

Presidential Address – Rick Casagrande
Victory Dinner, Brisbane Excelsior Band
7 May, 2005

Dr. Dan O'Donnell – Patron of Brisbane Excelsior Band, Distinguished guests, fellow band members, friends of Excelsior welcome one and all to Brisbane Excelsior's victory Dinner and hope that you are enjoying the evening so far.

We have titled this evening a victory dinner however since the idea was originally promulgated it has turned into an intention to have this function every year and hopefully those nights will also have something as significant as a National title to celebrate.

So why and where did this all start and what of our goals? Have we really accomplished what we set out to do? I could for historical reasons say it started back in 1912 but of course this is not the case.

The journey for us started when a decision, by the then 1994 committee and other senior members of the Excelsior organization, was made to annually contest the band at National level. It also coincided somewhat with the extra special work in stabilizing the Windsor School of Arts which was secured in 1992 but needed major TLC to make it habitable. For this the organization is indebted to the committee of the day.

The decision to contest at National Level came on the back of a period of weakness in Excelsior's musical life due to the Queensland banding scene generally lacking substance in both quality of music and the energy levels required to take banding to another level. Being "Just a community Brass Band" was no longer an excuse for below standard performances for the then committee back boned by Casey and Pam Schryver and Colin and Dulcie Topp. The committee took Excelsior's future into its own hands.

The Excelsior organization is capably led administratively with significant experience throughout the current committee, who are all committed to achieving the goals of the Excelsior organisation. Vice President Rodney Everitt an absolute stalwart, Our treasurer Brent Hoy who has shown the relevant toughness required of this position, the ever present Secretary Meg Fixter who certainly kept us abreast of our duties and weekly routines and ably getting us to and from contests relatively unscathed. Our ever faithful librarian and committee man Brad James always ready, willing and able and thinking ahead for all of us - Brad you truly inspire us all. To committee man and friend Alan Lonergan – Alan, a man who sacrificed his administrative banding ambition due to a high sense of morality, principals and standards that he sets himself on a daily basis and has committed himself thoroughly to band even with his long hours spent at work. To each of you I thank you.

The path to the top musically arguably started with the first musical director who insisted on subdivision being the most important factor in making music - Mr. Robert Quick. He was followed by the one and only Barry Gott who spills rhythm out of his pockets just walking down the street. Barry's attention to the overall performance or the big picture as they say was certainly a marvel to us all.

The direction was given the sharpest needle like edge when Howard Taylor was recruited by Pam Schryver and who can forget that wondrous day when one of the twenty thousand computer virus' which invaded her machine emailed the Excelsior offer of musical directorship to Howard to the 4 million people in her address book including the chairman of the the Waitakere band for whom Howard was working at the time. Pam needed all her wylie skills to skirt that one. However it was at a time when Howard was umming and ahring about moving to Australia. Whether it was a virus or deliberate Pam, I think it worked.

The rest I think is history which is well documented. In the three years that Howard has been at the musical helm there has been a string of successes including the 2002 Queensland State A Grade title contested in Gladstone, followed by the Queensland title again in 2003, this time held in Maryborough, and in September 2003 the NSW state title – the first time it had been won by a Queensland Band, and of course the current 2005 National Title. (2004 saw us unable to defend our State Championship title due to the National Championships in Launceston being held at the same time.)

Other milestones reached recently include our invitation to Hong Kong – an all expenses paid trip by the Hong Kong Tourism Board, staying at the Ritz Carlton one of only a handful of 6 Star Hotels around the world. Our job was to take part in the Chinese New Year celebrations. This was yet another project instigated by Howard. His determination and terrier approach secured this gig which is the envy of many groups world wide. This trip....as you can see....was thoroughly enjoyed by all!

Further achievements are

- the recording and launch of XLCR's first CD "Australians in Song",
- the launch of our new website ausbrass.com,
- the invitation to compete in the Swiss open,
- the success of the Brass in the Country concert,
- the Brett Baker concert and of course
- the unforgettable Cathedral brass concert at St Johns Cathedral on a 40 degree night.

This was indeed a concert with many highlights and none better than the fact that Riki McDonnell, Kevin McMorris, Gordon Lang and Kevin Mosely flew at their own expense from New Zealand to play at this concert along with Ken Bradley from Sydney. We did not need these players but their enthusiasm to be with us is an honour and another reason for us to cherish the moment.

The other highlight was the Governor of Queensland taking Excelsior to heart and has made regular efforts to stay in contact with the band primarily through Howard who recently was invited to attend a private function held by the Governor. Howard you're not the reason she has been in the news lately. Coincidental?

There was also the formation of Windsor Brass which was an initiative of Howard. Windsor Brass is a strong competitive yet very social band who I think keeps the reality of having fun as one of the most important parts of its functionality. For it is all too easy to forget why we do what we do along the road to success. It does make it easier of course when the person who knows most about having fun is the musical director himself.

2004 saw the commencement of the junior band led by Helen Hoy and Cathy Spratt. This group is for children who have never played an instrument before. We wanted them before they were taught the bad habits that many Queensland brass musicians appear to slip into early in their career. The commencement of this group we believe was instrumental in attaining one of the two grants received during this financial year but more about that later.

Back to Excelsior - and rehearsals have never been better attended and always have a solid balance between constructive serious work and some fun or humor thrown in for good measure. The last time I was as enthusiastic about getting to an Excelsior rehearsal was back in 1971/2 as a schoolboy walking into the Excelsior band room for the first time. The quality of our time together as both musicians and friends I will never forget and if this feeling can be cultivated further then we will be in great shape for the future. How will it be possible to forget the feeling of that final moment on the Adelaide stage as we completed the Paganini Variations.

I ask you all now how far are you prepared to push your musicality and how far are you prepared to be pushed because what we have ahead of us is an opportunity and a challenge which has not presented itself before in the 94 year history of the band and may not again for another 100 years. This band is blessed with musicians who could fill the corner seats of most bands of world standard and it is up to those with experience to lead the way forward and provide the opportunities to those who will lead the way in the future. This of course can not be achieved without the blessing of our spouses who go without for so long. I give credit to my fellow soloists who put in the extra work required to achieve a high standard in the individual events in Adelaide this year. This extra effort did not go unrewarded with 5 first placing from 13 events with another 3 second and 2 third placings. Six points separated Excelsior soloists from achieving 10 of the 13 solo championships. I must give my personal congratulations to the overall champion of champion winner Ashley Gittins. Ashley is a leader by example and his examples set very high standards for all of us.

The achievements to date are merely the stepping stones to where Howard and the committee intend to be at the end of the 5 year plan which was put in place 3 years ago. Clearly our goal of a major overseas tour and an invitation to the British open still require a successful defense of our National title followed up by a win at the New Zealand contest in 2006. So you can see we are only at the front end of our dream. Pinch me someone.

The Excelsior name is often mentioned and read about in European dispatches and fond words spoken of our organisation by visiting British composers and Conductors such as Martin Ellerby, Brian Hurdley, Russell Gray and Richard Evans who have all played a part in some way in our journey. We then have the visiting and emigrating poms that hear of these glowing remarks and want to be associated with a high caliber organisation when they arrive. I do have to say at this stage that there has been great influence by people such as Russell Gray, Howard Taylor and my good friend Steve Ridler whose individual contacts have been invaluable for ensuring that visiting banding guests attend our band room and take kind words with them back home. It all helps to lift and keep our profile up in the European banding movement. Steve and Tina have opened their home to many who come through our way and it is this style of generosity which will always reap rewards for our band as a whole. These actions together with future contesting successes will be the key factors in achieving the invitations we are seeking to the various major contests in Europe.

I believe special mention needs to be made of those wonderful and regular characters of Windsor Brass who regularly assist in the various fund raising activities and playing within the ranks of the A grade band when some members are committed elsewhere. I believe we could not be a successful A grade band without that assistance.

Apart from the musical achievements, the current administration has been successful in attaining grants totaling some \$ 105,000 for the new roof, painting of the Windsor School of Arts and for new instruments. In addition to this the rehearsal room on the lower level was improved with acoustic paneling and air-conditioning both of which were instrumental to our success in Adelaide. The acoustic material made us develop a better sound and the Air conditioning stopped Howard from whinging about the heat. The cessation of whinging about the weather was definitely music to my ears.

Howard, it must be said, your inspiration is never ending and infectious. It is an absolute pleasure dealing with you on an administrative level as well as musically. I know that in giving all that you personally have to the brass band movement leaves little time for family and we all hope that there will be time in your life for the pitter patter of little feet which may one day continue the Taylor brass band tradition in making it a richer place.

The Excelsior organization is a community group that is totally professional in its outlook. The word community brings out the very substance of the people that are Excelsior. Generally the healthier the community the better the outlook for community groups. If we sew what is good into the community then so shall we reap the benefits from that community. This is really about standards and Excelsior should never accept or expect anything less than the best each of us can do. The current committee is quite keen to keeping this fundamental principle and believes that there is no place for mediocrity and nor should it ever be part of our fabric as individuals or as a group. For mediocrity is the stagnation of life itself. We have been successful by actively balancing on the edge and it is said that if you're not walking on the edge you are surely taking up too much space.

I would like to say that the achievement of the 2005 National Title is certainly one of the highlights of my life and I am sure that it is also for all of the Excelsior membership who are participating in this incredible adventure. It was not an easy feat. It came amongst great individual trials and tribulations with members juggling work and in some cases sacrificing the opportunity to earn further income to ensure the band was at its peak and of course there was the unhelpful political climate. It is a credit to the organisation as a whole to achieve as well as it did. It is Excelsior's resolve to be the best that it can possibly be and I commend all of you for the support shown to your Musical Director Howard Taylor, the committee, and to myself personally as your president.

There are rarely positions of community office that are easy to carry with pride and I have to say that being the president of the Brisbane Excelsior band is certainly one of those rare positions. I carry it with pride because of its history and because of the greatness that you the members empower it with. There is no greater band, organisation or group of people with whom I would wish to be associated. I can promise you the membership that as your president I will never leave any stone unturned in the efforts to make this a greater band for us all.

Congratulations and thank you