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Cavaliers march to new tune

The Cavalier Marching Band comes together quickly for its official debut at Saturday's football game.

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CHARLOTTESVILLE - As Virginia football season-ticket holder Dick Coleman sat watching a late-August practice in Scott Stadium, he was moved by the precision and execution on the field.

"It's an exciting time," he turned and said to a fellow onlooker. "It's been a long time coming." The retired anesthesiologist wasn't talking about UVa coach Al Groh's 15th-ranked football team. On this day the focus was on another group of students tuning up for the 2004 football season.

Literally.

For the past three weeks the Cavalier Marching Band has been practicing and rehearsing around campus before small groups of students and fans.

On Saturday, the university-sponsored band, under the direction of Bill Pease, makes its official debut when the football Cavaliers play host to ACC rival North Carolina.

A month ago, many of the 169 band members didn't even know one another, and they have only been performing together as a group since Aug. 21. However, don't expect a rag-tag imitation of the Mayberry Band to march into the Carl Smith Center on

Saturday.

"They are actually years ahead of where I thought we'd be at this point," said Pease, formerly the director of marching bands at Western Michigan University. "I thought we'd be at this level, maybe two or three years from now.

"When you hear them you won't be able to tell that's a first-year band."

That's a sentiment echoed by the Cavaliers' football coach, whose team gave the band glowing reviews following a command performance.

"I think everybody felt unanimously, they were great," said Groh, who invited Pease to bring his band over and play for the team following a training camp practice. "That was only their fourth or fifth day, so if that's what they sound like after four or five days ...

"I think people are going to enjoy them tremendously. I think if you're a Marching 100 fan, you might be worried right now," added Groh, referring to Ohio University's highly-acclaimed Marching 110 band.

Meeting daunting task

Pease, 40, was hired last summer after benefactor Carl Smith donated \$22 million in April 2003 to build a performance arts center at UVa. The gift also earmarked \$1.5 million to endow a student marching and concert band.

When Pease arrived on the UVa campus last December, the Virginia Beach native was faced with the daunting task of building a Division I marching band from scratch. The initial plans called for a 200-piece band, but Pease was hoping for around 150 the first year.

"We started from not even having a desk, a phone number, a file cabinet, an instrument, a piece of music, a stand, you name it," said Pease, who expects the band to eventually more than double its current size.

To add to the challenge, the University wanted to have a 50-60 member band in place by the middle of January to play at basketball games. Pease signed off on the idea because he wanted to use the basketball band as a tool to recruit band students who were already at UVa.

Pease finally rounded up enough students for rehearsal, only to discover that many of the band members didn't know any of the music and the instruments still hadn't arrived. The band members rehearsed four times before they played their first game.

"It's just unheard of to have a group of students perform at a [Division] I-A level never knowing each other," Pease said. "It's like having 10 basketball players just show up and you say 'Alright, next week you are going to play Duke.'"

UVa athletic director Craig Littlepage, who played in his junior high school band, came away impressed after watching the band prepare for its first basketball game.

"Literally, from song-to-song, minute-to-minute, you could not only hear the improvement in how they played, you could see the confidence build, the self-esteem, the camaraderie among the group, the helping one another out, that sort of thing," Littlepage said. "The dynamics of watching that kind of growth in such a short period of time was remarkable."

Converting

the naysayers

Groh has often said that one of the integral parts of being a big-time football program is having a big-

time band. Not all alumni and fans at UVa share that view, though.

Some think the university simply doesn't need a marching band. It has been close to 50 years since UVa last fielded one, and band opponents feel that a "high-school style" band will tarnish the school's academic image.

In addition, there is a faction on campus that still supports the Virginia Pep Band, a student-run scatter band that used to perform at UVa athletic events.

The Pep Band entertained UVa fans for more than three decades with its sarcastic humor that relied heavily on parody and satire. However, the band was infamous for provoking the ire of opposing fans by performing halftime skits that were sometimes deemed overly offensive. The athletic department told the band its services were no longer needed, in effect, shortly after an incident involving West Virginia University during the 2002 Continental Tire Bowl.

Littlepage maintains that a shift in philosophy - not the Pep Band's antics - was the main reason the University decided to change its approach to halftime entertainment.

"The Pep Band, is, and was, a dedicated group of students, who provided a tremendous service in support of our programs over the years," Littlepage said.

"As our program, more specifically football, has grown and as we go into this era, hopefully, of national prominence, we just needed something different in terms of entertainment as we try to provide a high level of experience for all of our fans."

Pease is not fazed by his detractors. He said his only concern is to produce a high-quality band that, in time, will convert the naysayers. In response to the Pep Band, Pease said all students are welcome to be in the marching band, regardless of their other campus affiliations.

"Our goal is to put out a group that represents the university musically like the university is represented academically," he said.

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