

Ambassadors for American Music

Elon Jazz Ensemble complete European-Tour

Anna Johnson
Summer Editor

Two encores and a standing ovation later, Jon Metzger was proud of his students.

Metzger, associate professor of music and director of the Elon University Jazz Ensemble, led 22 students on a 10-day European concert tour.

"There were so many (highlights)," Metzger said. "Playing for 5,000 at a festival outside of The Hague. Playing at the little white house was another big highlight. And the response at Denmark. Two encores is a big deal and (the students) deserved it because they worked so hard and played so well."

The group left June 10 and visited The Netherlands, Denmark and Germany. The students performed at several locations including the U.S. Embassy in Germany, the Darling Market in Schevenigen and at the International School of Hamburg.

"The bottom line is that the entire trip was an awesome experience," sophomore John Mullen said. "The places we saw, where we performed and the people we met were all extremely enlightening. The best part for me by far was being able to meet and talk with other jazz musicians who truly appreciate the music."

Mullen plays the drums in the Jazz Ensemble and he said he was grateful for the chance to play abroad for those who appreciated the style of music.

"My only regret is that the styles of jazz, swing and big band are more appreciated around the world than they are here in the U.S.," he said.

Plans for the trip began in the winter and preparation continued throughout the spring.

"There was a lot of hard work and planning," Metzger

said. "They rehearsed two days a week so there was a lot involved. But we had an outstanding group that came together so well and worked so hard."

Before the group left for Europe, the students traveled to local middle and high schools to perform and give improvisation workshops.

"These run-outs were a great experience because we got to practice for our tour while also doing a great service for the students," senior Kaitlyn Fay said. "Not every middle and high school student gets to hear a great college jazz ensemble play for free."

Visiting the local schools were part of the service learning aspect of the trip, Metzger said.

"Our students loved it," he said. "I think it was a great opportunity for them to see how far they have come since their high school years."

It was through several bake sales, a car wash and donations, Fay said, they were able to raise funds for the trip. The tour cost each student a little under \$3,000 and the students were able to raise \$20,000 of the \$80,000 needed for the trip.

The band had to play under a variety of circumstances, Fay said, but there was nothing she would change about the trip.

"The tour was an incredibly educational experience — in being an ambassador and in being a traveling musician," she said. Metzger agreed.

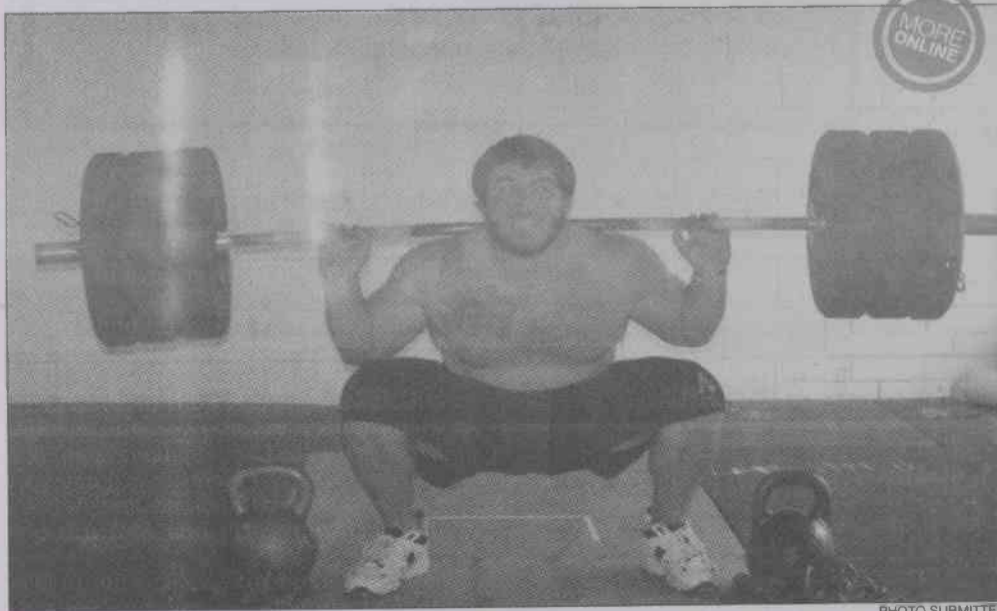
"When European audiences see this is what American students are like they see great ambassadors for our program, for our university and also American jazz music," he said. "They handled themselves really well."



Top: The Elon University Jazz Ensemble traveled to three countries including The Netherlands. The group played for more than 5,000 Jazz fans at the Darling Market. Bottom Left: Sophomore John Mullen, drummer, meets with a jazz student at an improvisation workshop at the Roskilde Music School near Copenhagen. The students traveled to various music schools for similar workshops while abroad. Bottom Right: The Jazz Ensemble were featured in the Roskilde Jazz Days Festival near Copenhagen. While jazz was the theme of the trip the group also performed classical music.

Burlington native headed to Highland Games Championship

Math teacher chosen to compete in largest tournament in North America



Local math teacher Wes Kiser prepares for the Amateur World Highland Champion Games in Minneapolis, Minn.

Anna Johnson
Summer Editor

For one local high school math teacher, it's time to grab the kilt.

Wes Kiser, 24, may be the only Alamance County resident to compete in the Highland Games, but he's one of the best amateur competitors in the country.

In August, Kiser will pack his bags for Minneapolis, Minn. to try his luck in the Amateur World Champion Games.

That was four years ago, and Kiser has been hooked ever since.

"It is fun to compete," he said. "It's one of the few games you can show up and even if someone is not as good as you, everyone is helping each other out."

The games don't take away from his teaching duties or his commitment as a football coach at Bartlett Yancey High School. The Highland Games, he said, is one of the few sports where an athlete could still have a normal life.

"I'm looking forward to (the games)," Kiser said. "I'll face some real tough competition. I haven't seen in a while. There are only a couple of games where I have real close competition."

The idea of competing in the Highland Games was first introduced to Kiser while he was in college. He was on Appalachian State University's track and field team where he threw shot put, and his coach mentioned the games.

"People always ask, 'You throw the telephone pole?'" he said. "My students always want to see the kilt."

Some of his students were able to watch him compete at the Grandfather Mountain games. His parents and his trainer, Matt Ledbetter, also often attend the games.

"I'll tell you this," Ledbetter said. "It was exciting to know that I work with the No. 1 competitor. He just blows people away."

The crowds often have their favorites, Ledbetter said, but Kiser tends to capture their attention when he competes.

"Wes gets up there and throws 30 feet farther than the No. 1 guy," he said. "The crowd's like, 'Whoa,' and they go crazy."

Regardless if Kiser is in the on or off season, his training schedule is intense. Wes trains four days out of the week for several hours. Ledbetter mixes up the routine by using traditional weight exercising and strong man activities. Some of these strong man activities include tire flips and heavy medicine ball throwing.

"He'll do well (in the championship)," Ledbetter said. "He'll get pushed, and then he'll dominate."

As a trainer, he said, it was his job to help Kiser reach his full potential and help flip the switch that makes him a stronger competitor.

"I want to have a real good game day," Kiser said. "If I can have a decent game and place in the top three, that will be great. If I win I'll be ecstatic."

No matter what the outcome, Ledbetter said he'll be proud of Kiser.

"His character is probably the best thing about him," he said. "To be 6 (feet) 2 (inches) and 290 (pounds), he's one of the nicest guys. And as far as work ethic, he's the kind of guy football coaches say they wish they had '10 or 11 just like him.'"