

# 10 Tips to Help You Prepare for Playing in a Grade 1 Pipe Band (or any band for that matter!)

by Kevin McLean September 16, 2017

I can think back to before I had played in a grade 1 band and getting to that Grade 1 Arena at the Worlds seemed like a mountain too tall to climb. What would it take to get the attention of the Pipe Major of the band I was aspiring to be in and have them give me the nod to have a shot with the band, and even more, get a chance to play in a contest, let alone the worlds? I'm hoping to pass on some of the tips I learned along the way to help you get into any band you want.

When I joined SFU in 2011 I was extremely fortunate that a spot opened up for me at the right time, I was an 'in town' player and I had some excellent help from veteran players to help me bridge the gap. I was also fortunate to play both circles in the 'finals' with SFU in my first year (check out the photo for proof!) and have managed to do the same at each year since. Part of it is definitely due to favourable circumstances (a spot opening up at the right time in a band that sees some potential in you) but part of it is also in your 'circle of control' as they call it. I hope I can help point out a few wee tips to help you make that leap to the top level

So let's get started:

## 1) There's No Excuse for Poor Maintenance

Before we get into some of the less obvious points, let's start with the simple. Adequate maintenance is a skill you need to develop before you get anywhere near a grade 1 circle. The last thing you want is for the players around you to be having to put hemp on your drones – that's not a great way to leave a good impression on the pipe major.

Maintenance is a simple skill that any piper can be good at and really shows how hard-working, meticulous, and how much dedication you have for the instrument. Don't show up with slides too tight or too loose, make sure your bag is seasoned, and take care of the small things like making sure your drone cords are tied properly (and not tangled). Make sure you have drone reeds that are set up properly (not too open or closed), you have fresh tape on your chanter, and maybe

even give your pipes a wee polish before the first practice. Remember – first impressions mean a lot, so make sure you look the part. There's no excuse for poor maintenance.

## **2) Always Turn Up With a Good Sound**

Tuning is a skillset that takes time to develop but it will really pay off. Usually when a new player joins our band, the first thing that happens is they are given a new reed. Firstly, you want to make sure you have the confidence to tell whoever is giving out the reeds if it's not good enough. You need to know if it's thin on the top hand, too hard or too easy, and a whole host of other issues that come with new reeds. If it is good enough, you then have to be able to tune it. One of the things that has helped me the most is asking the P/M for the number at which he expects to set the Low A's (both out of the box, and once it has warmed up). If you know that, you can take the reed home and set it up (near close to) perfectly using any of the whole host of tuning apps and tools available. While most bands have a tuning individual or team to take care of the drones, it's still very helpful if you turn up with drones well-tuned. Again, it shows you mean business and you're a professional. Of course, there will always be the odd tweak, but if you can show up 'in the ballpark' then you'll be on your way.

## **3) Choose your 'spot' wisely and take advantage of it**

You want to show the people in your new band that you are serious about being there. They can't tell that if you are standing next to weaker players – they'll probably automatically blame you. Choose solid veteran players to stand next to (or better yet, the Pipe Major). This will help you adapt quickly (so you know the standard to which you have to meet) and will also help the band's leadership see how well you fit in. Along with this goes the obvious – make sure you are solid on the tunes and you aren't making mistakes. Avoid standing near other 'rookies' if you can and if you are given a spot and aren't happy, don't just let it be – speak to the P/M and ask to be moved and explain why! Remember, they want to see you succeed as much as anyone else and even if you can stand next to the P/M or in the 'front row' just until competition season starts, you'll pick up a lot of valuable skills from having those talented players around you.

## **4) Develop a Mental Toughness and Never Take Anything Personally**

This is a broad topic, but is probably one of the toughest to achieve. So many players are nervous and never meet their full potential. Be so confident with the music that you can overcome any nerves. If this is really an issue for you (as it is for so many) check out sports psychologists like Dr. Allen Goldberg (<https://www.facebook.com/DrGPeakPerformance/>) for some incredible tips. There's a whole host of online information about performance anxiety – take advantage of it so you can realize your potential!

Beyond the nerves, you need to be able to take criticism well and have the perseverance to keep improving, even if you get cut. Too often do great players allow their egos to get between them and success. Never take criticism personally – whoever is giving the criticism only wants the best for you and for the band. You have to be willing to adapt and change to match the playing styles of the band (more on that to come).

## **5) Be Able to Blow a Strong Bagpipe and Keep It Steady for Up to Two Hours**

This one is a bit of a given. Essentially, you need to have the strength to play a decent-strength reed (so that you're actually adding to the quality of sound) and the stamina to hold the tone through a 7-minute medley at the end of a two-hour band practice. You can practice that – make sure you do this at home before you go to a band practice. Hook yourself up to a tuning app and make sure you can still blow quality tone and not let the sound dip in the slow air, even after two hours of playing. Nobody said this was going to be easy... and there's no shortcut to solid blowing. Have your teacher sit down and show you how to blow steady and ask them to make they correct you whenever you let the tone dip.

## **6) Build A Name for Yourself**

This one is more to help you get that initial invitation into the band, but also to keep your stock in the band healthy. Rack up the grade 1 or professional solo prizes in the local games and build your resume by playing in decent lower-grade bands. Make sure you have a respectable teacher

that will help push you to the next level. If you hope to be an out-of-towner, this point is even more important. As an out-of-towner, you are competing against so many people so you really *need to want them want you*.

## 7) Be Able to Blend

Blending in is really the name of the game when it comes to grade 1. You want the area around you to sound like one piper. Listening and adapting to those around you is a huge skill to master. When we do solos, individual expression is encouraged. But most top grade 1 bands have their own expression that doesn't exactly align with your own style. Learning what that new style is and adapting to match it is key to success.

The other aspect of blending is making sure you can blow tone and be well tuned at all times. If you turn up and your chanter is too sharp or flat overall, or if one note is off, or if there's a trend (i.e. the top hand is sharp and the bottom hand is flat) then you need to be able to recognize and fix it (or bring it to someone's attention who will fix it). If it is well tuned, you need to be able to blow it well – as soon as you hear a change in your tone, you need to bring your blowing back to perfect.

With that said, don't ever be the person that spends half of the band practice alone trying to get their chanter set up – do that at home. And if it's still not right at practice, tell someone in a leadership position that your chanter needs a listen. They'll be happy to help.

One of the toughest things is making sure that if someone around you has poor tone or blowing, you need to make sure you don't change the good job you are doing. Be confident enough in your arm, in your ear, and in your own abilities to be aware when it is or isn't you that is causing the change. Remember, just because it's grade 1, doesn't mean everyone and everything will be perfect 100% of the time. Know when it's you that's dropping that percentage down and when it's not.

## 8) Get Your Hands Up To Speed

Along with ultra-steady blowing, one of the toughest aspects of jumping up to grade 1 is the increase in tempos. You need to make sure your hands are up to the challenge. Make sure you can handle playing with tempo at home and don't round off the corners in the tough parts of MSR's, make sure you don't fall behind in the jigs (or any tune for that matter), and make sure your hands can handle the technical rigors of the strathspeys. If your hands are sloppy at slower speeds, there's no chance they'll be ready for high tempos. Work on this on practice chanter and tell your teacher you want to work on this – you'll be playing your band tunes much faster than

your solo tunes so this might not be covered in a lot of solo lessons (which tend to generally be solo-centric).

## **9) Fit in Socially**

As Terry Lee told me when I joined SFU, grade 1 bands can be a “tough nut to crack”. Members have often been in the band for decades together and breaking into that circle can be difficult. Make sure you go to the pub after band, go to parties you are invited to, if you have Sunday morning band practice go for lunch afterwards. Make sure you talk to the people around you in the circle, even the drummers! If the people in your band like you, there’s a good chance they’ll want to keep you and help you succeed! Email the P/M with any questions you have – it shows you are keen to learn and improve. And once you are confident enough, take the initiative to invite your newfound friends to your own get-together. Anything you can do to fit in with your new band will go miles towards them wanting to keep you in the band.

## **10) Be a Keener**

I don’t mean be a geek. But be a keener. That means be the first player in the band to learn new tunes, offer to bring water to band, attend any and all practices, show up to band early, and just generally be willing to put yourself out there. It’s a fine line between doing this and getting annoying to the veterans in the band so don’t over-do it. But subtly asserting yourself into your new environment will tell those with the power that be that you want to be there and want to work hard to bring yourself up to that next level.