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Crowd pleaser

Story by Stephanie Detillier

In the early 1960s, twirler Warren Bass, BS Ed '65, was a campus celebrity of sorts. With his 100-foot-high baton tosses, under-the-leg throws and energetic high struts, he thrilled Mizzou football crowds during pregame and halftime performances. The show-stopping, two-time U.S. National Baton Twirling champion got his start by twirling a broom for two hours a day in the alley behind his St. Louis home.

Adobe Flash version 8, or higher, and Java Script are required to view the slide show for this feature story.

Bass first became interested in the baton after reading about scholarships for twirlers at a Midwestern university.

“One day I picked up a broomstick and started clowning around with it,” Bass told *Ebony* magazine, which ran a five-page photo spread on him in its January 1963 issue. “Then I watched a twirler in a parade, and I was fascinated. I decided I was going to learn to twirl.”

Although he had never taken professional music lessons, Bass played the piano and organ at St. Louis’ Westside Baptist Church so he could afford to train with champion twirlers. After two years of twirling lessons, he began entering competitions and placing near the top. In 1960, as drum major at Sumner High School, Bass twirled at MU’s high school band day and won standing ovations from the crowd. That caught the attention of Marching Mizzou director Charles Emmons, who recruited Bass to become a feature twirler the following fall.

“Professor Emmons allowed me the freedom to do practically anything I felt like on the field,”

Bass told *Ebony*. “He had confidence that whatever I did would be complementary to the band.”

Bass dedicated most of his time to studying, working and practicing. He was a busboy for the Zeta Beta Tau fraternity house and played the organ at Columbia’s Second Baptist Church.

In July 1962, Bass was barred from competing in a state twirling competition in Monett, Mo., because organizers were concerned his appearance would lead to a race riot. But a few months later, he beat more than 400 competitors in the Mid-South Fair’s national twirling contest to take the grand prize. He was the first African-American to compete in the Memphis, Tenn., event.

After graduating in 1965, Bass moved to California and taught physical education in the Los Angeles Public School System. He returned for Homecoming several times. The 1978 pregame performance was his first since 1964.

“I’ve wanted to come back for a long time,” he told *Missouri Alumnus*, the name of this magazine until 1995. “Having another generation of Mizzou students screaming and applauding when they heard my name was beautiful! I couldn’t believe it.”

In 1981, Bass made another appearance in *Ebony* — this time in a feature on eligible bachelors. By then, the 37-year-old’s face had been seen in magazine ads, billboards, commercials, films and TV shows. He had moved to New York, where he found work as a musician, model, actor and semi-professional tennis player. He described his ideal woman as someone who “reflects style, class, intelligence, love and a true sense of humor.”

In 1990, Bass died at age 47. [Beverly Clevenger](#), who twirled with Bass in 1961, says former Marching Mizzou members often ask about Bass when the alumni band performs at Homecoming. She still recalls how he helped her when she struggled adjusting to a more military strut her freshman year.

“One day Warren said, ‘You’re just having an awful time with that, aren’t you? How about if I watch, and we’ll figure out how to do this?’ We figured out how to pose my arm in a position that looked right,” Clevenger, HE ’63, of El Paso, Texas, says. “Warren was totally his own person and a tremendous showman. I felt honored over the years to have become friends with him.”

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