

# An Experience with Injury

BY JOHN ALLEN

Even at an early age, drumming was very physically challenging for me. My muscles seemed to be very tense at all times, because I believed that to obtain great sound quality I had to grip the sticks very tightly between my index finger and thumb with no space in between them, and I had to play with my wrists as much as possible, no matter what the tempo was.

When I went to college, I began to learn different types of strokes. The staccato stroke was a quick stroke that was used to play accent-to-tap patterns. A very quick and powerful staccato stroke was used for accents. You stopped the stick at resting position and played the tap notes or inner beats. Playing this type of stroke and stopping the stick created the uniformity so desired by drum lines.

The legato stroke was used for double beats and unaccented patterns, such as eighth or sixteenth notes. But as I got into drum corps the double beats became more of a cross between a staccato and a legato stroke. I always felt uncomfortable using this technique, but I thought I would learn it with maturity and practice.

In drum corps, great emphasis was put on the uniformity of our sticks—both in motion and in resting position. The right stick was over the second tension rod to the right. A straight line was made from the tip of the stick to the bend in the elbow. The stick was an extension of your arm, and there was no gap between the thumb and index finger. The left stick was just outside the second tension rod to the left, keeping a firm grip between the thumb and index finger. Both sticks were at least two fingers in height above the rim.

At slower tempos we played with the wrists, and when the tempo got faster, we played the “speedo” technique. This was used for ultra fast patterns using the arms and getting more on top of the sticks, and still playing through the drum.

Some days, my arms felt like they would fall off. But by pushing myself I

would get better and the pain would go away. Drummers in drum corps can be a very hard-core bunch, paying the closest attention to detail and playing with great intensity. However, the only things that should matter are the sound and feel, rather than how it looks (something we always say, and seldom practice).

Drumming should not be a painful experience—physically or mentally. Musicians need to understand the difference between pain and muscle soreness. Only the individual can make that determination. If you feel you have a problem, you must speak up or you may end up like me with an injury that remains unhealed.

As a side note: Many people blame my injury on the response of the Kevlar head, but I had hints of these problems before I ever played on one. Many things probably helped contribute to my injury, but technique was the underlying factor. Nine years after my surgery (five years of not playing at all, and trying new techniques) I still have problems, and I’m not marching or playing on a Kevlar head.

## MY STORY

As with most people, I tried to make the most of my last summer in drum corps. I wanted to play as much as I could. I was excited about how much better I could become during those three months of doing nothing but drumming. Not only did I want to play in a great drum line, but I wanted to become a better player individually.

When school let out for the summer, I headed directly for summer camp—days and weeks of marching and playing eight to twelve hours a day. I had been running, weight lifting, and drumming regularly so that I would be in shape for those grueling weeks of learning the show. Even after practicing long hours I would go off by myself to practice parts of the show and exercises that would improve my personal playing.

During the first three weeks of learning the show my playing really became stronger. I could play just about any-

thing I wanted. I had the endurance and dexterity to accomplish the goals I had set for myself that summer. I began feeling that it was going to be smooth sailing from there because it seemed to be getting easier to play—or so I thought.

## AN OBVIOUS WARNING

As with any turning point in your life, you remember specific things—good or bad. In my case it was something bad—the beginning of the end. During a sectional rehearsal we were playing a section of the show that had a lot of threes (RRR, LLL) and other stickings in groups of threes (i.e., RLL, RLL, and RLRLL). As we were playing it over and over, my right arm (particularly my forearm muscle) cramped so bad that it caused my wrist to bend downwards and lock. I couldn’t even pry the stick out of my hand. I forcefully moved my right wrist with my left hand to relieve the pain.

Of course, I had to stop playing. I stepped out of the drum line to massage my arm and stretch it out. After about two minutes the cramp and pain subsided and I went back to playing. Not much was said about it at the time. Everything seemed fine. I played for the next few days without any problem. I’m sure at this point there was a problem, but I didn’t know how to recognize that there was something wrong.

Another turning point I will never forget came right before we took a break for lunch. We began playing a very complicated paradiddle exercise with an unusual accent pattern. I noticed that when I played two right-handed notes after an accent, my stick would barely graze the drumhead. As I tried to squeeze or relax, it had no effect. It was as if I weren’t even playing those two notes—very scary, because I could play that exercise in my sleep. No one could tell what was happening in the ensemble, but you could hear it clearly if I played by myself.

As soon as we broke for lunch I tried playing that exercise by myself, only to confirm that it was indeed happening.

"Well, I shouldn't worry. I'm in great shape and this will probably fix itself by the time lunch is over," I thought. Yeah, right!

After lunch, we began doing something else and I almost forgot about it until we played any pattern with two right-handed notes following an accent, including any type of roll pattern with accents in various places. The problem had not fixed itself.

## DENIAL

I didn't know what to do. I really thought that it would eventually go away. Besides, who gets injured from playing drums? Soon I started having problems playing flam-drags and other flam patterns. My right arm felt like someone was holding it to try to keep me from playing. But it didn't affect my playing entirely, so I just kept going.

As we finished the summer camps and were getting ready to compete, I told the staff some of the problems I was having. I ended up going to see a doctor at an emergency room who told me he didn't find anything wrong. I reasoned, "Well, he's a doctor. So if he says nothing is wrong, then nothing is wrong."

I went back to playing. I assumed it was all in my head and that it would eventually work itself out. Well, it did work itself out—out to other areas of my playing. As the touring and competition progressed, so did my problems. It began affecting every aspect of my playing. It spread from accented paradiddle patterns to accented roll patterns to the point where I couldn't even play eight on a hand without my right hand buzzing the last eighth note.

It wasn't until the end of July that I realized that I had just better stop. My right hand felt like one giant cramp, as though I had been lifting a 200 lb. weight all day. But as soon as I stopped playing, the pain immediately went away and my arm felt relaxed. The ironic thing was is that it did not affect anything else. I could lift weights, do push-ups, write, etc. I just couldn't *drum*!

Needless to say, depression had consumed me. I couldn't make anyone understand the problem and no one could help. By the time Preview of Champions came I had decided there was no way I could finish the season. My playing had gotten so bad that anything I played sounded like a mistake. I could not con-

trol my sticks. I could not keep with the rest of the section. So I told the staff that I could no longer physically do this. I left the tour and went home.

## IN SEARCH OF A CURE

After I left the tour I had about two weeks before I started back to school. I saw a sports medicine doctor who told me I had what is commonly referred to as "tennis elbow" (lateral epicondylitis). Through repetition, I had overworked the muscle that attaches to the bony part of my elbow. The inflammation caused a compression on my radial tunnel, which is the nerve tunnel that runs through the elbow. Anyone with this condition finds it uncomfortable or painful to do such things as gripping, lifting, and carrying. In my case, I only felt this way when drumming.

The doctor had me do a series of movements to find what motion caused the problem. I did all of the tests without any pain or discomfort. The tests were designed for "normal" activities, not drumming. A few weeks later we did a test in which a needle was stuck in my arm and different intensities of electricity were sent through the needle to see how my arm would respond. My right arm did not respond as well as my left arm. This confirmed that I did have some compression on my radial tunnel. The doctor thought that, in time, this could heal on its own. Later, I had a cortisone shot to help alleviate the pain, but it was not helping.

Almost six months after I left the tour, I tried to play, but I felt that pain start to come back. It was not as prominent as before, but I knew that the pain would get worse if I pushed it any further. It was determined that surgery would probably be the best course of action for me to take. I went into surgery about eight months after being diagnosed with tennis elbow. The doctor scraped out gray, inflamed material around my elbow area.

When the cast came off six weeks later, I was in for a long recovery just to get the full use of my arm back for everyday use. It took two months to get a full range of motion. I had to practice squeezing a racquetball to strengthen my grip—a very painful exercise. The only problem I had with my recovery was that neither the doctor nor physical therapist could help me learn to play again. That

was left to me. I was basically rehabilitated to where I was before I had the surgery.

Summer came and I went home from school and slowly tried to drum again, but my right-hand grip was very weak. Things I already knew came back pretty easy, but repetition would slowly bring the pain back. I knew of no one who could help me learn to drum again. After six months, I abandoned the idea of drumming. There is no happy ending...yet.

## WHAT I LEARNED

I've read many articles about famous drummers who talk about having to wear gloves because of blisters on their hands or breaking fifty sticks during one show or breaking cymbals night after night. Intensity can look cool, but it can be damaging if we don't understand our bodies.

In an article by Steve Smith in the April '97 issue of *Modern Drummer* he says, "When you're using tension, something has to give. Hopefully, your arm will not break; the stick will break first, the cymbal will break first. But usually, YOUR BODY HAS ALREADY TAKEN QUITE A BEATING."

I should have known long before I injured my arm that I needed either to re-evaluate my "technique" or stop playing until I reevaluated it. People who play this type of technique, as I did, need to understand that their overall playing should not be done with brute force. The main objective of drumming should be maximum results with minimal effort.

Many drummers have learned such techniques and we need to be listening to them. Some drummers I recommend listening to about technique are Jim Chapin, Joe Morello, Steve Smith, Dave Weckl, Dom Famularo, and Freddie Gruber, just to name a few.

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