

Hitting your notes is just one requirement to being classified as elite.

For Erica Shirley and Shelby Wilbanks, earning Superior ratings starts with the right mind-set that allows the parts of their New Hope and Caledonia bands to come together and shine.

On Saturday, Oct. 17, New Hope and Caledonia delivered two of their best performances of the year to earn All-Superior ratings at the Mississippi High School Activities Association (MHSAA) State Marching Evaluations at Tupelo High.

This is the third-straight year New Hope has earned All-Superior ratings, the highest in the event, in drum major, color guard, percussion and

band. It also is the third-straight year Caledonia has earned All-Superior ratings, and the fifth consecutive year of marching superior ratings.

“(Assistant band director) Mr. (Ryan) Jobe and I stress the importance of All-Superior being a mind-set,” said Shirley, who is in her 18th year teaching and 12th year at New Hope. “It is something you do in all things. It bleeds over into everything we do.”

Said Wilbanks, who is in his ninth year as Caledonia’s band director, “All-Superior is a mind-set from day one. You have to come in and say I am going to give my very best. We have been doing this show since the day after the fourth of July. It has been four and a half months trying to perfect it and make it the best thing. It is not just on the field. It is off the field. How do you pick up yourself and your classroom? How do you leave the stands after a Friday night football game? Yes, it is a rating, but they have to have the mind-set they have to be superior every day in everything they do.”

Caledonia will perform at 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 24, in the MHSAA / Mississippi Bandmasters Association Class 5A State Marching Band Championship at Brandon High. New Hope elected not to participate and is gearing up for a performance Nov. 14 it hopes will help it earn a bid to Varsity Sport’s National School Band Championship (NSBC), which begins Jan. 29, 2027, in Lake Buena Vista, Florida.

Earlier this year, the NHHS band finished first in Varsity Sport’s inaugural Division II NSBC and competed with the school’s co-ed cheerleading squad and Dance Xpress, its dance team, at the National School Spirit Championships in Florida.

Jobe said realizing another year of All-Superior ratings is the culmination of a process in which the coaches and team leaders set the expectations, the team members agreed to that standard and everyone

did their best to try to meet that level. He credited the student leaders for playing a bigger role than in past years in helping everyone follow the playbook and realize their goals.

“When you build culture, it is just being consistent, “ Jobe said. “Hats off to the leadership of the kids and for their ability to embrace it. They have done a great job of making it happen because, ultimately, it is their performance, show and season. Now that they have taken more ownership, I think it means a little more for them, and I think they have shown that in the performances.”

Wilbanks echoed that sentiment and credited the 11 student leaders (brass, woodwind, percussion and color guard captains along with the drum majors as well as section leaders) on the squad for “guiding” and “pushing” their classmates, which he said made the difference at the MHSAA band evaluations. Eight of the student leaders are seniors. The other three are juniors.

Wilbanks said that leadership was crucial this season considering Caledonia lost 35 seniors from last year’s group and brought up 32 freshmen.

“Just like the district’s motto is ‘All In’ this year, I told them to be all in, all the time because we only get better when everybody is and through repetition,” Wilbanks said. “We have a great student leadership team. It started rocky at first because there were new leaders in new positions, but once they realized, ‘Oh, I am the person who is the role model for the younger students’, things started to go a lot smoother. The student leadership team really has been the determining factor for what we have been able to do this year.”

Wilbanks said the band did well at New Hope’s Golden Triangle Marching Festival and then took a step back because it didn’t practice

for a week during fall break. He said the group put in an additional 24 hours of practice in the second week of fall break to help get back on track.

Wilbanks credits the Caledonia community for its investment in and its support of music education. He is proud of how everyone has rallied around the band program, and said the addition of assistant band director Angelina Neal, who is in her fifth year with the program, and Brian Lindsay, who is in his second year, have freed him up to focus on other areas as well occasionally take a breath and regroup.

“This all came down to the kids,” Wilbanks said. “My job could change tomorrow and these kids would still be that All-Superior band because they put in the work. No matter who is in front of them, they have the drive and determination. I appreciate everything they have done because we have called extra rehearsals, we have had night rehearsals and we have had early-morning rehearsals just to get this show where it needed to be because of the student turnover.

Jobe said a key to New Hope’s success is how well he, Shirley and Clay Tyson, the “behind-the-scenes” coach in his second year on the staff, work together to get the visuals and the band hitting the right notes with energy. He said consistency is getting easier to achieve despite the turnover and the fact that each season brings a new performance to master due to the students’ willingness to accept the All-Superior standard and give their best.

“We have them from the sixth grade on, so we have a longer time with them,” Shirley said. “We lose groups, but regardless of what year you’re in, you get a taste of that All-Superior mind-set. You have seen it. You have witnessed it. You have been around it, so if you see success and a good product and one that everybody likes, you want to keep doing it.”