

The Marching Ravens Are His Life's Work. Now He Wants To Preserve The Band's Past And Ensure Its Future.

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John Ziemann shrugs off credit for keeping the band, one of two in the NFL, going. But he's also quietly pondering the best way to make sure it does not yield after he's gone.

The sun has long since dipped behind the trees that surround the Ravens' training facility in Owings Mills, but there's still work to do.

A cacophony emanates from the team's indoor practice field. Dozens of black-clad figures drill on the turf field as a hawkish supervisor patrols the sidelines. He stops and points at a group of disciples talking among themselves.

"C'mon, no messing around!" he barks.

He's not a football coach, and these are not players. He's John Ziemann, and these are Baltimore's Marching Ravens, preparing for their 77th season.

Ziemann watches as rows of musicians weave through precise patterns on the field, hauling their glistening instruments, all while performing a flawless rendition of "Celebration" by Kool & The Gang. It's a technical masterpiece, yet the band president, in his 62nd year with the group, looks on with a stern expression, always demanding more.

It's nothing short of a miracle the Marching Ravens still exist. Beginning as the Baltimore Colts Marching Band in 1947, they endured the departure of their franchise in 1984, continued performing for more than a decade, then played a critical role in bringing a new team to town in 1996.

Today, the band is about as famous as a marching band can be. The group's dramatic story inspired an ESPN "30 for 30" documentary by "Rain Man" director Barry Levinson, a Baltimore native. Hundreds audition each April to claim a coveted spot on the roughly 135-person squad. And Ziemann, a frequent guest speaker at colleges and universities, has become a legend for his heroics in keeping the group together.

"He's an institution," said Tory Nymick, entertainment marketing manager with the Ravens. "He's a celebrity on his own."

Ziemann, 77, helped bring football back to Baltimore. He turned the Marching Ravens from a band on the brink of collapse to a thriving operation. Like a Super Bowl champion in the twilight of his career, he has nothing left to prove. So why does he keep dedicating his weeknights for rehearsal, attending parades in the offseason and getting up on Sundays in the fall to lead his band along Ravens Walk into M&T Bank Stadium?

"It's been my life," he said. "Marching in, watching excitement that people see. That's my reward."

Just keep playing

Bob Irsay had had enough. After years of failed negotiations with city and state officials over the funding of a new stadium in Baltimore, the frustrated Colts owner took the easy way out. In the dead of night on March 28, 1984, Irsay had the team's stuff packed into Mayflower trucks and shipped off to Indianapolis, leaving Baltimore forever. It was equal parts cowardly and cruel, and four decades later, Irsay's name is still spoken with disgust within 100 miles of Charm City.

But as the trucks trudged west through the snow, they did so without a key bunch of equipment: the band uniforms. Those were at the dry cleaners.

Ziemann and his fellow band members eagerly sought to reclaim the uniforms before the Colts realized they were missing. So they secretly arranged a deal with the owner of the dry cleaner to rescue the uniforms. From there, they hid them in a cemetery before stowing them away in a band member's home. Somehow, "a bunch of band geeks" had outmaneuvered an NFL franchise.

The city mourned the loss of their beloved Colts, but the band, armed with uniforms and instruments, wasn't ready to stop the music. "People were calling us to join because they wanted to be in — not a protest — but they wanted to be in the part to bring a team back to Baltimore and people knew what we were doing and they loved what we were doing," Ziemann recalled.

The musicians just kept playing, performing at parades and NFL halftime shows — including in Indianapolis — as Ziemann funneled much of his own money into equipment, travel and other expenses. He did so with the unwavering support of his wife, Charlene, a majorette turned cheerleader turned flag line instructor.

"She let me do what a lot of wives would not," Ziemann acknowledged.

Then, there was hope. In 1987, state legislators debated the approval of funding for a new stadium in Maryland, a key step in bringing a team back to Baltimore. Gov. William Donald Schaefer recruited the band to play on the steps of the State House in Annapolis in an attempt to influence the lawmakers.

It worked, and the NFL slowly began viewing Baltimore as a prime location for another franchise. Nine years later, the city was on the other end of a controversial relocation, as Art Modell moved his Cleveland Browns east to become the Baltimore Ravens. The new inhabitants happily adopted Ziemann's crew, and the Baltimore Colts Marching Band became Baltimore's Marching Ravens.

The dramatic saga was immortalized in 2009's "The Band That Wouldn't Die," the ESPN "30 for 30" documentary, which is available to stream on ESPN+ and Disney+. Ziemann, the central character of the roughly 50-minute feature, said he hasn't watched it in years. But he doesn't hesitate to enlighten an uninitiated member on the band's history.

"John Ziemann made sure that every person that walks through that door knows what happened because he was here the night it happened," said Kimberly Smith, a percussion instructor in her ninth season with the band.

Now, the band is thriving. The Ravens organization, led by owner Steve Bisciotti, provides Ziemann with everything he could ask for, but the band president still toils as if the band remains on the verge of eradication. The Marching Ravens represent half of all marching bands in the NFL — their neighbors, the Washington Commanders, are the only other team that still employs one. So Ziemann is always on his toes, looking for ways to innovate and grow his successful operation.

Changing times

A lot has changed since 1984. From music selection to quality of work, the band that plays on Sundays at M&T Bank Stadium hardly resembles the one that once bore the Colts' name.

"The standards have come up quite a bit in the time I've been here and the sound reflects that," said Bryan Furth, who has been with the band since 1997. "We are a very different band than we were almost 30 years ago."

The first change was the group's makeup. When band director Dan Fake first joined 21 years ago, it was a transient troop, with members coming and going throughout the course of a season.

"Now we are much more consistent," Fake said. "Same folks, which allows us to be a little bit more robust in our drill design and push the band a little bit stronger musically and visually."

Ziemann also empowers his veterans to add their own flare to their sections. Dale Lawton, whose skills with the trombone have earned him the nickname "T-Bone," has taken full advantage of the freedom afforded to him. Years of experience in Morgan State's marching band shaped Lawton's "aggressive" playing style, which he's imparted on his section mates.

"What I come from, it's like power, in your face, aggression, we're here, you're gonna hear us and we gonna bring it to you, so that's what I like to try to bring to our organization," he explained, punctuating his points by slapping his fist into his palm. "It's something we can bring to literally change the dynamic of the music."

Just like the players on the field, the musicians have to buy in to the process. And just like head coach John Harbaugh, Ziemann must inspire his performers to be at their best. That sometimes means giving them some tough love.

"Forgive me, he really is just an old grandpa fart," Smith said. "He means nothing but love, but when it's business time, it's business time and we know that."

"He really just gives us that energy, like that dad energy that you really need to just get you to lock in sometimes," Lawton said. "But it's always loving, it's always helpful. It's a little stern sometimes but sometimes you need that little push to get you where you need to go."

That "dad energy" hasn't just helped the band improve its sound. It's also created a family.

A family band

When Furth first auditioned for the band, he was just 13 years old (currently, rules require members to be at least 18). Three of his four siblings have also been involved in the band at some point in their lives. Now married and living in Catonsville, Furth has no qualms about devoting his time — three-hour rehearsals each week, 12-hour marathons on game days — year after year.

"Honestly, I don't know what to do with that time if I'm not here," he said.

Furth's family found the band, but Katie Storey found her family in the band. Storey, who joined in 2008, met her husband, Rob, in the Marching Ravens. The couple now has two daughters together.

"It's like a family here," she said. "We support each other through band, through relationships, things outside the band. We talk all the time."

Every member, no matter how many years of experience they come with, must audition each year. But veterans such as Furth don't mind.

"It makes us get back and work on fundamentals and make sure you're not missing anything," he said, sounding eerily similar to a player on the Ravens' 53-man roster.

Band member must not only juggle playing music with walking in a straight line — an absurdly difficult task — but also juggle their careers with their demanding hobby. When he's not blowing into his trombone, Lawton works as a server at Phillips Seafood in the Inner Harbor. Mara Ahlquist, who lugs a sousaphone around on Sundays each fall, is a pharmacy technician.

Kelly Jentis plays five instruments: clarinet, trumpet, saxophone, bass drum and mellophone, which is "kinda like if the trumpet and the flugelhorn had a baby" (don't ask what a flugelhorn is). She dabbled in the marimba in high school. And she's a software engineer working on the Hubble Space Telescope.

To Jentis, the Marching Ravens were the perfect confluence of music and football, another of her passions.

"Band's cool," she said matter-of-factly. "There are so many different ensembles you can be in around Maryland but being able to be on the field, and when you're a part of the team, you're cheering for the team the fans love you and it just makes the experience 10 times better."

From every walk of life, and from as far away as Delaware and Pennsylvania, people flock to the Marching Ravens. They've become an indispensable outlet for local musicians, especially recent college graduates looking for the camaraderie that comes with a marching band.

"The alumni of these schools, after they get out they have no place to go," Ziemann said. "After they've graduated they need a place to go and continue their music operation and they come to us. We're the best deal in the land."

And the band members appreciate the importance of having a leader as zealous as Ziemann.

"For everyone in this band, they've been a part of some organization that they've had someone in that role that has been super intense with that role or with the passion of marching band," said Kimberly Smith. "So I know that, if not every marching band, hopefully most of them have someone like John Ziemann. I hope they do."

For more than a decade, Ziemann just wanted an NFL team to call Baltimore home. Now, his band has become a second home to so many.

"They say there's no marching band after college and stuff like that," Lawton said. "Well, this is clearly proof that that's not true."

What's next

About a month ago, Ziemann decided it was time to do something with the mountains of band artifacts that filled up two storage lockers and space in his home. He could've sold them — "everybody needs money," he laughed. But after discussing it with his family, he decided to donate them to preserve the band's history for future generations. So he and his sons sifted through close to 7,000 photographs and countless pieces of memorabilia before sending them to the Maryland State Archives and the Ravens Historical Collection.

"My son, Chris, said, 'Dad, God, if something happens to you, what are we gonna do? We don't understand this. You know the history and heritage of each item,'" Ziemann said.

Ziemann carries more stories about the Colts, the Ravens and the band that united them than anyone else, because he lived it. Legendary Colts quarterback Johnny Unitas can be credited with kindling Ziemann's passion for football when, during his playing days, he took a visit to the hospital to see a pained band president recovering from a burst appendix. That sparked a friendship that lasted until Unitas died in 2002.

"He's a great mentor to me, a great friend, and you never forget who he was," Ziemann said of Unitas. "He was there many times for me and the band, and I hope I was the same way with him."

A living connection between Baltimore's past and present, Ziemann can't help but marvel at the journey that football and music has taken him on.

"It's not a day that I don't walk into that Ravens complex in Owings Mills or on game day when we approach that stadium and I look at it," he said. "And my thoughts go back to old Memorial Stadium."

These are the kind of firsthand accounts that will disappear when Ziemann's time with the Ravens eventually ends. But he's not thinking about that just yet.

"As long as my health continues and it [the band] doesn't interfere with my family, I can still be a major, major, major promotion for the Baltimore Ravens in a positive way," Ziemann said. "I'm gonna stay, as long as long as the Ravens front office still wants me."

"No matter when — and if — I go or when I go for any reason, the band will carry on because everything's in place."

The Marching Ravens wouldn't exist without John Ziemann. But even after all these years, he still won't take the credit. He's quick to diminish his own importance, to lift his band members up and to heap praise on others.

"Ziemann is not the band," he said firmly. "The band is the people."