



VALDOSTA STATE UNIVERSITY  
**BLAZIN'**  
**BRIGADE**

# VISUAL HANDBOOK

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# INTRODUCTION

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The goal of the Valdosta State University Blazin’ Brigade is to establish processes that are the norm whether in rehearsal or in performance.

It is important that we practice as we perform; it is extremely rare to perform at a higher level than you practice.

Establishing proper habits during rehearsal translates to better consistency in performance.

## **THE BLAZIN’ BRIGADE VISUAL PROGRAM**

The Blazin’ Brigade visual program utilizes visual techniques that draw on a number of resources. Many ideas and practices combine elements from several schools of thought, with the hope of enabling the student performer with a set of skills which best prepare him or her for meeting the goals of the ensemble.

The techniques presented here are designed to allow the marching musician to best be able to play their instrument a high level, while achieving a visual presentation that is uniform throughout the ensemble and which supports the desired image of the overall production.

## **THE ROLE OF STUDENT LEADERS IN REHEARSAL**

The Blazin’ Brigade student leadership program is designed to place an enormous amount of ownership in the hands of the members, allowing them the opportunity to serve the organization in an elevated capacity. A substantial level of trust and responsibility is placed upon student leaders and they undergo intensive training and preparation before and during the marching season.

<b>Role</b>	<b>Responsibilities</b>
Drum majors	Lead by example Demonstrate visual marching techniques Assist in teaching fundamentals block, music sectionals, and drill rehearsals Provide feedback to sections and individuals after a rehearsal segment in the areas of music and visual execution Monitor disciplinary aspects of rehearsal
Section leaders	Lead by example Demonstrate visual marching techniques Demonstrate all music in a proficient manner Assist in teaching fundamentals block and drill rehearsals Teach music sectionals Provide feedback to sections and individuals after a rehearsal segment in the areas of music and visual execution Monitor disciplinary aspects of rehearsal

<b>Role</b>	<b>Responsibilities</b>
Graduate staff	Lead by example Assist in teaching fundamentals block and drill rehearsals Teach music sectionals Provide feedback to sections and individuals after a rehearsal segment in the areas of music and visual execution Maintain accurate attendance records Monitor disciplinary aspects of rehearsal Assist in logistical execution of rehearsal preparation/teardown
Undergraduate staff	Lead by example Assist in teaching fundamentals block and drill rehearsals Provide feedback to sections and individuals after a rehearsal segment in the areas of music and visual execution Monitor disciplinary aspects of rehearsal Assist in logistical execution of rehearsal preparation/teardown
Tau Beta Sigma and Kappa Kappa Psi members	Lead by example Be a “go-to” person for new members to ask questions if a drum major, section leader, or staff member is unavailable Actively find and anticipate ways to serve the bands

All Blazin’ Brigade members are responsible for looking uniform and sounding their best.

# BODY AWARENESS & POSTURE

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The single most important trait of a successful marching band is the ensemble body posture. The manner in which a member stands directly affects the level they will be able to play, spin, dance, or march.

Improper body carriage can put unwanted strain and tension on the body. Tension is the number one cause of poor performance no matter the section. Ironically however, this is one of the most overlooked areas of visual fundamentals. We are oftentimes reluctant to teach things we do not completely understand. Body awareness is actually a very simple and logical concept to teach.

In the beginning stages of teaching, we must stress some key points:

- Relaxation of the upper body
  - The shoulders are down and round
  - The neck, chest, and arms are “soft”
    - This is a departure from what many bands teach
- Separation of the upper body
  - The upper and lower body should be “separated” at the hips
    - The upper body can be imagined as the “musical machine” (musician)
    - The lower body is the “visual machine” (athlete)
    - The two rely on each other to work effectively, but they must remain autonomous to be maximized
  - Stretch your abdomen up and away from the hips
  - Make the distance between your lowest rib and hip bone as wide as possible without causing tension
- The back
  - The back should be straight and flat
  - Avoid any arch or curve in the small of your back
- Proper weight distribution
  - The performer’s body weight should remain on the front two-fifths of the foot at all times
    - This part of the foot is known as the platform
    - All motion begins from the platform
    - This is the most efficient area to keep body weight
  - Although a majority of the performer’s body weight should be on the platform, the heel should not be visibly off the ground
- Visual tuning
  - As with any musical exercise, timing of all visual exercises is dependent on proper subdivision
  - Moving together as a group is analogous to visual “tuning”
  - In music we use our ears to tune; in visual settings we use our eyes

- Breathing
  - Without proper breathing techniques (addressed in Musical Fitness), our music will never reach a proficient level
  - Our visual technique will plateau and falter if proper breathing technique is not employed
- Center of body
  - When standing in a given position on the field, the performer will have a designated spot, often referred to as a “dot”
  - This dot should be centered directly between the arches of the feet when the performer stands with feet together
  - When standing on a yard line, the arches should be centered on the center of the line

### **FIVE POINTS OF ALIGNMENT**

Correct posture involves a system of “five points of alignment.” One should imagine a straight line that runs from the floor through the **ankles**, the sides of the **knees**, the sides of the **hips**, the **shoulders**, and the **small bone** just behind the ears.

Feet should be together. The performer should think of elevating the rib cage and expanding their chest while keeping the neck and shoulders relaxed, which will enable proper breathing. The vertebrae should be separated, visualizing “lifting up” from the ground.

### **Posture and Alignment Checklist**

- ✓ Five points of alignment
- ✓ Feet together
- ✓ Elevated and expanded rib cage
- ✓ Neck and shoulders relaxed
- ✓ Separated vertebrae

# INSTRUMENT CARRIAGE

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Every performer in each section should hold their instrument in a uniform manner. Again, this is based on proper music fundamentals, but will also be important in visual uniformity. This method of holding the horn will seem awkward at first, but as with anything will become easier with practice.

## Instrument Carriage Checklist

- ✓ Your instruments should not be held with any kind of force or tension; your hands are only used as a platform for your instruments to rest upon
- ✓ Relaxation must always be maintained in the fingers, hands, arms, shoulders and back or unnecessary tension will occur
- ✓ All instruments will be held by the fingertips, not gripped in the palms
- ✓ Proper breathing must always be maintained while holding the instruments
- ✓ All bell-front brass instruments will hold their horns 10° above parallel

## **THE SET POSITION**

Verbal command: *set*

- The set position is used to precede the full playing position
- Posture remains consistent
  - Strong Five Points of Alignment
  - Appropriate weight distribution on the platforms of the feet
- The distance of the instrument from the body varies slightly from one instrument to another
  - A general starting point of reference could be described as one or two fists, depending on instrument, from the chest to the closest point on this instrument
  - In all cases, one should avoid over-extending the arms in a manner that causes the angle of the elbows to be obscured from view from the front
  - Generally, the angle formed between the biceps and the forearm will be roughly 90°

## THE PLAYING POSITION

To get to playing position from a four-count tap-off:

- Start in set position
- Tap-off will come from metronome or center snare
- Verbalize counts 1 and 2 and *up* on count 3

To get to playing position from a silent count-off:

- Start in set position
- The conductor will conduct two measures of 4/4 in performance tempo
  - Measure 1: verbalize large beats 1 and 3
  - Measure 2: verbalize *up* on count 1

### Instrument-Specific Playing Position

- Piccolo
  - The instrument should be parallel to the ground
  - Clarinet  
The instrument should be perpendicular to the ground when viewed from the front and should be about 30° from the body
- Saxophone
  - Focus on making sure the mouthpiece is at the appropriate playing angle within their embouchure
  - It is very important that the chin is level
  - The resulting view from the side will be an overall perceived angle of the instrument, which is slightly closer to the body at the bell than at the top of the instrument
  - In all cases the instrument should be perpendicular to the ground when viewed from the front
- Bell-front instruments (except sousaphone)
  - The instrument should be 10° above parallel
  - Valve casings for trumpets, horns, and baritones should be perpendicular to the ground
  - Right-hand pinky fingers rest on top of the pinky ring for trumpets and horns
  - The wrists should be flat, which in turn enables the elbows to be 45° from the instrument
- Sousaphone
  - The instrument will not change their position from the Carry Position to Horns Up, but they must maintain correct posture and hand position

Once in playing position, the performer may make minor adjustments to the finger positions and/or embouchure. However, these adjustments must take place as fast as the horns up motion and must be as minute as possible.



# MODIFIED CORPS-STYLE TECHNIQUES

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Blazin' Brigade marches a modified corps-style technique that draws on many schools of thought in order to create the most efficient and visually appealing movement possible.

## Catchphrases for the Modified Straight Leg Technique

- ✓ Pendulum motion from the hip
- ✓ The Claw! (activate muscles of the right leg and core)
- ✓ Push forward, not up
- ✓ Pushing leg stays straight
- ✓ Back corner of the heel
- ✓ Legato motion
- ✓ Upper body moves as one with the lower body
- ✓ Get your heel to the ground as soon as possible (while staying in time)
- ✓ Relaxed straight leg (soft knee with full leg extension; no locked knees!)

## Common Issues in Modified Straight Leg Technique

- Step two is small and slow
  - Cause: it is traveling twice the distance
  - Correction: push off with the left foot without reaching for step two

## **MARK TIME**

Although the modern marching band rarely marks time in a performance venue, it is an important fundamental of pulse and body control that must be mastered. Blazin' Brigade utilizes mark time as a music rehearsal technique.

Some key points must be understood in order to perform the mark time effectively:

- All motion must be smooth
- The heel height should rise to approximately one inch off the ground
- On the downbeat both heels should be on the ground
  - Then the heel is immediately lifted so it is at its highest point on the upbeat
  - The platform remains firmly on the ground
  - Motion should remain constant and smooth at all times
  - An absence of motion should never occur
- The upper body should remain completely still
  - Core activation is a necessary component to upper body control
- The hips should not break when performing mark time correctly

## Common Issues in Mark Time

- Heel height is too high
  - Cause: the student does not accurately perceive distance in movement of their body
  - Correction: encourage student to move less, video and show the student, relax and focus more on continuous motion instead of execution mechanics of the motion
- Hips break
  - Cause: the student does not accurately perceive separation of the Five Points of Alignment in the context of their body
  - Correction: provide a tactile way for the student to feel hip motion without touching them

## **FORWARD MARCH**

This updated version of the forward technique is basically walking with definition. All motion, no matter the exercise, begins with the center of body. Pushing off with the platform of the right foot will create the necessary momentum for each exercise. The motion of the legs should be executed from the hip, much like the way a pendulum moves. The feet should always move in a straight line from where they begin. Do not allow one foot to cross the “line” of another. This can create safety situations at extended step sizes and accelerated tempos.

When teaching, we use the following vocalization of the quarter note subdivision: 5 - 6 - 7 - *press* - 1 - 2 - 3 - 4

- The muscles of the right leg should activate (“press”) and prepare for motion on count eight
  - Initiation of forward motion begins on count eight
  - This should be led by the center of the body with the momentum created by pushing from the platform of the right foot
- The heel of the left foot makes contact with the ground on count one
  - Instead of addressing “toe height,” focus on the angle of the foot as it relates to the leg
  - It should remain at a 90° angle to the leg (as in the standing position)
  - This will lower the toe height significantly, but will relieve unnecessary tension on the back of the leg, allow for a smoother heel-ball-toe roll step, and offer definition to an often-ambiguous concept
- A complete breakdown of the rest of the sequence (we do not teach this directly):
  - Release of the right foot occurs on the “e” of one once the foot rolls from the corner of the heel to start of the platform
  - The legs will again pass on the “&” of count one
    - The pass position should look as if the band member is standing still
    - The entire foot should be equidistant and as close to the ground as possible without it touching

- The knee is slightly bent, but again from a distance it should appear as if the leg is straight
    - Focus on the foot placement and the knee will take care of itself
  - Forward motion continues on the “a” of one
- The heel of the right foot makes contact on the next beat
  - Focus on the angle of the foot as it relates to the leg
- Continue the process

### Common Problems that Affect Uniformity

- Improper body carriage
  - Cause: the core is not engaged to encourage proper posture
  - Correction: review the Five Points of Alignment, elevate the rib cage, and separate the lower half of the body (athlete) from the upper half of the body (musician)
- Leaning into and out of the step off
  - Cause: not leading motion from the center of body or by improper weight displacement on the foot
  - Correction: engage the core and move the body as one unit, evenly distribute weight on both platforms with proper Five Points of Alignment, avoid anticipating the movement
- Knee bend on the first step
  - Cause: improper body awareness
  - Correction: focus should be placed on initiating motion from the hip
- Upper body not centered over the lower body on the move
  - Cause: not initiating and leading motion from the center of the body
  - Correction: engage the core and move the body as one unit, evenly distribute weight on both platforms with proper Five Points of Alignment, avoid anticipating the movement
- Extreme upper body motion while on the move, often leading to poor playing
  - Cause: not separating the hips, not rolling from the back corner of the heel all the way through the platform, or lifting the foot too high off the ground and slamming the heel on the ground
  - Correction: review the Five Points of Alignment, elevate the rib cage, and separate the lower half of the body (athlete) from the upper half of the body (musician), encourage smooth motion
- Timing tendencies
  - Cause: the first step is fast while the second step is slow, often due to lack of internal subdivision or incorrect body posture, improper body awareness
  - Correction: review the Five Points of Alignment, elevate the rib cage, and separate the lower half of the body (athlete) from the upper half of the body (musician), encourage smooth motion, focus should be placed on initiating motion from the hip

## **BACK MARCH**

Our back march technique carries the same basic concept as the forward technique. All motion, no matter the technique (forward, back, slide, obliques, etc.), begins with the center of the body. Pushing off with the platform of the right foot will create the necessary momentum for each exercise. The motion of the legs should always be executed from the hip, much like the way a pendulum moves. The feet should always move in a straight line from where they begin. Do not allow one foot to cross the “line” of another. This can create safety situations at the extended step sizes and accelerated tempos.

*Above all else land on the platform of the foot when marching backwards. **Not the toes or the ball of the foot.*** This is important as lifting onto the toes or ball of the foot is more likely to cause injury.

Remember: step size is not important in the early stages of the learning process. Focus should be on technique.

- Motion should be led by the center of the body with the momentum created by pushing from the platform of the right foot, using the relevé technique
- The legs should be straight on the downbeat with a slight break in the knee on the off-counts
- Remember to focus on the placement of the foot and not the amount of knee bend
- The feet do not drag along the ground during transition

When teaching, we use the following vocalization of the quarter note subdivision: 5 - 6 - 7 - *press* - 1 - 2 - 3 - 4

- The muscles of the right leg should activate (“press”) and prepare for motion on count eight
- Initiation of back motion begins on count eight
  - This should be led by the center of the body with the momentum created by pushing from the platform of the right foot
- The platform of the left foot makes contact with the ground on count one

## Common Problems that Affect Uniformity

Many of the same problems that occur with forward march will occur in back march. We must continue to focus on those problems in order to appear uniform while moving as well as to be able to play at the highest possible performance standard.

- Too high or uneven relevé
  - Cause: performers relevé too high so little or no body control exists
  - Correction: only relevé to the platform and no higher, both heels equidistant off the ground
- Leaning into and out of the step off
  - Cause: not leading motion from the center of body or by improper weight displacement on the foot
  - Correction: engage the core and move the body as one unit, evenly distribute weight on both platforms with proper Five Points of Alignment, avoid anticipating the movement
- Knee bend on the first step
  - Cause: improper body awareness
  - Correction: focus should be placed on initiating motion from the hip
- Upper body not centered over the lower body on the move
  - Cause: not initiating and leading motion from the center of the body
  - Correction: engage the core and move the body as one unit, evenly distribute weight on both platforms with proper Five Points of Alignment, avoid anticipating the movement
- Extreme upper body motion while on the move, often leading to poor playing
  - Cause: not separating the hips, not rolling from the back corner of the heel all the way through the platform, or lifting the foot too high off the ground and slamming the heel on the ground
  - Correction: review the Five Points of Alignment, elevate the rib cage, and separate the lower half of the body (athlete) from the upper half of the body (musician), encourage smooth motion
- Timing tendencies
  - Cause: the first step is fast while the second step is slow, often due to lack of internal subdivision or incorrect body posture, improper body awareness
  - Correction: review the Five Points of Alignment, elevate the rib cage, and separate the lower half of the body (athlete) from the upper half of the body (musician), encourage smooth motion, focus should be placed on initiating motion from the hip

## **OBLIQUES AND SLIDES**

99% of all motion will be executed utilizing some version of the slide position. No tension must be present.

- Turn the body from the lower abdomen up
  - Focus on the abdomen and sternum facing the direction of the slide to ensure appropriate technique and the least amount of tension
  - The hips should divide the angle the upper body is executing
- Shoulders should be down and round
- Open chest area at all times
- Upper body posture should remain the same no matter the position

### **Common Problems that Affect Uniformity**

- Tension creeping into the shoulders and chest area
- Not fully rotated in either direction
- The chest area begins to collapse

## **CLOSING**

Any forward, backward, or oblique motion transitions with either a change in direction or a halt. In the case of a halt:

- Right platform makes contact with the ground on the second to last count
  - Verbalized by *touch*
- Instead of continuing motion, the left foot will close to the right foot
  - Verbalized by *close*
- Both feet will be together, parallel to yard lines and perpendicular to sidelines

# PREGAME VISUAL STANDARDS

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## **HIGH MARK TIME SEVEN**

The High Mark Time Seven is a stationary move at half tempo with each leg up at a 90° angle. They take place during the introduction of the fight-song to initiate the Blaze Step. Being in time is essential for the execution of this technique.

- Performers will hear three counts from the bass drum, press with the right platform on the *and* of 3 and kick the left table at a 90° angle on count 4
- On count 1 of the sequence, performers will land the left foot on the ball of the foot and roll down to the platform and the right table top will kick on the *and* of 1
- Repeat this sequence until the *and* of 6 where the left table top will be up up at a 90° angle

## **LOCK-2-3-KICK**

The Lock-2-3-Kick is the transition between the high mark time seven and blaze step. It prepares the appropriate tempo to the Fight Song and has to be as defined and precise as possible.

- Lock: the left heel is down as the right knee jolts out with the right heel off the ground for a hard mark time
- 2: hard mark time, left knee out, right heel down
- 3: high mark time, left heel down, right knee out
- *and*: purely for subdivision purposes only; no physical movement
- Kick: left table top at a 90° angle, right platform planted on the ground

Note: to execute this technique effectively, students must perform and verbalize from the left table top. The teacher counts “5&6&” and students verbalize and perform “Lock-2-3-&-Kick.” Give the count off in half time (i.e., “five-and-six-and-lock-two-three-and-kick”). The most important thing is to focus on the lock sequence as a transition from half tempo to full tempo.

## **BLAZE STEP**

Blaze step is a modified high step at a 45° angle. Focus should be the toes flexed down toward the ground, taking a true 22 ½” step forward, quality air support and posture to ensure characteristic instrument sounds. Toes should be low to the ground.

- On count 1, the left thigh is lifted parallel to the ground
  - The thigh and lower leg should form a 90° angle
  - The toe should be pointed down as much as possible
  - Make sure the leg is brought up directly in front of the body
  - Every step after the first kick should form a 45° angle from thigh to lower leg

- The feet return to the ground with the ball of the feet hitting first, followed by the platform, on their respective beats
- Keep the weight on the platform

**Wait longer, move faster!**

### **BLAZE STEP CLOSE**

The close of the Blaze Step is essentially the halt, which concludes the forward march sequence of the Blaze Step.

- On the eighth step, the right platform will land at a 22.5° angle outward
- The left tabletop is parallel to the ground creating a 90° angle from the thigh to the lower leg
- On the closing count, the left platform lands at a 22.5° angle outward to create a 45° angle between the two feet

### **BLAZE STEP FLANKS**

Flanks are used to change directions during pre-game. They can be done to the left, right, and to the rear. Flanks will always be at 90° angle with the tabletop and occur on even number counts (with a slight freeze prior to the next count). To execute flanks properly special attention must be paid to lifting the rib cage away from the hips and maintaining a firm core.

***Special care must be taken when teaching and executing flanks as this is the most likely scenario where someone will twist an ankle or incur another injury.***

#### **Left Flanks**

- The right platform lands with the arc of the foot over the “dot”
- The left tabletop faces the new direction along with the upper body and the right platform will pivot in the new direction at the same time
- This will be the most achievable of the flank techniques

#### **Right Flanks**

- The right platform lands at a 45° angle to the right (this serves as a prep step) with the arch of the foot still hovered over the “dot”
- The left tabletop faces the new direction along with the upper body and the right platform will pivot in the new direction at the same time



### To the Rear Flanks

- All to the rear flanks will be to the left whether stationary or on the move
- The right platform lands at a 45° angle to the left (this serves as a prep step) with the arch of the foot still hovered over the “dot”
- The left tabletop faces the new direction along with the upper body and the right platform will pivot in the new direction at the same time
- This will be the most challenging of the flank techniques

### **RUN-ON**

The Run-On is an energetic and fast-paced version of the blaze step used to get on field for pregame and halftime. Similar to the downfield technique, you will lift your left at a 45° angle while entering the field. Focus should be on the toes being flexed downward toward the ground and taking a true 22 ½” step forward. On the prep step (left leg), you will go to a full 90° angle to prepare your body to propel forward onto the field.

- Maintain upper body control with an engaged core and lifted chest area
- Engage the core early to provide a solid foundation for run-on
- Focus on technique and staying in line

# REHEARSAL TECHNIQUES AND EXPECTATIONS

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## **HOW TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN REHEARSAL**

- Arrive early, prepared, and with a mindset to grow as a musician, performer, and person
- Be familiar with the rehearsal schedule and any other information distributed in the weekly email
- When completing a maneuver, stay at playing position without talking until given further instructions
  - Use this opportunity to look side-to-side and adjust your final position
- When returning to a set, get there quickly and go to set position
- When your section is called, raise your hand and look in the direction of the person giving instructions

## **STEP OUTS**

Blazin' Brigade utilizes the step out as a means of practicing and initiating momentum. Our version of the step-out helps to reinforce the initiation of our forward and backwards march technique. When marching, you will find that nearly all timing and technique problems that are related to the music or drill occur within the first two counts of a phrase or drill move. As an effort to tackle this problem, step-outs were created.

- Take a step out forward at the beginning of a musical phrase or during what would have been a drill move
- You will take one step with the left foot, and then bring your right foot to the left on the second count
- On the next two counts (counts 3 and 4) you will go back to your original placement and continue to mark time until the next halt