

Natalie Holder becomes first female drum major for Fightin' Texas Aggie Band

By Kynlee Bright
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The sun beams down as the grass, painted maroon with "Texas A&M" sprayed across it, glistens. The woman looks into the crowd — 97,339 people to be exact — as she holds the golden instrument in front of her.

She takes her first-ever step onto the north end of Kyle Field, as she takes a deep breath, beginning the "Aggie War Hymn."

Now, four years later, she steps onto the field, boots hugging her calves and holding her mace in hand. Solo, she marches forward before the band follows in her footsteps, playing the war hymn as thousands of Aggies sway across the stadium.

Every step she takes, her members follow, looking to their leader for guidance. Hundreds of practices, hundreds of meetings and even more sleepless nights all led up to this.

This is history in the making.
This is Natalie Holder.

'She had a plan'

An overexposed screen sits atop the desk as a young girl pops up on the computer — but not before her dog steals the show.

Senior Associate Director of the Fightin' Texas Aggie Band Rayburn Tipton explained that the first memory he has of biology senior Natalie Holder, who is now the band's first female head drum major, comes from their first meeting — with both her and her giant schnauzer — over Zoom. He explained that it was right after the COVID-19 pandemic when Holder, who was a senior in high school at the time, interviewed with Tipton.

In theory, Holder was just what the Aggie Band needed, but on paper, things were a bit different.

"She was an all-state bassoonist and ... she's just like this incredible kid, obviously," Tipton said. "... She had a plan, it just wasn't as direct a path as some of other folks."

Following the pandemic, Holder chose to complete the rest of her high school education online, taking her off the field and away from marching.

"I vividly remember that Zoom conversation because it was just like, 'All right ... what do we need to test her on to make sure that she still knows what she knows from a marching band perspective and all that stuff?'" Tipton said.

Despite her time away from the field, Holder immediately marched into leadership roles within the band and the Corps of Cadets.

"Natalie, from the moment she stepped on this campus, has been a leader in some form or fashion," Tipton said. "... She's getting attention because she's the first female to ever stand in front of that band in Kyle Field and call recall ... but that's not the reason she made it."

'It was worth it in the end'

From being a leader in her fish class to having the potential to be the commander of the Fish Drill Team — if she didn't go out for drum major, of course — Holder has led the people around

her, according to Tipton.

And not in a quiet way. "She's been very, very, very, very successful everywhere," Tipton said. "She passed every trial that every cadet could have been asked to pass and has the respect of that band. I mean, and not because she's a drum major — she had it long before."

Despite having its respect, Tipton said one of the initial fears was how the band would take to its new leader.

"If they reject the leadership, you're in big trouble," Tipton said. "... If they're not into it, man, everybody knows. ... They invest too much not to be taken care of."

But that wasn't a problem for Holder. She said that she always knew that her aspiration was to become a drum major, and she made sure to take the necessary steps to get there.

"I had a really good chance of getting artillery band commander, or I could risk going out for drum major," Holder said. "There's no guarantee ... but I really wanted to be drum major, so that was a big risk, and it made me very nervous, but it was worth it in the end." That process, though, was

not as easy as it may seem.

It all starts by putting out at the end of junior year, and then, the game is on. From there, the candidates participate in a two-part audition: prelims and finals. During the prelims, candidates conduct, command and march in front of judges before a brief interview. The first round of cuts limits the pool to no more than 10 finalists.

In the final round, candidates are put into the most high-stress, yet controlled, situation possible — conducting the band.

Day One involves conducting either "Spirit of Aggieland" or "Noble Men of Kyle," in addition to a piece of their choosing. But, Day Two is when the real challenge is faced.

Remaining candidates are put in front of the band to teach them a drill that they learned that very morning.

"It's just about as tense or as stressful as it can be, but it's also what you want," Tipton said. "... You don't want them stressed, but you want them prepared. ... In a military band, if one person's off by two inches, it's like a red light blinking down the field."

And stressed she was. Holder said her stress stemmed from her need for perfection — specifically with the position of her mace — a maroon, 3-foot conducting tool, with uneven weight distribution used to lead the band in cadence.

"I'm just a perfec-

tionist," Holder said. "We'd go outside and practice, we could watch ourselves in the window, and the mace is supposed to be straight up and down ... and it just never was enough for me. I was just super stressed about that being perfect."

But all that worry and stress created history once again for Tipton, because he finally had a drum major who didn't switch arms.

On the sidelines, drum majors can conduct for up to 30 minutes straight. Typically, they switch their conducting arm to give the other a break — but not Holder.

"I've never seen that kid switch arms ... she refuses," Tipton said. "I've never seen her do it, not one time. ... That's just the kind of kid she is. She is more stubborn than any challenge or any problem. ... She's not going to take a loss, you know?"

In Tipton's 10 years as a band director, Holder is only 1 of 30 drum majors that he has taught that uses just one arm for conducting.

"I'm just so stubborn," Holder said. "... Being a female, I don't want anyone to have anything over me with that kind of stuff. I just fight through it."

And she doesn't just fight through the physical pain. Tipton said that one of his proudest memories of Holder was after the band's performance at LSU — a rough showing that members took to heart.

"We had a tough drill and didn't perform well, and that's tough on them because they take it super, super personally,"

needed.

"I feel like I'm a very kind person, and so I've had to have those conversations telling people ... 'No, you cannot do this,' or, 'You cannot march this drill, because you messed up,'" Holder said. "Having to manage that has been the hardest part."

It may be hard for Holder, but to Tipton, she's a natural.

"Watching her on the field is motivating ... but watching her interact with her peers is the part that makes her special," Tipton said.

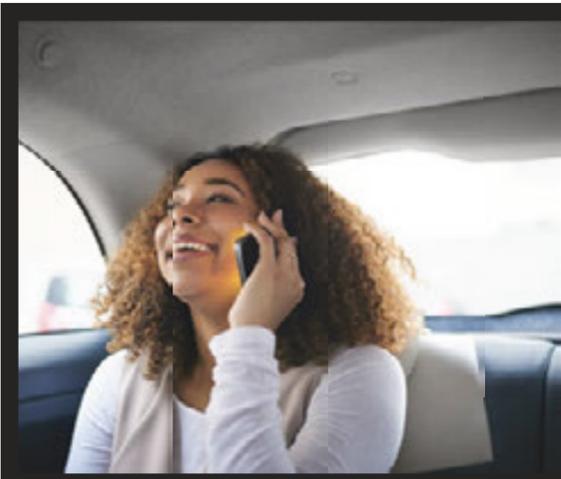
As the historical marching season comes to a close, Tipton has nothing but praise for Holder.

"We're just so proud of her," Tipton said. "I don't know that there's anything that I could tell her that would mean more than that. It would've been so easy for her to have taken the pressure of being the first female and taking all the attention ... and it cracking her, and it just didn't. There's not even a dent. She just handles everything so brilliantly; she can just do anything."

HOLDING HISTORY



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