

Marcus Wright rarely lacks the energy or ability to get your toes tapping.

That's what makes the longtime West Lowndes High School (WLHS) band director and multi-instrumentalist so adept at motivating and engaging students.

This year, Wright knew he had to use his infectious energy to help build the confidence of his band members as they prepared for their second season of competition.

"I love just being excited and enthused about it and being able to help them," Wright said.

On Saturday, Wright's enthusiasm and months of practice paid off as the WLHS Marching Band earned one Superior rating (the highest available) and four Excellents at the 49th-annual West Alabama Marching Band Festival in Gordo, Alabama.

The dance line, which received the Best in Class Award, earned a Superior rating, while the drum major, color guard, percussion and band received Excellent marks. The accomplishments reflected significant growth from the 2025 season and provided optimism that the marching band can accomplish more and grow in the years to come.

“There has been tremendous growth,” Wright said. “Last year, I would say half of them struggled with marching and playing at the same time. When we went to summer band camp, I emphasized playing and marching at the same time. If they messed up, we would start again and start over and start over. After doing it so many times, eventually they caught a hold of it.”



The band’s growth in skill was accompanied with a growth in numbers. Eighteen newcomers replaced eight graduating seniors from the Class of 2025 and gave West Lowndes a squad of 65 (competition squad of 50). Wright hopes this year’s success will help those numbers increase after students have seen what can be accomplished and that they can have fun doing it.

Senior Madison Kidd, who plays trumpet and has been in the band since the sixth grade, feels people were really focused this year and

that there was more determination, which she said helps explains why the squad accomplished as much as it did.

Senior Madison Jackson, who also plays trumpet and has been in the band since the seventh grade, said the experience of going to band competitions in 2025 set the stage for growth, even if senior Ahjala Givens, who has been in the band since the sixth grade and plays trumpet and was a drum major this year, said that put more pressure on the band.

Despite maybe feeling bigger expectations, the senior band members said everyone came together, improved and performed their best at the end of the season.

“Most of our band is made up of middle schoolers,” Jackson said. “For a lot of them, this was their first time doing high school band. There were a lot of adjustments, but I think we did pretty well to be a really young band. I am really proud of our band.”

Said Kidd, “Like Madison said, there are a lot of middle schoolers in our group, but you can really see the energy and determination in them. They really want to be here. I feel we had a really big jump. Even though we’re leaving, I think there is going to be way more in the coming years.”

Unfortunately, Wright said seven to eight members of that 50-member competition squad missed the West Alabama event due to sickness. He credited the remaining members for stepping up for their missing classmates. Wright said the confidence the students gained throughout the season helped them persevere.

“Last year, it was kind of like a deer in headlights,” Wright said. “I tried to encourage them and told them it was our first year of competition,

but the pressure got to some of them. This year, their confidence level grew and they had the courage to do what they had to do.

“I was extremely proud of them this past weekend. With seven or eight out, I told them they knew what they had to do and they went over and beyond.”

Freshman Ja’Lah Givens, who is a cousin to Ahjala, is in her first year on the dance line. She said she sensed the dance line, which was missing one of its members due to sickness, was going to have a successful performance at the West Alabama Marching Festival. She said she has tried to convince some of her friends and classmates to join the band and/or dance line next year

Looking back to the beginning of the year when Givens felt being in the band was going to be “hard”, she said she is proud of how much the band and dance line grew.

“It surprised me how well the band did, especially at Tupelo,” said Givens, referring to the band earning a Superior rating in drum major and dance line and Excellent ratings in color guard and percussion at the Mississippi High School Activities Association Region 1 State Evaluation last month. “I feel the band and the dance line will be great in the coming years and more people will want to join because they see how good we’re doing.”

Wright said his students worked hard, performed with pride and represented WLHS exceptionally well and that the results were a “testament to the dedication, hard work, discipline and teamwork” of the band members and staff.

Wright, who works with middle school and high school age band students at West Lowndes, also hopes more students will get involved

for summer band camp to help the group take the next step. He said making sure the students enjoy what they're doing and have fun will be keys to sustaining that growth.

"I want them to see the number of trophies we won (motioning to the collection of trophies in the far corner of the band hall), but next year I want that to be doubled," Wright said. "I want them to focus on moving up to the next level and earning more consistent ratings and focusing on Superiors. We have a foundation, so let's build off it."