

**JC Sykes and the Rocky Mount Senior High School Band
A View from the Inside
NCMEA**

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My friend and mentor JC Sykes died on June 5, 2015. At his funeral an overflow crowd brought home to me how much JC meant to the Rocky Mount Community and The Rocky Mount City Schools for so many years and in so many ways. At the reception after the service I was able to reconnect with Pris his wife, who was the librarian at Edwards Junior High School where I taught from 1979-1988, his son John, who was an important member of the band program and with the many former students I had not seen in many years except perhaps on Facebook. It was very clear to me that the experiences we had together when the Rocky Mount Senior High School Marching Band rose to national prominence had affected their lives in a significant manner and they all expressed gratitude for the influence of Mr. Sykes and the other staff. For me, it was a sad, yet joyous occasion that really hit home - helping me to once again realize what lasting, meaningful effects we all have on our students.

A few days later as I reflected on that occasion it occurred to me that if no one spoke about what went on during that time in the Rocky Mount program all the valuable things we all learned were simply going to fade away, so I would like to talk with you today about something I think is very important: Legacy. Legacy may be defined as that which is handed down. We have many valued legacies among North Carolina band programs. One of the first is the legacy of the Lenoir HS Band under Colonel Parker. This tradition produced many fine musicians and a very high level of performance. I never will forget when my high school band director, Larry Wells, played us a recording of Chester performed by the Lenoir High School Band. I did not know a high school band could sound that good. Honoring legacy matters for many reasons, not the least of which is that the wisdom of our profession cannot be contained in a book. The wisdom of our profession exists in the character and in the

actions of our best teachers. Lets face it - none of us knew what we were doing when we got our first job, despite the best efforts of our professors. I bet if we took a sampling, most of you would say that somewhere along the line you had a very important mentor that helped you develop, over time, into a better teacher and you are probably still working on that. This is why mentoring is so important and why legacy matters and this is why I felt compelled to apply for this opportunity to talk with you today. JC Sykes was my mentor from 1979-1988, the years I taught the junior high feeder program that fed into Rocky Mount Senior High.

I am so lucky to have been hired at Rocky Mount – it was the only job I applied for coming out of the ECU School of Music in 1979. I had been accepted to the University of Michigan to study trumpet performance but had met this wonderful young lady who was also a music-major at ECU, named Joy Hinsley and we wanted to get married so I needed a job. JC later told me I got the job because Herb Carter, then Director of the ECU Wind Ensemble, called him and recommended me and JC said if I was good enough for Herb I was good enough for him. Once again, this shows importance of legacy. After my first concert – don't you all remember your first concert – I drove over to the high school and asked him what he would have given me in terms of rating. He said he would give me a III. This is the first character trait I want to highlight about JC. He was about the most honest person I have ever known. He was also polite and would have never said anything like that to me unless I asked. I responded, ok, would you come over to Edwards Junior High and help me? This was the beginning of us working closely together for 9 years, eventually arranging our schedules so that when the large bands at my school rehearsed he was there and when the bands at the high school rehearsed I was there. I had the good fortune of having a veteran teacher of 19 years stand behind me each day as I rehearsed.

It was not long before JC invited me to attend high school marching band practice. I am not sure when the conversation happened but he said he wanted to win a BOA Grand National Championship in 5 years. I honestly thought he was a little crazy. The Rocky Mount Band had some local and regional success but even a new comer like me knew this was going to be a huge undertaking. Neither Pris Sykes nor myself could remember why JC said we were going to attempt this. Perhaps it was

because in all walks of life JC wanted to do things well and he did! He hated mediocrity in any form. Away from school he was an excellent wood worker and builder and spent many retirement years as a fine instrument repairman. I think he brought that same need for a challenge and desire for excellence to his band program. After 19 years of proven success he did not need to do this for himself. I think he wanted to push our program to be the best it could be for the students and community and since we were going to do marching band anyway, we may as well do it as well as we can.

Let me ask you a question – has anyone read **The Little Book of Talent: 52 Ways to Improve Your Skills**. (LBOT) by Daniel Coyle? Gail Williams recommended this book in a recent master class at ECU. Coyle went to several places that he termed **pockets of excellence** in different locations throughout the world. He wrote down what the master teachers and coaches did when developing talent and the results are in this book: 52 short suggestions with explanations that describe the behaviors he witnessed.

One of the locations was the Spartak Tennis Club in Moscow. This club has developed more top 20 women tennis players than any club in the United States. It is run by a 77 year old woman named Larisa Proebrazyhenskaya. The students there cannot play any tournaments for three years. They must develop their technique and they do this by *imitatsiya*, perfecting their strokes but not hitting tennis balls. Another visit took Coyle to Brazil where world-class soccer players are developed. How: they grow up playing an indoor version of soccer called *futsal* where the court is much smaller than a soccer field thereby resulting in 6 times more touches per player and with a smaller heavier ball. In both cases, the development of excellence in a sport is the result of intense commitment to technical perfection and on the international level the results speak for themselves.

I was not familiar with this book but had read Coyle's **The Talent Code**, which is also very informative for educators because the topic is the development of excellence in performance in whatever genre. When the topic is the development of excellence I am interested because isn't that what we are trying to do with our students? Aristotle said, "You are what you repeatedly do. Excellence then is not an act, but a habit." As I

began to read this book I said to myself – this is JC Sykes – I was seeing JC in it and by extension myself because of the things I learned from him. For the remainder of our time together I would like to pull out a few of the tips from the LBOT so you can have concrete ideas about what I saw JC do on a regular basis and perhaps they can help you in your teaching in some way.

LBOT tip number 12 is **five ways to pick a high quality teacher/mentor:**

Avoid someone who reminds you of a polite waiter.

JC was honest and direct. He was dedicated to reality and did not sugar coat anything. He told the truth as he saw it and if you did not like it too bad.

Seek someone who scares you a little.

JC was authoritative but not authoritarian. He was the definition of professional. He wore a shirt and tie or a coat and tie to work everyday. In the language of my youth, he was what we called strict and old school.

Seek someone who gives short, clear directions.

Ronald Gallimore and Roland Tharp have updated and revisited a 1970's study of legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden. It is called: What a Coach Can Teach a Teacher: Reflections and Reanalysis of John Wooden's Teaching Practice. Upon his retirement in 1975, John Wooden's UCLA teams had won 9 national championships, including 7 in a row. Video analysis revealed that the majority of Wooden's teaching comments in practice were described as what to do and how to do it, or were activating and intensifying previously instructed behavior. His comments were short, punctuated and numerous, no lectures, no harangues. Only 7% of his comments were compliments. This is the way JC Sykes rehearsed. **Reach for a goal - evaluate the distance between the reach and the goal - return to step one.**

Seek someone who loves fundamentals.

Bill Walton, starting center of the 1971-72 UCLA team that went 30-0 and was part of an 88 game win streak discussed the first practice he had with John Wooden. The opening portion of the practice was a detailed, step-by-step instruction on how to put on socks and how to properly wear basketball shoes. He thought this was ridiculous but coach commented, the best player in the world is useless if his feet have blisters. No detail was too small. For example, JC once told me, Scott, if you are not teaching sound, what are you teaching? He wanted his groups to play in time, in tune, and in tone. It was not a complicated equation.

Other things being equal- pick the older person.

Well, I have to say JC was and did all these things that quality teachers do.

Because of him I think the Rocky Mount band program from 1979 to 1988 was a **pocket of excellence**, as Daniel Coyle describes. A flowering of achievement took place there with the coming together of good students and lots of them, a terrific band parent organization, great community support and a very fine staff that really enjoyed working together. I can only speak to those years because that was when I was there. Here are some the accomplishments during that time:

- 2 Tropicana Music Bowl Championships
- 5 BOA regional championships
- 3 BOA Grand National Championships
- The Presidential Inaugural Parade - 2
- The Tournament of Roses Parade, Pasadena, CA
- The Lord Mayor of Westminster Parade, London

- Numerous other championship performances in 10 states
- A performance in Carnegie Hall
- Over 2 decades of superior rating at MPA in Grade 6
- An award winning jazz ensemble

There was no reason for a medium size town in Eastern North Carolina to have a band program that would rise to national recognition unless someone served to **ignite** the drive for excellence. JC supplied the **ignition**. His motto during this time was **whatever it takes**.

When excellence is desired it is amazing how all decisions become easy. Nothing of substance takes place without this kind of vision. **Aristotle** said faith is the confidence that possibility can transcend mediocre circumstances. Somehow, he got everyone on board by having faith in us.

Our journey began in 1981 with a 5th place finish at the BOA Eastern Regional at JMU, our first BOA competition. We also finished in 11th place at Grand Nationals that year. 1982 saw 3rd and 4th place finishes in Southeast and Eastern regionals respectively. Grand Nationals saw a 6th place finish.

Now, I would like to refer back to LBOT. These are some tips that describe our developmental years in our quest – believe me, it was a shared endeavor.

1. Stare at what you want to become

Spartak Academy young girls

3. Steal without apology

Norwin High School

5. Be willing to be stupid – learning is reaching. Embrace reachfulness.

After competing at the national level for 2 years and falling short of our goals, change was clearly needed and JC knew it and I give him total credit for accepting this risk. After all we could fail, but **FAIL** is nothing more than **First Attempt In Learning**. Learning is reach – reach for the goal, evaluate the distance between the reach and the goal and return to step one.

It was clear the staff needed to change and our habits needed to change. The status quo was not getting us where we wanted to be. This is a difficult thing to admit but the fact is that if you want to be successful at the national level you are going to need help. As a result the following changes occurred:

Gary Czapinski was brought in as consultant and drill designer. Sadly, "Chops", as everyone called him, died in December of 2013. His influence in all areas was instrumental in our success and he was widely respected as a DCI adjudicator.

Todd Ryan was brought in as on-field M&M coach. Todd is a member of the DCI Hall of Fame for his work with the Madison Scouts and the Blue Devils. He usually drove directly to Rocky Mount the day after DCI finals and he lived with us until the season was over and was at every rehearsal.

Tom Acheson served as M&M cleaner and came in for two weeks prior to Grand Nationals and wrote our schedule for those 2 weeks based on his analysis of our strengths and weaknesses. He also bailed us out when we had design problems as did our own Bob Buckner on occasion.

I did music rehearsals and worked with our arrangers. Kendal Cowart taught at Parker Middle School (6-7) that fed my school. He was responsible for percussion and Donald Johnson did guard. I think a lot of you know "Goober", who still works with many band programs in our state, especially down east.

Despite our diverse backgrounds this staff worked very well together. All of them were very good at what they did and brought the best out of our students. We never once argued or had any of the drama that often over take close working situations. There was a great deal of mutual respect because everyone produced.

Other changes that occurred:

No freshman marched in the Rocky Mount Senior High School Marching Band. It was a 10-12 school. Yet, we were still behind the curve in marching and we knew it. Spring practices were initiated to get 9th

graders up to speed prior to the fall. In addition, summer marching practices were started. If you were in town, you came 2 nights a week. Motto: If you march better, you play better.

JC became our managing CEO and this allowed each of us in our areas of responsibility, to completely concentrate on what needed to be accomplished and we were accountable for any shortcomings. In short, he gave the staff the freedom to address problems as we saw fit and then he brought it all together. Every rehearsal began and ended with his observations on the band's progress and what needed to happen next.

- 1. Stare at what you want to become.**
- 3. Steal without apology**

The winner of the first BOA regional we attended and the winner of the 1982 BOA Grand National Championship was Norwin High School from North Huntingdon, PA. JC and I talked many times about things that Norwin did that separated them from us and other competing bands. We became friends with their director, L.J. Hancock. We even stayed in their school when performing at a BOA regional in the Pittsburgh area. JC gave me the freedom to roam the warm-up areas at competitions and I attended many local drum corps shows but stayed in the practice, warm-up areas to watch how fundamentals were developed by these high achieving organizations. This resulted in the following changes:

1. Woodwind and brass warm-ups were separated. A brass fundamentals routine of mouthpiece, long tones, flexibilities and extensive breathing exercises was implemented. I got the breathing exercises out of Ed Kleinheimer's book, *The Art of Trombone Playing*. Now, I would use *Breathing Gym* by Pat Sheridan and Sam Palafian. This fundamentals period normally took 30-40 minutes at the beginning of rehearsal before full band music rehearsal.
2. A commitment to sound development that was consistent with indoor concert band was implemented. Since woodwinds made up a large part of the band, our arrangements needed to contain more material for them. This provides color contrast and also rests the brass. Norwin showed us that tenor voices and

- chalmeaux clarinet could be used outside provided the context was right. We made sure that these contrasting colors were included in our arrangements.
3. In studying the BOA scoring sheets, JC and I both came to the conclusion that all things being equal, the best playing band should win and that's as it should be. We decided that musical values and musicianship were going to drive everything we did. Music was selected that contained dramatic elements that could lead to production moments. If a moment was not really there, and we wanted to do the piece, it was put there. As Chops used to say sometimes you need to make a cat bark. In all three Grand National Championships we won best general effect. If this happens you are playing well.
 4. Thursday rehearsals before a BOA event often began at the end of show and worked backwards through the show to insure big moments were happening.
 5. Students in the junior high program needed to have a higher level of musicianship. Individual etudes, solos, scales and arpeggios were graded regularly. The 8th grade band started the fall in grade 3 and moved to 4 in the spring. The 9th grade band often moved to grade 5 in the spring. An audition to get in the marching band was implemented.

1. Stare at what you want to become

3. Steal without apology

5. Be willing to be stupid

6. Choose Spartan over luxurious

I think Rocky Mount had some of the worst practice spaces in the state. Our stadium was a very old baseball field that converted to football in the fall. There was a large dirt area that was the infield. I think Spartan was the perfect word for our outdoor practice spaces. The same could also be said for many of the locations that Daniel Coyle visited when he was researching the LBOT. The Spartak Tennis Academy was in a run down warehouse. For several years at the beginning of John Wooden's tenure at UCLA the players had to clean up their dilapidated practice facility before practice. They did not play home games for 14 years until

a new arena was finally built. Wooden's take on this – he said it sure made us a better road team.

17. Embrace struggle

In each year of a Rocky Mount Grand National Championship there was always at least one show where things went terribly wrong. In 1983 when we were at the Pittsburg Regional at the finals performance it was so cold that the kids made paths in the frost as they marched. That was not the worst of our problems. We lost to Norwin HS by a very small margin and the kids were furious. They were a lot more teachable the next Monday, however. I saw it coming. Upon reviewing the tapes after prelims one adjudicator insisted that brass, even at double forte remain in equal balance to the woodwinds. Apparently he had never heard the Chicago Symphony under Fritz Reiner and George Solti. I told JC we were going to take a hit and we did. That person never adjudicated a BOA event again. The students sure were a lot more teachable the next Monday.

Earlier that same year, performing in MD, the band separated in the opener during a 4-count silent drag turn. I honestly do not know how they got back on. The students sure were a lot more teachable the next Monday.

In 1986, we were at a show in NC and in a large move near the end of the show they separated again. It was a large move towards the end zone and the separation in the staging made the move fairly high risk. We won the show by almost ten points, but as soon as the band came to the buses JC really lit into them. He called them cowards and proceeded to lambast them for several minutes. The parents standing around did not know what to think. JC never used profanity, but I think that night he came pretty close. The students sure were a lot more teachable on Monday.

I am not sure what year it was, but at a Friday night football game we had a really bad half time performance. We used football game performances to determine rehearsal plans for the next week. JC was so furious that he marched the band right back to the high school and we practiced for a couple of hours and never returned to the game.

The students sure were a lot more teachable on Monday

17. Embrace struggle

43. Embrace repetition

44. Have a blue color mind set – inspiration is for amateurs.

JC taught me that to be excellent at something you simply must commit to do the work. He often said good bands are made up of good individual players. If you want your band to be better, the individual players must be better. There is no bench in band. You are as good as your least competent player. So Bob Reynolds statement is true: if you want to be a great conductor, get great players. JC also had a funny way of telling the band to reset in rehearsal. He would say, set it up again but he pronounced again in an unusual manner. I have never heard anyone else pronounce again that way, but if had a dollar for every time I heard him say that I would be rich. He once told me, if the students were not giving their best he would do run-throughs the entire rehearsal. He called it playing them into shape or rep them into shape. We never had to do that but he would not hesitate to run a show 3 or 4 times back-to-back. His approach inside with wind ensemble was the same. He was very quick to put the responsibility for improvement on the individual student. He did not believe in practice cards for example. He said he could tell who is practicing by having them play an unannounced solo in class. In the old days we called this going down the line. Now that may be a little intimidating, but it worked. I know what he would say to that – well so what. By the way, that technique also works in university wind ensembles.

49. When you get stuck-make a shift-everyone hits plateaus.

50. Cultivate your grit.

I think one of the most important things I learned from JC was this: students do not know how good they can be. They literally need to be shoved into a demanding experience by someone who expects them to do it. Always assume that the student is capable of doing what you demand. That is also how he treated me.

Let me close by looking at a recent study of Grand Nationals Finalist bands. Emmett O'Leary recently published in the Journal of Band Research (Spring of 2016) a study of the BOA Grand National finalists from 2001-2013. Economic and demographics of 35 bands from this time period were examined. Here is a brief summary of the results:

“The typical Bands of America Grand National Championship Finalists will likely have competed at the event more than once, be from a major population center or within 25 miles of a major population center, have a high school enrollment significantly larger than their state's average, have a lower than state average percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch, and be from a district with higher than average median household income. In sum, finalist bands are likely to be from large schools with above average economic means located in the central region of the United State. “

Except for the “competing in the event more than once,” none of the other characteristics listed applied to the Rocky Mount Senior High School Band. It was through the remarkable vision of JC Sykes that the **pocket of excellence** flowered there during the 1980's. He saw something more in the community, in the students, in the band parents, in the staff and certainly in me, than we saw in ourselves. I think I will remember that aspect of his mentorship the most.



John C. Sykes, Jr.
1938 - 2015



Carnegie Hall - 1988