

1. Winter Guard is Color Guard on Steroids

We've all watched color guards at high school football games. They are a part of the marching band and do cool, synchronous maneuvers with their flags. It's a nice addition to the bands and provides color and pizazz.

Winter guard is about 10 steps up from that band color guard. It is practiced and performed in a gymnasium and has become a combination of dance, cheerleading, and equipment maneuvers all in one.

2. There is an International Winter Guard Organization (WGI)

Even though this sport began in the U.S., it has traveled to Europe, the Far East, and even Africa. International competition does occur, and just like with any sport, working up to those involves winning at local, regional and national competitions in a team's own country. WGI is the organization that teams join in order to participate in the important competitions.

3. There are Usually Multiple Coaches and a Team Captain

Because Winter Guard involves dance and equipment maneuvers, there are at least two coaches – a choreographer for the dance moves and an equipment coach, who trains team members in the handling of the equipment – flags, rifles, and sabers being the most common. A third gymnast coach may also be involved because the highly skilled teams use many of the gymnastic movements that we see in a contemporary cheerleading squad. Team captains are senior members of the teams who lead the exercises and routines.

4. Staging is Common For Winter Guard

Winter Guard teams bring lots of creativity to their performances. They may have backdrops and props other than their personal equipment. Most all of them have colorful tarps which are spread on the floor and designed to meld with the "theme" of the performance. It's almost like a set design for a scene in a play.

5. Timing is Critical

During competitions, teams have a total of nine minutes to get "on" and "off." The "set-up" and "take-down" generally take up four minutes, and the routine is limited to five minutes. For this five minutes of show-time, teams practice for months and months.

6. Equipment Varies

When Winter Guard began, it was a take-off of color guards on the field. Most teams began with flags. In fact, in the U.S., the WGI originally required American flags as the only equipment. That has changed a lot. Now flags of all sorts of colors and designs are used, usually to support a "theme" for the performance. Rifles and sabers are also now used, sometimes in combinations with flags. Rifles are wooden and pretty lightweight, because they are often thrown in the air or among team members. The same goes for sabers. They have dull blades and tips and are usually decorated to support a theme as well.

7. Is It Grueling? Yes!

People often look at Winter Guard performances and see them as pretty "lightweight." After all, it's not as if these performers are in a 10-minute rigorous gymnastic routine or playing ice hockey. They are dancing, swirling and throwing equipment around. What performance observers do not understand is that every movement is a precise one, with the use of muscles that must be flexible and solid. This often requires strenuous workouts before a participant is ever ready to begin learning a performance routine.

There is also a mental aspect to a solid performance. Winter Guard requires deep focus and a commitment to excellence, two skills that will certainly translate to success in other areas of life.

8. Precision is Everything

If you have ever watched a synchronized swimming event, you understand precision. Every movement by every team member has to be absolutely flawless in both timing and the movement itself. Now consider that the precision involves not only body movements but the manipulation of pieces of equipment too.

Flags may be a variety of sizes. Some have poles as long as 6-feet with flags just as long. Smaller flags, called “swings” have shorter poles made of plastic for easy tossing and spinning.

As already said, rifles are wooden, often hollowed out for ease of throwing, and sabers are of light metals or plastics.

When these pieces of equipment are tossed or spun, they must be precise throughout the entire team. As you can imagine, this requires mental focus and physical agility.

9. Dance Performances Are Amazing

Almost any type of dance can be incorporated into Winter guard routines – ballet, jazz, modern, etc. Music is chosen to “fit” the type of dance and the routine’s theme. Everything from “hip-hop” to classical may be used. This is why a choreographer is usually required.

The cool part of Winter Guard compared to Color Guard is that music is chosen and pre-recorded in advance instead of being played by the marching band. This opens up much more creative possibilities to mix and match the tunes. You can add spoken words, create mash-ups or blend in some cool sounding noises.

10. There are Actually Divisions for Competitions

Most people are familiar with divisions for major sports teams. In high school and college, divisions are based on the size of the school, and competition is with other schools within the same division. In Winter Guard, divisions are based upon whether a team is from a school or is an independent group. School divisions are based on school size, like other sports. Independent groups are divided by skill levels as judged from previous competitions. A new team, for example, will be judged in the “Beginner” division, and so on.

Judging is based on four categories – precision, creativity, horizontal orchestration, and overall talent. In WGI competitions, there are three places awarded. First place winners move on to the next level of competition and ultimately to the World Championships, where 350 teams will compete.

11. Winter Guard is a Combination of Art and Athletic Skill

There are few athletic competitions that combine skills of ability and the art of musical/dramatic performance. The ones that typically come to mind are skating, synchronized swimming, and gymnastics. All three of these are now Olympic events. When we think about the fact that ping pong is also an Olympic event, it stands to reason that Winter Guard should be a candidate for this prestigious competition. People are working on it.

The bottom line is this: Winter Guard is a little-known sport right now. But its participants and coaches are dedicated individuals. As it spreads globally, there is every reason to believe that it will become far more recognized than it is today. And for the participants? Even if they never move beyond their teen years in this sport, they will have gained many “soft skills” that future employers will find valuable.