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Mitch Henck: "UW Wrong to Leave Freshman Behind"

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The Badgers are going to the Holiday Bowl in San Diego without their freshmen. UW is not going without its football players, but the freshmen members of the band are not going.

Why? Good question.

UW Band Director Mike Leckrone is used to being told the budget for the band to go to bowl games is only so much. Until now, Leckrone was always given the chance to make up the difference.

This time that didn't happen. The band director since 1969, Leckrone found out in a general Athletic Department email Dec. 2 that only 225 band members and supervisors could make the trip. Expecting a bowl bid, Leckrone and the entire band had already been rehearsing as a whole unit for weeks. Their program for the bowl game is to be a tribute to Frank Sinatra, because the singer would have turned 100 this month.

The full band and staff is closer to 300.

"It isn't the money," Leckrone told me. "It was the travel arrangements."

He was told that if he wanted to bring everybody, he would have to make different travel arrangements for those beyond the 225 allowed on UW charter flights. In the past, UW would take the whole band, and Leckrone would reimburse them for the difference after raising money.

Leckrone was never told why the university changed its policy this year. He made the wrenching decision to tell the freshman they couldn't make the trip.

"I told the upperclassmen that I was leaving behind some marchers that are better than they are," Leckrone said. "We are dedicating our performance to the freshmen. I know they will be there in spirit."

As a beneficiary of school music, I can tell you I would not have the confidence to do a radio show or speak or perform in front of a live audience had it not been for my high school choir director, Richard Jaeger.

What Leckrone does for his students is immeasurable. The process of coming out of a youthful shell to face the world is not always easy. Leckrone has inspired thousands of UW Band members in his career, and they love him for it.

The UW Marching Band has a national reputation for excellence. Anyone who has ever watched a sold-out UW Spring Band Concert knows what I mean. National performing stars can't wait for Leckrone's invitation to be in that show.

As for the bowl game, the UW Band is being asked to perform at less than full strength even though a full band would not have cost the Athletic Department any more money. We don't ask UW coaches to go onto the field of battle without their full rosters.

The opposing band in the Holiday Bowl is Southern Cal. The great Herb Albert once played in the Trojan band. You can bet those who love the Wisconsin band wish this year's group could show Southern Cal and its fans why the Badger band is considered second to none.

Leckrone says he is talking to administrators to make sure this circumstance never happens again. If UW administrators want to maintain a tradition of excellence that is the UW Band, they will not let that happen.

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