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| **Focus****By Lauren C.**Oklahoma, Age 16http://teacher.scholastic.com/writeit/images/popprintable_10.jpgThe roar of the crowd was slowly fading, although in my head it seemed miles away. Finally, silence set in, with the exception of the smooth gusts of wind, fluttering of the color-guard flags, and a minuscule ticking of a metronome. My eyes were focused on the top of the stands, and I knew that this was where the judges lurked. I couldn't see them, but somehow I felt their eyes burning holes in the large feathery poles that emerged from the top of our hats. They would make absolutely sure that none of those black feathers budged more than it took to make them sparkle. I ignored the burning sensation in my lower back, as my arms begged me to drop my instrument, to grant them relaxation. I took a lengthy moment in making certain that my back was straight, and my presence forward, weight balanced over the arches of my feet, heels nearly hovering over the artificial grass field.A voice suddenly interrupted my silent mind. The drum major had called us to attention with a bellowing, “BAND, HORNS UP!” His voice was stern, heavy, and it echoed in my head as I snapped my horn down and into my mouth in two counts. One would think this would break my concentration, but somehow it strengthened it; every second leading up to the end of the opener grew more and more intense.My eyes glanced at the drum major as my neck remained stiff; the fact that a large plume would give even my most discrete movements away never left my mind. I followed his hands as his arms danced and waved when he began conducting. drops of sweat now plummeted down my face, body begging for a gust of wind, a drop of water, anything other than heat. I began to grit my teeth, counting each beat in my mind as my body responded accordingly. My legs had begun to carry me, and I hadn't realized it. It was as if I was on some sort of autopilot, and this registered as negative in my mind. Although my head ticked with counts, movements, music, style, and other various aspects of marching, I somehow remained on this autopilot mode.Legs as straight as I could make them and knees burning I floated over the field, fitting myself, a puzzle piece, into each complicated form. As my fingers doodled and scattered across key holes and levers, I pictured myself as if I were outside of my own body, watching intently to catch my own mistakes. Everything suddenly muffled: the music, the soft breeze, even the screaming pain that my knees felt as I kept them pushed back, straight as a board (mind you, this is difficult to do while trying to move). Within that moment, I realized: every ounce of effort I had put into this show was now exploding. We had been working on our show for months, since the summer, and it was now nearly October. Energy overcame me. How was it that I was not exhausted?It was as if a mysterious energy weaved throughout the band, traveling with us as we marched from set to set. Surely I was not the only member feeling this. No. This was certainly a full band connection. Before I could dwell on the unknown forces, the last pieces of the giant puzzle fell into place and I stood once again in that unnatural position, body pulled up, teeth clinched, knees back. I was a board –- a plank of wood-- sticking straight up out of the ground. The last note came to a halt as did the drum major's arms. His hands, tightly fisted, flew to cut us off and automatically gave us the command for horns down. In two counts I snapped my clarinet out of my mouth and up into the air, the words “and down” flowing through my mind as well as across my lips. It was over.The score we would receive from the judges did not matter now, for all members of the band had undoubtedly performed at their highest level. As the feeling of satisfaction set in among us all, I sighed, my body beginning to be audible to my mind as it recognized both exhaustion and pain.Bus loaded, we began to head back to the school. I swore I could still hear the distant roar of the crowd's echo in my head and a grin crossed my lips. State Contest had been quite an experience this year, as it was every year. The energy in which the band had experienced never left my mind and I began to feel eager for the next season, as if it would start the next day. |

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