"Skizz"

Stephan Philemy

Stephan attended Collège Notre-Dame du Perpétuel, a Catholic high school in Cap-Haïtien, Haiti, and graduated from Thornton Fractional North High School. At TF he played basketball and was active in band and jazz band. Here at NIU Stephan is majoring in financial economics.

When someone first suggested I audition for drum major, I couldn't help but laugh. I remember saying I would NEVERRRRR, not a day in my life, join anything for this lame-ass school. The band room already felt loud and unorganized, and I didn't want even more responsibility on my back when I was already on the basketball team. Standing out like that? Being watched? Nah. That wasn't me, and I had "beef" with some of the school staff, so that added to it. And the way the school functioned, I never really wanted to contribute to anything in this school.

But one summer, my mom forced me to go, and one of my friends was also trying out. I originally planned to play drums, but somehow all the spots were taken. Someone handed me a baton and said, "Just try drum major." I remember thinking, *I guess*. That choice didn't feel important at the time, but it ended up changing everything.

The first time I held the baton, it felt heavy, way heavier than it looked. My wrist couldn't even handle it. I could barely move it. I dropped it more times than I can count, the metal clanking loudly against the floor while people pretended not to notice. I went home frustrated, annoyed at myself. Instead of quitting, I was like, *Let me try the same movements with a wooden stick*, and practiced with that instead. Every day. Every night. And yes, night. Sometimes it was 12 a.m. Sometimes 3 a.m. The house would be quiet, the air still, and all you could hear was the stick slicing through space. Slowly, I got faster. Smoother. One night, something clicked, and I even created my own move.

That's when my mentors came in: Lapin, Celestin, Marvens, Tchallu, Charitable, Chalensly, and Zamor. Each one had a different style, a different rhythm, a different presence. One would say, "Loosen your wrist." Another would stop me and say, "You're thinking too much; feel it." I learned, unlearned, and relearned everything. We practiced, sparred, and pushed each other without needing many words. Even when people started saying I was better, I never believed it fully. I still don't. To this day, I say my mentors are better than I, even when they admit I surpassed them, because I remember how much they poured into me.

At the same time, I had a rival, my homie, who got in at the same time I did. The band saw me as the more refined one and him as more laid-back but flashy. Over time, we both grew into our lanes. I became better at freestyling. He became better at Mezire (he got that, I won't

lie). Eventually, the plan was clear: I would become the first chief, and he would be second. There was no jealousy, just mutual respect. We pushed each other without ever having to say it out loud, our friends would always compare us, and we would equally get our distinct flowers. But at the end of the day, I always had the passion over him, though he had the talent because when we were first starting, he picked up the moves faster.

As I started to be better, I started mentoring others, too. One of them is Makerly, who I now call *ti frè* (Haitian Creole for *little brother*). Teaching him felt full circle. I saw myself in him: the
same young boy that always wanted to challenge his mentor, trying to surpass him, trying to become his rival, his heir, trying to be the best. He even considered me his rival, or the peak he should be able to reach, and honestly he would be a great one because he had the same drive for greatness I had when I even wanted to challenge other drum majors, going to their schools and being friends with them just to "spar." But while training him I saw more potential in him than there was ever in me, and he had no excuse for nothing. He would show up every day; even days when there was no rehearsal, he would just practice by himself. By training him I found my drive, my hunger once again to not let this young'un be better than me, because at that moment my school already considered me the goat. So while training with him I just pushed myself harder every day and every time until I reached what I would say was my pinnacle, my peak—when I could do any move just by saying it, twirling with my eyes closed, just doing what I love with true passion, not for notoriety or scholarships, but genuine love and passion.

Even after I moved away, people kept telling me how good I was, how nobody could even think of reaching my level. They said the band wasn't the same without me. Hearing that never made me arrogant. It humbled me. I knew how many nights I cried, how many times my hands hurt, how many times I almost quit and considered just going back to being a regular student. At the same time, I didn't have nothing to lose if I just tried. I wanted to be the best and everyone kept
telling me how they saw potential and talent in me, how effortlessly I did the moves. This made me confident—not arrogant, *humble*—not putting myself down in front of anyone.

Being a drum major meant being exposed. Standing alone. Leading without speaking. Leadership, confidence, and discipline: qualities I wasn't sure I had. I remember leaning against a cold metal chair during rehearsal, the smell of brass and floor cleaner mixing in the air, thinking, *That's not who I am*. I hated the pressure. I hated the attention. But at the same time, I loved the feeling of doing it with genuine happiness, sometimes with my eyes closed, dancing while leading, completely locked in. When challenges came and we had to represent the school, I stepped up, not for popularity, but for pride. Still, people knew my name. I was considered one of the best, even *the* best, but I never carried myself like it.

Training changed everything, but not in a gentle way. Late nights became normal. I practiced alone under buzzing stadium lights, my shadow stretching across the empty field. My hands throbbed from repeating the same movements over and over, trying to make them sharper, cleaner, and more confident. Some nights I wanted to quit. I missed cues. Lost tempo. Felt stupid for ever believing I could do this. But then there were moments: a clean cutoff, the band responding

Describing his writing process, Stephan notes: "I usually start by getting my thoughts down without worrying about how they sound, then come back and shape them. For this essay, I spent time in conversation with someone whose story I wanted to tell honestly and carefully. The hardest part was finding the balance between my voice and hers. I revised based on feedback from my instructor, Caitlin Gamble. I kept asking myself: Would a reader feel this, or just read it?" Stephan describes his essay's inspiration: "Growing up between Haiti and the United States, I found myself thinking a lot about what it means to keep going when everything feels uncertain. The students and people around me at NIU—dealing with financial pressure, cultural expectations, and the daily grind of college— inspired me to write about resilience and mental health. I wanted to give voice to an experience that does not always get talked about openly."

"SKIZZ" is a Mae Thomas Award winner.