

Blessed Sacrament Commemorates 50th Anniversary of First National Championships

by Gary Dickelman and Tim O'Brien

On August 7, 2004 an amazing number of original members of the 1954 Blessed Sacrament Golden Knights converged on Union, New Jersey, to commemorate the **'54 Gold Rush**, the 50th anniversary of the dual national championships won by the corps that year. Amazing, because the number represented almost 50% of the members who marched in 1954. Also amazing is the fact that both nationals were won just 26 months after the corps entered field competition – a feat that has not been duplicated in drum corps history, even by contemporary DCI standards. The “Golden Knights” –a nickname of the Blessed Sacrament Cadets – faced formidable odds in St. Vincent’s of Bayonne, Audubon Bon-Bons, Holy Name Cadets (The Cadets), St. Joseph’s of Newark, Most Precious Blood (Boston) Crusaders, the Madison Scouts, Little Flower of Baltimore, and more. In many ways, it was a remarkable season, filled with surprises that earned the short-lived name, the “Cinderella” corps.

Present for the event were not just the surviving corps members, but the Blessed Sacrament Golden Knights alumni corps, which put on an exhibition for the veterans. Drum major Art Farrell invited all former drum majors, including Jack Stecker, Bob Yuknovage, Bob Paul and Al LaRocca to conduct the corps’ signature “National Emblem March.” Also in attendance was the original bugle and drill instructor of the era, Bill Hayes, who delivered personal remarks about the corps. The widow of Bobby Thompson, the famed “gentle giant” of drum corps percussion, was also present. Most of the members had been neighborhood school kids from Clinton Hill in the south ward of Newark, NJ, surrounding Blessed Sacrament church and school.

There were about 50,000 people jammed into Philadelphia’s Municipal Stadium on August 4, 1954 for the VFW Nationals. The Midwest-dominant Madison Scouts were favored, while others put their money on Most Precious Blood Crusaders who had dominated the Massachusetts scene. There was also St. Vincent’s of Bayonne, having won the past four VFW titles. Liberty Bell and the West Reading Police Cadets were the Philadelphia favorites. But almost nobody thought that Blessed Sacrament would win. Indeed, they had done battle with Holy Name, St. Vinnie’s and St. Joe’s of Newark, but had lost most contests up to this point. In fact, BSGK had a single win to its name for 1954 leading to the Nationals. Further, the corps had only been in competition for 25 months and had won only four contests to-date. When the finals scores were announced that evening, BSGK had won with an 88.70, in front of the Madison Scouts (87.4), Most Precious Blood Crusaders (86.9), and St. Vincent’s of Bayonne (86.7).

Following Philadelphia, BS won its next contest, but over Pennsylvania corps. None of the NJ or Midwest powerhouses were present. They beat St. Joe’s on August 14th, but at Holy Name’s show, where Holy Name did not compete. On August 21st BSGK beat Holy Name, but was clobbered by St. Joe’s. So when the bus pulled away from Van Ness Place on Saturday, August 28th for the American Legion (AL) Nationals in Washington, DC, BSGK remained the underdogs. They had never defeated all of the top corps on a

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single night. Going into the AL contest, BSGK has lost to Holy Name 11 of 14 times; had a losing record against St. Joe's; had won just 4 of 18 contests; and were facing tough competitors, like Little Flower of Baltimore, the Racine Kilties, the Chicago Grenadiers, and the upstart Chicago Cavaliers.

The statistics in drumming, bugling and marching did not favor the Golden Knights as they headed for DC. And most notably, many members of the corps were just 11 or 12 years old, with the average age of the corps a mere 16. But Blessed Sacrament did not flinch. When they arrived in Georgetown for practice, all three fields were occupied by competitors. BSGK fought mosquitoes and diminishing daylight to complete their rehearsal. And after being hustled to the field for competition, an error had them two hours early. They could only mill around in anticipation of the show. But in the end, BSGK was the only corps to break a 90 and win the show. They scored 90.45 in the finals, followed by Holy Name (88.85), St. Joseph's (86.4) and St. Vincent's of Bayonne (84.13).

True to a tradition that endured through the competitive years –and still alive today – is a spirit that believed, trusted and endured a losing season of just 8 wins out of 27 shows. But the spirit grew, practice by practice and contest by contest, in discipline, perseverance, balls, attitude, camaraderie, a naïve optimism and courage. For in the AL Nationals the corps came through with a 17.8 in drumming, crushing Holy Name by 1.5 points. The horn line tied St. Joe's, beating Holy Name by 0.7. They advanced in marching to second position, within 0.2 of Holy Name. The corps was third in GE, behind Vinnie's and the Kilties. The winning score of the Blessed Sacrament Golden Knights was 90.45, a full 1.6 points over the 5-time, defending Legion champion Holy Name Cadets.

Blessed Sacrament was only the second corps ever to win both nationals in the same year. What followed is now legend. Until their final junior corps season in 1972, the corps won 9 nationals, 19 NJ state championships, 11 National Dream championships of 14 appearances, and the first World Open in 1963. The corps placed first or second in 82% of all contests ever entered, placed in the top five in 19 of 21 nationals, and from 1958 – 1963 BS placed first in 112 of 135 contests. Blessed Sacrament is one of only two corps to be recognized for winning more than 100 contests that comprise over 50% of all entered (the other is the Blue Devils). In 1965 the Golden Knights were inducted into the Drum Corps Hall of Fame.

This amazing record had its foundation laid in 1954 by a group of young city kids in billowing blouses who blew away all the corps in those snappy jackets, in the *Gold Rush of '54*. The members, family and friends who gathered on August 7, 2004, expressed gratitude for the Blessed Sacrament church and school, their parents, support staff, priests – most notably the late Father (Bishop) Robert F. Garner – and to God and country. And hearty thanks were expressed to the members of the 1954 Golden Knights for having the courage to never once doubt that they could become national champions.