

So You Want To Be A Judge?

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There are many types of activities that rely on subjective assessment comparing one performance to another. Often these judgments decide placement, with winners and losers. Others may rank contestants against a local, regional, or National standard, with multiple Gold or Silver Medalists at one event. From gymnastics to figure skating to cheerleading to marching band, many popular youth activities involve judges using some type of criteria to arrive at “and the winner is....”. Too many of my life’s memories are related to drum corps, band, and color guard, and have to do with unbelievable, ‘how could this happen to my team’ results. I still recall the heartbreak of those moments whether I was a child, designer/teacher, or parent. In your heart of hearts it was THE performance of the season, but..... the judges put you in 3rd place. Who could do this to kids? Who would want to judge?

With that said, I feel those experiences have kept me pretty balanced as a judge. After 15 years, part of me still adjudicates due to that lingering fear of those things happening to kids again. The other part of course is that it took me years to really feel comfortable with the process of using certain sheets, weighted and worded in different ways, to arrive at an insightful evaluation and proper placement. There is a lot to learn, and if experienced judges don’t actively engage in the training of potential judges from within the activity, then we invite the possibility that some kid (and some Dad) will forever wonder how ‘the system’ could get it so wrong.

So who should consider judging? Who is truly qualified to make decisions of this impact? Although noted experience is certainly an indicator of potential success, the most essential quality needed is the desire to do the right thing. Could you judge a group or student you used to teach? A group taught by a close friend? Performers who exhibit completely different training and artistic styles than you? These situations happen.

Is it important that an adjudicator has a body of work in the field that is being assessed? (Performer, coach, teacher, designer, choreographer, music arranger, etc.) Having a lifelong background in different aspects of the activity adds a perspective that can be a great asset in critiquing, describing, and justifying your analysis of any given performance. Someone with an open mind *can* learn and understand the criteria and manage their scoring to arrive at fair, justified results, but learning the vocabulary and the culture of any organized competitive endeavor can be daunting if it’s something you’ve never done.

The assumption that someone who was a successful teacher or performer can automatically begin assessing other groups objectively has been proven false many times over. People who are rigidly set on their own designs, techniques, and teaching methods will struggle to establish credibility as a judge, regardless of their reputation in that field. A competent judge knows there are many ways to be successful, and continues to keep up with trends, attend training, and is well aware of all the groups or performers considered the elite in their art form, activity, or sport. Differing techniques, opinions, and styles need to be given a chance or things would never evolve.

Some of my worst experiences as a teacher have come from assessments or clinics from judges with very singular definitions of what achievement looks or sounds like. Organizers of community, scholastic or National events are obligated to provide proven, age-appropriate judges.

If training is not available, then the organizer and its sponsors must provide extensive judging criteria, thorough scoring range information, worksheets, and support materials.

For those seeking to get involved as a judge in the marching band, color guard, or percussion ensemble activities, there are online resources to find training info and to contact established Judging Associations offering certification in different disciplines, and who pass their membership lists onto competitive band and guard circuits. (See reference list below). There are judging opportunities attached to many youth activities around the country, and judges can usually start off by ‘trailing’ at shows in their own area. Trialing involves observation, practice commentary, and finally numbers management alongside a mentor judge working at actual competitions. It takes a lot of study and focus to grasp the many factors that go into each and every event. Being able to recognize achievement based on the given assessment criteria, describe your observations with clear and insightful dialogue, and fairly rank and rate all participants is a product of experience. Once comfortable with the process, and after passing all prerequisites, employment opportunities may become available at a regional or national level. All marching arts organizations use multiple judge panels at all their events, giving qualified judges opportunities on most weekends from September into April.

If you are interested in trialing for district or all-state auditions, start by contacting your local Music Educators Conference. These associations usually run annual auditions with someone on their board hiring the judges. This type of work does require a judge who has mastered that particular instrument, and has taught privately for years. It also requires the ability to rank and rate a large number of auditions, usually playing the same piece, over an entire day. This takes special skill and training, and even trained judges of ensemble activities may find it difficult to transition to this type of assessment.

Teacher associations also run regional or state competitions for marching band, jazz or concert band, string orchestra, chorus, and indoor guard and percussion groups. If you live in an area where an established Judge Certification system isn’t an option, contacting the Festival organizers directly and sending them your qualifications may be the only entry point. Often, they have a Judge list they hire from year after year – ask to be put on that list.

No matter what field and talent or age level you choose to adjudicate, hiring is still commonly done by word of mouth. Make every effort to be cordial with everyone you meet. Judges need to feel comfortable that those around them are also implementing a particular system fairly and justifiably. Impartiality of the highest order is the cornerstone of all successful pageantry events. By being prepared, objective, and never taking for granted the time, effort, and passion that performers bring to these events you will carry on a valuable service that many are unwilling or unable to provide

Few consider judging a glamorous life. I still remember when the French judge was accused of throwing the Olympics in figure skating. Certainly this person was qualified to represent her country at the Olympic Finals, but clearly her ability to remain objective and focus on the actual performances was compromised. She was known around the world. People remember when judges mess up (re: my early life memories). If all goes well, the scores are announced, no one is surprised (because everyone agrees?), and the judge is on their way. Not a lot of glory, but certainly rewarding. To have a teacher or performer thank you for your help and insight is special. However, reputations are on the line every time someone chooses to judge and

rate performances of an artistic or athletic nature. It is a big responsibility and still challenges my knowledge and experience every time I grab a clipboard and sign my name on the bottom of the sheet as the judge for today's competition.

Places to start:

Central States Judges Association

Judging services for drum corps, color guards, marching bands and drill teams.

<http://www.csja.net/>

Judges Association of Mid America (JAMA)

Judges for Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, Nebraska and the Midwest.

<http://www.jamahome.org/>

Massachusetts Judges Association (MJA)

Judge training and certification for indoor and outdoor marching activities. <http://www.massjudge.org/>

National Judges Association (NJA)

Provides Judges for the Tournament of Bands.

http://www.njatob.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=48&Itemid=59

Pacific Coast Judges Association

Adjudicates competitive pageantry from local parades to events of national scope.

<http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Square/3620/pcja.html>

Tri-State Judges Association

Judging services for parade and field contests across Minnesota, South Dakota, Iowa and Wisconsin.

Contact Tom Haugen at 563-382-4069.

Jeff Bolduc has been a freelance composer and arranger since graduating from Berklee College of Music with a Bachelors Degree in Composition. He also holds a Masters Degree in Music Education from Boston University and is currently the Director of Symphonic and Stage Bands at Marshall Simonds Middle School in Burlington, MA. Jeff is the Music Caption Head for the Massachusetts Judges Association and has served as a music judge for every marching band association in the northeast, Drum Corps International, and for many district and all-state auditions around New England. Contact Jeff on his website: 1stplacedesigns.com.