

Color Guard Equipment

by *Tim Mikan*

Perhaps one of the most important decisions a director makes is selecting the proper color guard equipment. There are many options when choosing the specific equipment for your program. Style, shape, color, length, weight and cost are just a few factors weigh when purchasing equipment. The color guard activity utilizes standardized rifle, sabre and flag as primary pieces in choreography, each having several variables to consider.

When selecting the styles and sizes of equipment that you want, you first have to be aware of what it is you are looking for. Once you decide what the "look" of the color guard is going to be, you will then need to select a teaching approach.

When choosing equipment to spin, you always have to consider the show design or theme. You should have a stock set of equipment in your collection and make adjustments if the show requires them. The following information is based on the assumption that we are setting up a stock supply and your show doesn't encompass anything out of the ordinary.

Let's start with **flag**, since that is the most common apparatus. The flag is a distinctive element that really helps set the mood or tone of your show, so having the right one is important.

The flag can be made from poly-china silk, lamé, nylon, or just about any fabric that can be attached to a flag pole. The most common material is polyester china silk. It is very light weight and flows very well while spinning. Poly-china silk comes in just about any color you might want and is quite affordable at around \$2.50 a yard. Some schools choose to spin nylon because of the strength of the material. However, nylon does not flow well, is also very heavy and its colors often have a drab appearance.

The most frequently used **pole** lengths are 5, 5 1/2 and 6 feet long. Once you pick the length, you then have to choose the style of pole, either aluminum and fiber glass. You may use PVC pipe or different bendable poles for certain effects, but I would not recommend them for daily use.

When picking a pole length, you want to consider the body size of the performers. For instance, high school students might spin 6' poles where elementary or jr. high students might spin 5' or 5 1/2' poles. You don't really need to go any bigger than this unless, say in a ballad you decide you want to have more fabric or more color, so you choose to use a 7' pole or bigger. Size is important. You don't want one of your performers struggling with oversized equipment. This is potentially a way to create poor technique and develop bad habits.

When choosing the make or style of a pole, you must consider the strength of the performer, as well as the location of the performance. Because they are a little heavier than fiberglass poles, many groups choose to spin aluminum poles outside due to wind and because of their durability. Aluminum poles are also good for developing strength. Fiberglass poles are good to use because of the light weight which makes them easy to maneuver. Both poles have their deficiencies as well. Aluminum may bend or dent and is virtually impossible to repair. Fiberglass can also fray if not properly maintained. Both poles can be purchased around \$10 a piece.

Once you have selected a pole, you also have to choose a type of tip or cap to go on the end. Rubber crutch tips and plastic tips are the most common. Rubber tips are strong and aren't as loud if they are dropped on a gym floor. Plastic tips are lightweight, but are a little less durable than the rubber tips. Both tips will eventually grow weak and need replacement. When you order your poles, you should be able to specify which tips you prefer at no additional costs.

You will need to put weights in the ends of your pole to make the flag balanced. Remember that when you add a flag to one side of the pole, you have higher wind resistance on that side. You will need to adjust the weight according to the amount and shape of the fabric that you use, as certain flags may drag more than others. Carriage bolts are a good method of weighting the flag. They fit in the rubber end caps a little easier than the plastic tips. Also, the head of the bolt has a bigger diameter than the pole, so it won't slide down. Make sure the flag is in place before you attach the tips. Once you put the bolt in and place the cap on the end, **MAKE SURE YOU ALWAYS TAPE ANY CAPS THAT CONTAIN BOLTS!** Once you begin spinning, if a tip containing a bolt is not secure, it can propel from the pole with great force.

Electrical tape is the best method of attaching the flag to the pole. Velcro is an option, but not a good one. Velcro doesn't allow the flag to flow well and also comes unattached easily. Taping is fairly easy and allows you to attach or remove the flag quickly. You don't need more than 6 to 8 inches of electrical tape to keep the flag attached.

Just like flags, **rifles** have many options to consider. Ultimate or Elite rifles are proving to be quite dependable. These rifles are usually the most consistently balanced and the weights aren't too heavy. There are a number of sizes to choose from. The most common weight is around 1 pound. The weight usually refers to the rifle without the hardware (strap, bolt, screws and tape). The most common length is between 36 and 39 inches.



Again, the size depends on the frame and build of the person spinning the equipment. When deciding on weight, you must also factor in wind conditions. Rifles are light enough that wind during marching band season is enough to hurl them around pretty easily. The heavier the rifle, the harder it is for the wind to manipulate the rifle in the air.

You can further customize your rifle with black or white straps. The straps are made of nylon or leather. The leather has proven to be much more effective than the nylon. Leather straps will stretch with time, so you'll need to tighten the strap as needed, especially when it is new. Rifles tend to spin more evenly if the strap is a little tighter and less air resistant. You also have to choose between silver, gold or black bolts. The only difference in the color is that having a black bolt is easier to see in the air. For the performers it is a good thing. For a judge critiquing your group, it is a way to see if your rotations aren't matched in the air.

Similar to taping your flags, it is a good idea to tape your rifles. Taping will help prevent breakage or damage. Rifles average around \$36 after hardware and are going to split or crack over time, so taping will help to increase the life of your rifles. When taping, you should use two types of tape, strapping and electrical. The strapping tape goes on first. Strapping tape is made with strands of nylon which provides strong support. You should put strapping tape on the butt, neck/small, under the bolt, the swivel and the tip/nose. Once you've placed the strapping tape on the rifle, you then add white electrical over these areas to help clean up the appearance. Make sure that you tape these areas before you attach the hardware. Keep in mind that the more tape you add the heavier the rifle gets. You can always adjust the weight by adding or removing electrical tape.

Sabres, like rifles, are commonly 36 to 39 inches in length. Sabre weight is standard and not really adjustable. There are many brands of sabres to choose from. Some common brands are King, Sabreline and Ultimate Sabres. King and Sabreline are probably the smoothest to spin. Ultimate Sabres spin much like a rifle and is very durable, so a lot of groups choose to use them. Sabres are the easiest piece of standardized equipment to maintain because of their durability. You will need to make sure electrical tape is on the hilt and tip of the sabres for safety.

Sabre blades do tend to bend after several drops. You can sometimes bend the blade back to its original form,

depending on how badly it was out of shape. Hilt also become weak and may break over time. If they do break, you can buy a replacement. All parts for flag, rifle and sabre can be individually ordered and are not very difficult to repair.

When you build a supply of equipment for your program, you should buy in bulk to reduce costs. I suggest researching what it is you want for your program before you make a big purchase. If you get stuck with an arsenal of equipment that is not right for your color guard, it usually takes time to raise enough funding to replace it. Ask vendors to send you a brand sample before bulk ordering to avoid spending countless hours rehearsing on equipment that isn't productive for your students.

A FEW COLOR GUARD EQUIPMENT VENDORS...

WOODWIND BRASSWIND

<http://www.wwbw.com>

800-348-5003

REEDS & THINGS

<http://www.reedsandthings.com>

703-339-9694

SABERLINE

<http://sabreline.net>

954-974-7980

THE GUARD ROOM

<http://www.theguardroom.com>

937.885.1876

THE BAND HALL

<http://www.thebandhall.com>

800-398-3064

STYLE PLUS

<http://www.styleplusband.com>

ALGY TEAM SPIRIT

<http://www.algyteam.com>

800-458-2549

