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Holmes pep band is boosting school spirit

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School spirit is building at Holmes Middle School in Wheeling, and everyone from teachers and administrators, to parents and students themselves are pointing to a new group that's driving it: the Hornet Pep Band.

Performing under the direction Jeremy Budrow and Bryan Itzkowitz, the 25 students are playing at six basketball games this season, including both girls and boys games, and they even have been asked to play at a wrestling match or two.

Last week, they played for nearly 45 minutes - much to the delight of the crowd - before the Holmes Hornets boys basketball team took on conference rivals the Cougars from Cooper Middle School in Buffalo Grove.

"I need lots of trumpets on this one," Itzkowitz shouts to the group, before they launch into a shortened rendition of "Born to be Wild."

In all, the band played from a book containing 35 pep songs, from "Get Ready For This," to the band's favorite, "Let's Go Hornets," complete with horns moving from side to side.

Budrow and Itzkowitz bring their respective experiences to the group. Itzkowitz played at Buffalo Grove High School before playing with the Marching Illini at the University of Illinois in Champaign, while Budrow played at Wheeling High School before performing with the band at Northern Illinois University.

Not so ironically, one of the fight songs the band plays best is "Huskies, Come On You Huskies" from Budrow's alma mater.

"Lots of high schools have pep bands, but not too many middle schools," Budrow says. "We think it's pretty unique."

At last week's game, the poms squad performed some of their sideline cheers to the beat of the band, and even the basketball players picked up on their energy during pre-game warmups.

"It's hard to ignore the kind of impact that they have had on the spirit and morale of the building as a whole," says Jeff Brusso, assistant principal.

Students in the pep band started rehearsing last summer for their debut, and they continue to practice after school.

"It's fun to be cheering for the school," said seventh-grade bass clarinet player Tomasz Ciepiela of Wheeling.

"I just like to play," adds seventh-grade baritone player Ashley Engebretson of Wheeling.

The ensemble is the latest addition to the band program, which derives some of its support from members of the community.

For the last three years, Budrow and Itzkowitz have appealed to local businesses to join the band's sponsorship program. They point to the school's diverse students, including a majority who come from low-income families.

So far, their appeal has been answered. To date, they have raised nearly $15,000 and collected 50 donated instruments. The funds have allowed them to purchase some new instruments - including some instruments the pep band uses - and fund private lessons for students.

It all adds up to growing participation in the band program, their directors say. This year, they not only are debuting their pep band, but they will bring their jazz band to the Jazz in the Meadows festival at Rolling Meadows High School in February.

Ironically, at Jazz in the Meadows, they will go head-to-head with their conference rivals from Cooper Middle School, who have won the junior high title the last five years, and 13 years overall.