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# Drum Major Paula Braiden

## *A force to be reckoned with*

*The Scottish Banner speaks to Paula Braiden, Senior Drum Major and founder of The Force.*



Paula leading the bands on parade.

***Paula Braiden is the founder and visionary of The Force, Display Team of Champion Drum Majors. Born and raised in Northern Ireland, Paula is one of the most distinguished Drum Majors and instructors in the World.***

**Paula, you have a family history in pipe bands and took an interest in Drum Majoring at a very young age. Can you tell us more and how growing up in your family paved the way for you to make a life in the pipe band movement?**

**PB:** My brother Darrell was a drummer and when my mother Eva and father William were young they were in a pipe band, so it was a very natural progression for us as a family to enter that kind of hobby. We were all very musical, so it was a guided way forward for us. When my brother became a drummer, he would head off for competitions and I would be left with my granny, who I got on with very well, and thought to myself there is something I must do to also get to these competitions. I always loved watching the Drum Majors and I wanted to give that a go. The Pipe Major at the time said I was very talented, and my arms were very flexible in the movements, so I got my very first Mace at aged seven. I used to parade up and down when the Drum Majors were doing their performances, even though I had no notion of what to

do, I pretended I did. The audience would have seen this wee kid that would have been so excited and enthusiastic about Drum Majoring. I then joined Alastair Patterson's Drum Major class and then later was taught by one of the top Drum Majors at that time in Alan McBride, who had approached my parents and told them I had great potential and offered to teach me on a one-to-one basis. I worked hard and people on the circuit began to know who I was at a very young age.

**For those that do not actually know, can you tell us what exactly the role of a Drum Major is?**

**PB:** The role of a Drum Major is essentially the person in command of the band, they would be in charge of marching discipline, giving commands such as where they march off and where the band goes. They will also often name the tunes a band will play. In a military Drum Major role, they are the highest rank in the band, other than the Pipe Major, and work like the conductor of the band. They will give their command and move their Mace

to the rhythm of the music, and even command the tempo of how the band plays the tune. Drum Majors really do play an important role, whilst they do not play an instrument, they do hold the rhythm to what is being played. So, the movement of the Mace is what ties the musicality of the performance. A Drum Major's movements are not to be looked at just from a visual and flamboyant perspective, they are there to keep the band musically correct and in time. A highly functioning Drum Major will be able to keep the band together, even though half of them is at the very back. For example, I am quite small, so my Mace must be high enough in the air for those at the back to see my movements, but I do have a loud voice so there is no fear that those at the back of the band don't hear that.

**Paula you have won multiple World Championship titles as well as Scottish, British, Irish and European titles. How has competing amongst some of the best in the world shaped your passion and is there a title you are most proud of?**

**PB:** Growing up I was taught by the best and had every best possible opportunity to succeed. For me starting at the age of seven through to my first World title at the age of fourteen, that was my steppingstone to making it. I was very young and around many top senior Drum Majors and could not wait to be that person.

**A Drum Major's movements are not to be looked at just to be flamboyant, they are there to keep the band musically correct.**

Because my first World title was at fourteen it was phenomenal for me, I then went on for two seasons undefeated in every championship and local contest and by the age of 18 I had a total of four World Championship titles. At that young age it was a lot of pressure, though I did not feel it at the time. The win that stands out the most for me was when I won the senior World title in 2012, prior to that for five years running I placed second at the World Championships (to a different winner every time). By then I was competing as an adult in a senior grade and all I wanted was a senior title. In 2012 I really dug deep and put in my best performance possible. Prior to that my last World title was 2001 so that eleven-year period was probably the toughest time in my career.



The precision of The Force.



So, the 2012 win was the most memorable for me because I remember how high I jumped and the tears coming, and though I tried to remain professional, the tears kept coming. When I collected my trophy even the officials were crying as they were all overwhelmed at the fact, I had finally done it. It really was the most triumphant I have ever felt with a win.

**Being a female Drum Major on the international circuit surely must break some glass ceilings. How important has it been for you to be recognised in quite a male dominated network and what are your hopes for young girls coming up in the pipe band movement around the world?**

**PB:** If I look back at the young girl I was, watching those senior Drum Majors there was probably only ever one female. So, my aim in my head was to be that one female as I grew up and be an example to future generations. For me being a female, it used to be predominately a male that has held the role, I am quite fortunate to have been so successful and the opportunity to lead massed pipes and drums. Leading a massed band onto a tattoo arena I really have to use my voice and you can hear the audiences surprise and cheers when they hear a female leading them. That inspires me more to hear that excitement, that a woman is leading the bands and the bands make me feel very welcome.

Over time I was invited to do an event in Switzerland and eventually a tour of Germany, at the time I did not understand the importance of being a woman in that position. I was so proud to lead the bands and that my younger self was doing what she had dreamed of. For me its about working hard, being patient and knowing what you want out of your passion. I am very passionate about what I do and everything I do I do to the highest of standard. For any young girl that wants to Drum Major competitively know that you have the talent and ability by putting in the hard work. It is now so accepted to be in that position and people get excited to see a female march out a huge band and give those commands, it really does get a huge amount of respect. Putting in that hard work can get you to a level where you are full of confidence to lead a band and perform in front of thousands of people. I have also taught several female champions who have gone on to win titles so there are definitely females coming up in the ranks behind me.



**You have been a Drum Major teacher for over 20 years and helped produce five World Champion Drum Majors. What is the average age of your students and how important is it for you to pass on your knowledge to others around the world?**

**PB:** I used to have my own teaching class called the PB Class of Drum Majors and taught from a beginner level right through to experienced level. My average age of pupils would of likely been around the fifteen to sixteen mark. The younger children would have come in at around seven, when they have the capacity to follow instructions and maintain that concentration. I have had adults and older people who want to explore it as they never had a chance earlier in life and may be looking to lead street parades or perform at band functions. I have had a seventy-year-old pupil so the ages can really differ. Predominately though I taught at a beginner level through to early twenties. To be the best competitor myself I always found that teaching was one of the best tools for me to stay at my best.

**You are now involved with The Force, a display team of champion Drum Majors. Can you tell us more?**

**PB:** The Force has been in the making for several years now and been operating at various international military tattoos and events around the World, such as Switzerland's Avenches Tattoo and Moscow's Spasskaya Tower Tattoo. However, it is only now that I have launched this talented group of champion Drum Majors as The Force. We are all



The next generation, Paula's children, Pippa and Finlay.

multiple championship title holders including World champions so whenever I offer mine and The Force's services to an event it is an elite team of World champions, I bring with me.

I produce and choreograph performances to any Tattoo/event theme which can be so synchronised you may think it is just one person. We build the structure of the performance around the event we attend and try and create something to give the audience a real spectacle. To see a standing ovation at the end of a performance is something I strive for every time. It could be choreography, production or even designing a flash mob style performance, which is a unique piece and involves multiple musical accompaniments as part of our choreographed performance, such as Pipers, Drummers, Guitarists, Vocalists, Flutists, Dancers etc. We try to create something very special and I get huge satisfaction seeing what was in my head all come together and enjoyed by thousands of people on the World stage. We have been involved with many collaborations over the years with various artists at music festivals to military tattoos, workshops or even working alongside some of the members from the Red Hot Chilli Pipers, we really do bring a wealth of experience, creativity and innovation to an event or Military Tattoo. The Force is a very unique offering to any event or Tattoo as there is nothing else quite like it on the international scene.

**And finally, the pipe band movement offers an incredible fraternity and comradery to those at any age. Can you tell us what you feel is so special about it and what message do you have for someone who may be considering joining a band?**

**PB:** It sounds really cliché, but it really is a global community and a place where everyone knows your name. I grew up in the pipe band world and it really is a big family that looks out and supports one another. For me, pipe band people have literally watched me grow up from the age of seven, now I am an RSPBA Drum Major adjudicator. People I thought were old when I was young, are actually old now, and have watched me through my career. Everyone looks out for one another, and the older ones become your uncles and your aunts. My best friends in life are the ones I have met as a Drum Major at



Paula aged 14, winning her first World Title.

the age of eight, so they have been with me now for thirty years. I have lifelong friends who are now family members because we met through the pipe bands, I met my husband Craig through the pipe bands as he is a piper. We are now instilling that onto our children, my son Finlay loves to pipe like his daddy and my daughter Pippa loves to Drum Major like her mummy. If we go to a pipe band event Finlay asks why we stop every two minutes to talk to people on the field and I have to explain this is what life is like in the pipe band world, everybody knows everyone and you meet lots of friends.

Being part of the pipe band scene has taught me self-belief, self-discipline and a passion for life and those fundamentals I feel are vital in being the best you can be as a person, not just a Drum Major.

**The Force is a champion Drum Major Display Team who perform at various international musical military tattoos and events around the world. For more details see: [www.theforce.events](http://www.theforce.events).**



The Drum Major team.