400 species of plants recorded within the 200 acres of natural vegetation located in the middle of the UW-Eau Claire campus. Putnam Park provides an area for the study of flora and fauna and is a popular spot for hiking and relaxation. It was designated as a state natural area in 1976.

Photo by Rick Mickelson

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**On the cover:** The Blugold Marching Band has made great strides since Randal Dickerson took over as director nearly eight years ago. Increasing in size from 60 members to just over 200 this past season, the band performed its biggest gig ever this year when it played for Pope Benedict XVI in St. Peter's Square on New Year's Day. Hours and hours of rehearsal time led up to this crowning achievement, as senior art major Forrest Herr could tell you. Read about the marching band's success beginning on Page 7.

Cover photo by Rick Mickelson

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# Playing to the crowd on a worldwide stage

By Juliana Horgan Poquette



It's not a typical Blugold Marching Band practice. The group is assembled for a final rehearsal before its biggest gig ever: playing for Pope Benedict XVI in St. Peter's Square on New Year's Day 2008. →



Randal Dickerson conducts the marching band's first rehearsal of the season during August training camp.



Rick Mickelson

Between run-throughs of numbers as diverse as “Ode to Joy” and Ricky Martin’s “The Cup of Life” (complete with shouts of “Alé, alé, alé!”), chairs scrape against linoleum as their jittery occupants grow more restless by the minute, while the ever-patient man on the director’s platform fields questions about camera batteries, phone cards and the proper attire for a visit to the Vatican.

Who is this man, so seemingly unruffled by the fact that in less than 24 hours he’ll be leading these student musicians on a 10-day tour of Italy and Greece?

That would be Randal Dickerson, the band’s director since 2000 and the person responsible for the group’s explosive growth from just 60 members when he came on board to 202 members during the 2007-08 season. And what a season it was, including performances in eight cities, two states and three foreign countries before combined audiences of more than 150,000. The Blugold Marching Band is now the largest marching band at any NCAA Division III school in the nation — and bigger than marching bands at many Division I schools, said Dickerson, a UW-Eau Claire associate professor of music.

## Fans in the stands

Blugold football games in Carson Park are one way to experience the band at its finest.

“We sit down there in the end zone and make as much noise as we can,” Dickerson said.

And the noise they make is infectious as fans clap, sing, dance and shout in the stands to the beat of the band.

“He makes us believe we have the power to keep those people in the stands,” said Michelle Kochan, a drum major in the marching band and senior music education major from Fond du Lac.

The marching band’s halftime shows have become a highlight for football fans. In recent years the shows, characterized by high-energy dance moves and occasional shouting and singing from band members, have featured the music of such popular U.S. artists as James Brown, Gloria Estefan and Aerosmith. In 2007 the show took on a more European flavor, featuring hits familiar to the crowds the band would entertain during its winter tour of Italy and Greece.

The band’s repertoire for its 2007 show was right on target for its European performances, Dickerson said.

“It was nothing like we’ve ever seen,” he said of the group’s reception during its overseas tour, which included performances in Rome, Florence and Athens. “I had no idea the crowds would be as responsive as they were — following us down the street, chanting, asking us to play more.”

The band performed “Ode to Joy” for a crowd of about 100,000 in St. Peter’s Square following the New Year’s Day papal blessing. Afterward, an estimated 20,000 to 30,000 people stayed to hear more, Dickerson said.

“They were 360 degrees around the band, and they wouldn’t let us stop playing,” he said.

## Dramatic change and growth

The band’s growth in numbers and popularity could not have been predicted a decade ago. In the late 1990s a proposal to eliminate the marching band almost succeeded. In 2000, 59 of the 60 marching band members were music education majors, participating only because it was a degree requirement. Fast-forward seven years, and more than half of the students on the band’s 2007-08 roster



Andrei Strizek



Andrei Strizek

are pursuing majors other than music or music education, Dickerson said.

Dickerson came to UW-Eau Claire from the University of Illinois, where he earned his doctorate in education and then served for nine years as assistant dean for academic affairs and an assistant professor of music. Previously he was a high school band director for seven years in his home state of Mississippi and in Washington state. He earned his bachelor's and master's degrees in music education from the University of Southern Mississippi, where he was a drum major in The Pride of Mississippi Marching Band.

With a desire "to get back into teaching and out of the dean's office," Dickerson accepted a position at UW-Eau Claire that included teaching music education courses, supervising student teachers, directing the University Band and serving as adviser to the Blugold Marching Band.

"Adviser" doesn't quite adequately describe the role Dickerson has assumed with the marching band.

"At first, I just took over," he said of his role when he arrived in 2000. Only after establishing the direction he wanted the band →



Andrei Strizek



Andrei Strizek

**Top left:** Following the marching band's performance of the fanfare in St. Peter's Square, members of the drum line listen to Pope Benedict XVI as he gives the papal blessing from his apartment window.

**Top right:** Drum majors Jim Skaleski, Michael Renneke and Jennifer Tinberg in front of Il Duomo in Florence, Italy.

**Above:** Trumpet players dance and groove during the stage show in Florence.

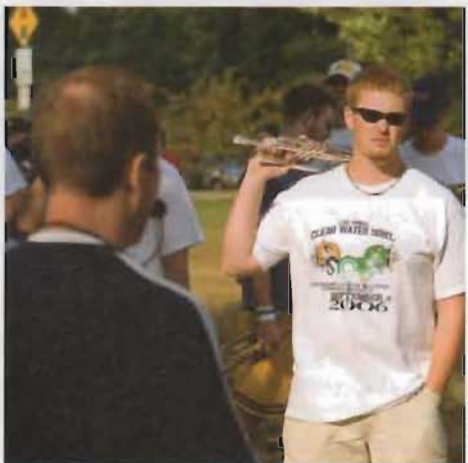
**Left:** Dickerson is caught off guard as the band lines up for a picture in front of Il Duomo in Florence and the crowd chants for the band to play.



Rick Mickelson



Rick Mickelson



Rick Mickelson

**Top left:** Dickerson consults with student leaders about choreography during rehearsal.

**Top right:** Trumpet players in their power stance during a loud section of the band's Aerosmith show.

**Center:** Trumpet player Karlee Shaw in three stages of a dance sequence during the Aerosmith show.

**Bottom:** Jon Lanctin listens as Dickerson gives instructions to the brass line.

→ to take and communicating his expectations to its members did he begin to invite students back into leadership roles.

"I couldn't put my name on something I couldn't take seriously," said Dickerson, who now works closely with a Blugold Marching

By doing his own arranging, he can write music "as demanding as I can get by with" for the specific musicians in the band during particular season, Dickerson said.

Dickerson also has developed an in-depth Web site, [www.blugoldmarchingband.com](http://www.blugoldmarchingband.com),

**"It's a whole different world from back in 2000 when I had to beg students to be in marching band."**

— Randal Dickerson

Band planning committee, composed of students enrolled in two upper-level music education classes, to select show themes and music and set the band's performance calendar for the following year.

In his eight years with the band, Dickerson has overseen a dramatic change in the band's performance style, which he sums up in one word: "Funk."

He also writes the arrangements of all the music the band plays.

"That's something that this band is known for," he said. "We don't do any bought or stock arrangements. It's something that gives the students such an ownership in the program."

which contains information for the general public as well as current and prospective band members.

"The Web site really took off," he said, noting that he increasingly observes hits on the site from locations outside Wisconsin. "It's a big image factor."

## Substance and style

Thanks to Dickerson's leadership, the Blugold Marching Band is now one of UW-Eau Claire's "true marks of excellence," said David Baker, a professor emeritus of music who was chair of the music and theatre arts

**Below:** Saxophone players during rehearsal.

**Right:** Mellophone and sousaphone players at Carson Park during Homecoming 2007.



Rick Mickelson



Bill Hoepner

department during Dickerson's first six years on the faculty.

"Although he is demanding, and this is certainly reflected in the band's on-field precision and well-focused sound, he also makes the students feel very good about their work," Baker said. "He is friendly and accessible, but he also clearly identifies challenges and a plan for achieving goals."

Students who have experienced Dickerson's leadership style firsthand agree. Drum major Jacob Boyle, a senior music major from Pewaukee, credited Dickerson for his ability to make the best of what he has to work with.

"That's one of his major strengths and why the program is where it is now," Boyle said. "He took a program that was left to die and made it what it is."

Band members also cite Dickerson's ability to effectively coordinate such a large and diverse group of students — or, as junior drum major Michael Renneke put it, "to deal with the band and its collective hive mind."

"He can make everything he says accessible to every single person in the band," said Renneke, a music education major from Eagan, Minn.

## Marching ahead

The Blugold Marching Band's success under Dickerson has not come without growing pains. Dickerson credits support from the UW-Eau Claire Foundation as critical to helping the band meet its financial challenges. The Foundation established a marching band advancement fund and in 2007 received a \$50,000 gift in support of the band from alumni Tom and Jeannie Flesch.

"This was the first year we had uniforms to fit everyone in the band," Dickerson said.

A few of the expenses along the way have included the purchase of 14 sousaphones at \$4,000 apiece, anywhere from 10 to 30 new \$500 uniforms each year and an investment of \$9,000 to equip the drumline, he said.

Just over 70 percent of the band's 2007-08 members will return in 2008-09, leaving room for about 100 new members next year as Dickerson allows for limited growth. That means that many of the students applying for spots in the band will not make it — "unless uniforms fall from the sky," he said.

An application process to determine the band's membership was used for the first time just before the 2007-08 season. Dickerson posts an online list of openings by

section so prospective members know from the outset where spots are available.

For Dickerson, the biggest challenge is coordinating the marching band program singlehandedly. It's unusual, even among other Division III schools like UW-Eau Claire, for just one person to oversee a university marching band, he said, noting that the music and theatre arts department has reduced his fall teaching load to help ease the demands on his time.

"It's remarkable that he's the only faculty member involved with the marching band," said drum major Renneke. "Even high school bands have parent booster organizations to help."

The Blugold Marching Band finds itself at a crossroads as it prepares for its ninth season under Dickerson's leadership.

"We're at that point where we have to decide, do we keep it growing or do we keep it where it is?" Dickerson said. "I don't know what the answer is yet."

But it's not a bad situation to be in, he concedes.

"It's a whole different world from back in 2000 when I had to beg students to be in marching band." ■