



The Dakota High School drumline poses with medals and a victory banner after winning the Michigan Alliance for the Performing Arts Percussion Scholastic A Championship at Eastern Michigan University on April 14. It is the program's second MAPA championship after winning last year's title. Photo provided by Kurt Reyes

Dakota drumline snags second state championship

By: Dean Vaglia | **Macomb Chronicle** | Published April 22, 2024

MACOMB TOWNSHIP — Another year, another historic victory for the Dakota High School drumline.

After grabbing the Michigan Alliance for the Performing Arts Percussion Scholastic A Championship for the first time in 2023, the team repeated the feat to claim 2024's Class A championship at Eastern Michigan University on April 14.

"It was a different experience than last year," Kurt Reyes, Dakota drumline director, said. "I'll never forget last year because that was our first one. Going into this year, my heart was still pounding. I'm sure everyone's heart was pounding out of their chest."

Coming off last year's victory and competing in the semifinals at the Winter Guard International World Championships, getting back to the top was not as simple as doing the same things over again. The administrative path for state finals qualification was the same — signing up and competing in two regular season tournaments gets a team invited to the championships — but a whole new roster of students meant success could not be taken for granted. Expectations were set by the 2023 team, and it was up to the 2024 squad to meet them.

"I felt pressured at first just to be able to put everything in," Jason Daniels, a 10th grade quads percussionist, said. "I didn't want to feel responsible — I wouldn't be, obviously — but I didn't want to feel responsible if we got second place or something. I would feel so bad about that, just going back down from state championship status to not state champions. And it's not really the whole important part of the activity, it's just to enjoy yourself and have fun with other people, but I really felt motivated to work towards getting state championships again just so we can build that record that we want to establish here."

Meeting the expectations of the 2023 team was a guiding motivation of many of the program's members, such as 11th grader Spencer Brong. Stepping up from playing the vibraphone to the marimba, Brong's goal of matching and surpassing last year's marimba players drove him to improve over the season.

"It was always kind of a back and forth," Brong said. "You never want to get too comfortable where you're at. We could just be like, 'Oh, we won state championships last year, it'll come again, we can just do it the same way, it will come the same way,' but everyone is upping their game. There's always another thing you can do."

Just as the students worked to improve their roles in the performance, the directorial staff worked to improve its end of the team.

"Me and the assistant director really spent a lot of time watching the national champions in our class and we were trying to figure out what is the formula to be successful in our class at the national level," Reyes said. "We took a lot of notes. We saw what kind of features they had, whether it was a visual feature or a music feature, how did they incorporate that into the show. We also refined our storytelling process, making sure the process of telling our story, right off the bat, people will get it."

Dakota percussionists took the top spot in events at Milford and Lakeland on the back of a routine highlighting the innate power of creativity.

"Our theme this year is called 'Within the Marble,' and pretty much it's based on anything you can think of is already in a marble block. It's a sculptor's job to free it," Reyes said. "You can think of anything that you want. It's already there, you just have to sculpt it."

The championships featured a repeat of last year's runners-up, Hudsonville High School, with Dakota winning with 85.98 points over Hudsonville's 84.75 points. But as dramatic as the onstage action can get, nothing could match the drama of watching the results get announced.

"I told Thomas (Wharton), our assistant percussion director, that I was feeling sick when they were announcing fifth place, like is that going to be us?" Reyes said. "And then they made a mistake. They announced third place and then they announced first place, so everyone was confused, and we were like, 'Did we get second or first?' And then the announcer corrected himself and said the second-place group."

Now with two titles in as many years, the future is wide open for the Dakota drumline. Reyes says the goal now is to make it into the Winter Guard International finals, an improvement over 2023's results, and to keep making finals on a regular basis.

"There's independent groups like Rhythm X or Pulse that know they're making finals," Reyes said. "I want us to be one of those groups. Once we're consistent on making finals, perhaps we move on up to the next class, which is Percussion Scholastic Open."

Even with judges urging the team to make the step up, Reyes has much to consider before declaring the team ready for Open Class.

"I've been in the activity for so long. I've been at Dakota for so long that I can kind of see where we're at," Reyes said. "Right now, we're making steady progress, which is good. I just want to make sure that we don't jump the gun into Open Class when we're not consistently making the A Class finals yet. Plus, it could be a hit to the morale of the kids if they go from being state champions to always getting last place."

Open to everyone from seniors to middle schoolers, the Dakota drumline has been a memorable part of its members' high school journeys. Nia Chua, a ninth-grade snare player, joined the program while in middle school after her brother was a member.

"Being in drumline has actually impacted my life a lot," Chua said. "When I was in seventh grade, being introduced and exposed to a high school environment taught me life skills that will help me along the way. I was very welcomed by the upperclassmen that season and it helped me get a good start to high school."

Coster Fairman, an outgoing senior marimba player, says his time in drumline has given him a lifelong interest in music.

"I think I want to be some sort of performing artist in some way," Fairman said. "I'm still on the fence about if I want to continue competitive drumline after high school — there's a lot of factors that go into that — but being a part of this group for so long has ingrained into me that whatever I do, I always want music to be a part of it somehow."