Chaos theory guides ‘the band without pants’

By JoAnne Klimeck Harrop
FOR THE TRIBUNE-REVIEW

There are no music majors in Carnegie Mellon University’s Kiltie Band, just a bunch of eccentric intellectuals (average SAT score: 1,330) who direct cheers like this at CMU’s opponents:

“That’s all right. That’s OK. You’re going to work for us someday.”

The 80-member Kiltie Band has only a passing interest in what happens on the football field. Members are more concerned with their own performance.

Take, for example, the “scatter show” the band puts on for the final home football game of every season. In the scatter show, band members run onto the field aimlessly and only eventually wander to their place in line.

Kiltie Band members never have to memorize a show because they change their music with every appearance. If there is sufficient interest, the band adds a dance line and majorettes. This year it had a flag line.

The Kilties are good at incorporating the opposing team’s name into cheers. They are known as “the band without pants.” They not only play the CMU fight song, they sing it, too. They have their own page on the Internet’s World Wide Web.

Simply put, this is not your typical college band.

During the regular season, the band travels to one away game. Band director Paul Gerlach, a former CMU student and Kiltie Band member, has a fond memory of one such trip.

“We stopped at a restaurant along the way and one of the band members suggested they wear their kilts into the restaurant,” Gerlach said. “That’s part of the shiteck. From one minute to the next, I don’t even know what cheer they are going to do.”

Kiltie Band tradition dictates that cheers be kept in the “cheer book,” which remains in the possession of the “cheer master.” The “cheer master” knows what the next cheer will be and maintains the “cheer book” until he or she graduates, then wills the failed collection to a fellow band member.

Included in the book of cheers is the Zucchini Cheer and the Offensive Nerd Cheer.

The Kiltie Band uniform is as bright as the band members: red tunics with green, black, and red plaid kilts, honoring the memory of their founding father. Andrew Carnegie, who was born and grew up in Scotland, Carnegie, in fact, wore kilts and had his own bagpiper.

“People love the kilts, especially the colors,” Gerlach said. “We have more than enough university requests asking to use the kilts.”

The Kiltie Band is supported financially by the Student Senate and has been under the direction of Gerlach since 1983. Gerlach knows the band’s routine all too well because he was a member of the Kiltie Band in the 1980s.

“My experiences here have been wonderful,” Gerlach said. “I hope they’ll continue to increase in quantity and quality and they are successful in the mission they’re on.”

Gerlach is a part-time staff member at CMU, where he teaches The Fundamentals of Marching Band. He also is a full-time general music teacher for grades K-6 in the Northgate School District.

Gerlach’s band students give him the utmost respect. Several wear buttons that display his picture.

The Kiltie Band’s performances are not limited to the football field. The band held a holiday concert Dec. 3 and is scheduled for a spring concert as part of CMU’s Spring Carnival festivities in April.

The Kiltie Band made its first public appearance on Nov. 25, 1922 — the 97th anniversary of Andrew Carnegie’s birth — at Forbes Field in Oakland, where Carnegie Tech played Notre Dame.

The Tartans no longer play the Irish, but the band plays on.