

The Tallahassee Today

NOVEMBER
2023





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The Soundtrack of FSU

Florida State's Marching Chiefs

By: Ada Rye

As a student, there's nothing that will envelop you in the Florida State University spirit like a football game. Surrounded by fellow students and other FSU fans, all dressed in garnet and gold (some more committed than others) and cheering for the team amongst tens of thousands of people. You aren't thinking about that assignment due tomorrow, or that paper you really should get started on, or even how you were cursing FSU for its horrendous parking yesterday. At a football game, none of that matters anymore. And the driving force of that spirit? It's FSU's very own Marching Chiefs. The magic of a football game starts with the Chiefs' pre-game show.

They carry that magic, that FSU's spirit, with them everywhere they go, whether it be at a football game, or a volleyball game, or even at their own practices (and they practice a lot). This organization is the very heartbeat behind this university, and it is high time that the student body recognized it.



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The Work

The Marching Chiefs have about four hundred and twenty members, and each and every one went through a grueling audition process to get there. Back in August, I auditioned alongside countless other people, and while I didn't earn a Chiefs position, I have the highest respect for the ones that did.

The audition process is a five-day process that begins in August. On the first day, music auditions are held. Students come armed with weeks of practicing scales and musical selections selected by Chiefs leadership, and music auditions are followed by four days of marching training. Starting at 7:30am, students work for hours under the Tallahassee sun to learn difficult marching maneuvers. After a lunch break, the students then work for another few hours on learning and perfecting new music, and then are back outside learning even more maneuvers until about 9pm. Speaking from personal experience, these four days were *exhausting*. It's physically and mentally challenging, and each day fewer people would show up. Those that quit had decided it was too much, and that all this work wasn't worth it.

And all of this work was just to become a Chief. The work doesn't stop once you have made it in.

The Marching Chiefs hold practice Monday-Friday, 4pm-6pm, in addition to a weekly sectional time allocated by the section leaders. If we do the math, that's about eleven to twelve hours of rehearsal during the week, not counting personal practice time and pep bands.

Game days for a Chief can be intense. Marina Whitsell, a flute player in the Marching Chiefs, shared the 2023 LSU vs. FSU away game day itinerary with me, and it was packed with rehearsals and performances.

"I was up for hotel breakfast at 6:00 am that day, and I didn't get back to my dorm and go to sleep until 6:00 am the next day," she told me. Even for home games, game days "include a schedule of continuity rehearsal, legacy walk, skull sessions, march over, pregame show, the actual four-hour game, and then post-game playing..." Whitsell said.

Keep in mind, every single Marching Chief is an FSU student, a fact that Dr. Plack, the director of Athletic Bands at FSU, is very proud of. A time commitment like the Chiefs is huge for a college student, and it can be very difficult to manage. When asked what the hardest thing about being a Chief is, Lora Thaxton, a second year Chief, says, "It takes a lot of time and energy. I'm very blessed I can balance everything...but the thing people struggle with most is the time commitment."



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“WE AREN'T JUST MARCHING CHIEFS, WE'RE 'MARCHING CHIEFS ALL THE DAMN TIME,' WHICH MEANS THE EFFORT WE PUT INTO OUR PLAYING, MARCHING, AND ATTENTION TO DETAIL TO BE THE 'WORLD RENOWNED MARCHING CHIEFS' NEEDS TO BE PRESENT ATDT [ALL THE DAMN TIME]. THE DIRECTORS REMIND US THAT OUR PUNCTUAL ATTENDANCE, WALL OF SOUND, AND FULL UNIFORMS NEED TO BE 'ATDT.'”

-MARINA WHITSELL

The Job

When I was talking to Chief members, one word kept coming up: service. “We really serve the college by being ambassadors to the college and we’re one of the largest organizations with that many ambassadors, you know?” Thaxton said when describing the Chiefs. Whitsell told me about how the Marching Chief directors remind the students that “we [the Chiefs] are there to provide a service to the university.”

In essence, the Marching Chiefs have taken on a purpose to support Florida State and the student body. Of course, there are other organizations that revolve around serving the community, but like Thaxton said, there is not one as large as the Chiefs. This group is built upon service, and this foundation can be traced back to the early Chief days in 1939, when a group of students played at intermural flag football games. (*History of the FSU Marching Chiefs*, Adamita).

When I asked Thaxton what she thought the purpose of the Chiefs was, she answered, “The purpose of the Marching Chiefs is to not only bring music to people, but we’re considered the soundtrack of athletics.” During the auditions, Dr. Plack said something similar. The band is there to hype up the crowd and encourage the athletes, and they create a very special atmosphere for the campus.

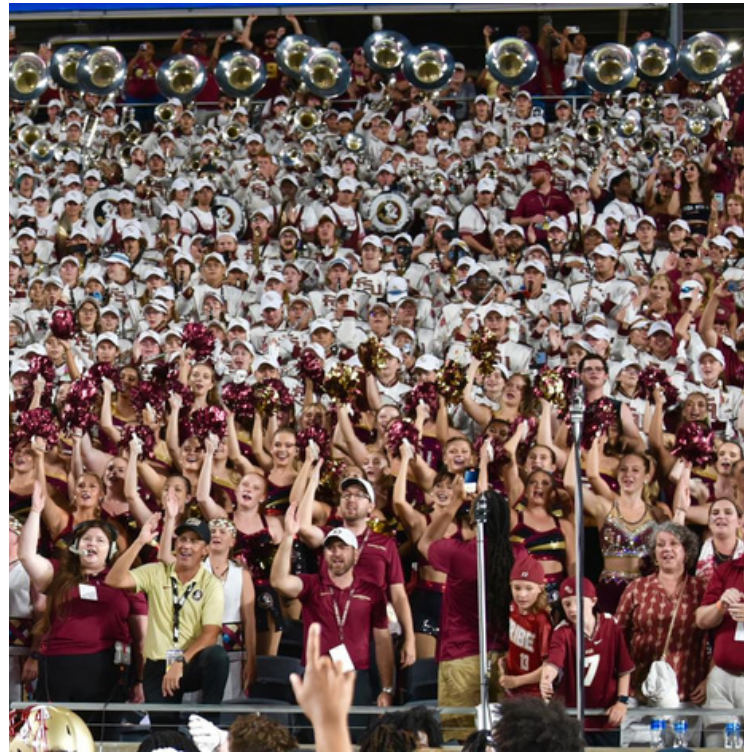


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The Community

While it's clear that Chief members truly enjoy serving FSU, they also really enjoy the time with each other. The community that the Chiefs have formed within themselves is another thing that consistently came up in my interviews.

"The Marching Chiefs is like a big family," Thaxton said when describing the band. "You meet everybody from every walk of life. And even though, like, 420 people—that's a lot of people— I'm not friends with everybody. But a lot of people look at me and see the things I do." It's important for Thaxton to be a part of something that she loves, and to be joined by hundreds of other people who love it as much as she does. Her favorite memory from being in the Chiefs is when they were asked to play for the Golden Girls last year as they were coming home. I thought it was significant that her most cherished Chief memory was supporting another FSU organization.

When I asked about how the rather intense schedule affects her social life, Whitsell said, "Almost all of my college friends come from Chiefs, and we end up doing things outside of Chiefs together as well." She also talked about how many people she gets to meet and play music with, and this community has some of her favorite people. "It's really nice having a niche to fit into," she told me. In a university this big, I'm sure it is! When I asked her favorite memory, she gave me a few, but ultimately said, "Running out of the tunnel for the first time with the Saturday lights and 79,000 people cheering for you is electrifying and has to be my favorite though."

"I CAN'T IMAGINE A LIFE WITHOUT THE MARCHING CHIEFS... EVEN THOUGH, LIKE RIGHT NOW YOU'VE HIT ME AT A SEMESTER WHERE I'M STRUGGLING...I WOULDN'T TRADE ANY OF THE THINGS THAT I'M DOING, ESPECIALLY THE MARCHING CHIEFS. MY ADVISORS...THEY'RE LIKE, I KNOW THAT, YOU'RE OVERWHELMED RIGHT NOW, BUT ALSO, YOU'VE KIND OF PUT THIS ON YOURSELF WITH THE MARCHING CHIEFS. AND I... EVERY TIME I LOOK AT THEM AND TELL THEM I WOULDN'T TRADE IT FOR THE WORLD."
-LORA THAXTON

The Marching Chiefs is an outstanding organization and is completely unique to Florida State University. The songs, the steps, everything is catered to the spirit of FSU, and pays homage to the history of the university, while supporting the student body into the future. It can be discouraging for the Chiefs, however, when they are not supported in the same way. It's very easy to write off the band, but they deserve to be recognized for their work and their dedication to the university. The performances they manage to put on despite being undermined and underfunded are incredible, and it's mind-boggling to imagine what they could do with the proper support. These students have given so much of their blood, sweat, and tears (literally, I'm sure) to serve the student body. We should be watching their performances and supporting them just as they support us, and this is the very least that they deserve from us, but it's a start.

Works Cited

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