

## TWIRLER'S GOT TALENT

### Clyde baton whiz will compete on national TV Tuesday

Originally published in *The Blade* on Friday, August 29, 2008

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CLYDE, Ohio — Jonathan Burkin doesn't just play with fire. He twirls it, tosses it, even throws it. It flickers from the tips of his batons as he swirls around the stage like a young man possessed.

There were days when some people used to make fun of him for this. They would say mean things and bully him for being a male baton twirler.

That's OK, because David Hasselhoff digs it. Ditto for the other judges on the NBC reality show *America's Got Talent* who selected the 18-year-old from this town southeast of Fremont as one of the program's top 40 competitors.

On Tuesday, Mr. Burkin will perform live on the show, vying against singers, dancers, impersonators, and others for \$1 million. It will be broadcast locally on WNWO-TV, Channel 24, at 8 p.m.

After Mr. Burkin's initial crowd-pleasing audition in Chicago earlier this year — a high-energy routine tossing three fire batons to the tune "The Devil Went Down to Georgia" — Hasselhoff was effusive in his praise.

"You know, all those kids who called you names can shove it!" the former star of *Knight Rider* and *Baywatch* shouted. "You know why? Because you've got talent and they don't, and I'm proud of you for sticking with your dream. You are what this show is about."

Mr. Burkin's unlikely trip to the reality TV universe began at the age of 4 when he saw a feature twirler for the local high school band performing with fire batons.

"I thought it was the coolest thing I'd ever seen," Mr. Burkin told the Blade. "I came home that night and broke a twig off that tree and started twirling it."

#### VIDEOS

[Interview with Burkin  
His Chicago audition](#)

Two years and numerous sticks and toy batons later, he started taking lessons. Eventually, Mr. Burkin joined the Hi Society Baton Corps out of Fremont as the only male member. (Today, he is one of two in the 65-person group.)

A man in a traditionally female discipline, Mr. Burkin remembers being harassed by other kids, especially in eighth grade. He'd get prank phone calls.

Someone taped his locker shut. A bench in front of the school had to be repainted — twice — after someone scrawled nasty comments about him on it.

"People hated me," Mr. Burkin said. It was a minority, he added, but "people that did make fun of me made it hell."

Doug and Denise Burkin saw how much it hurt their son.

"There were times that Doug and I seriously wondered: Should he stay with it? I mean, in the long run, what will it do to him?" his mother said.

No one said anything to her face, but there were times at parades when she would hear some disparaging comment from the crowd.



Jonathan Burkin is preparing to compete on "America's Got Talent." (THE BLADE/JEREMY WADSWORTH)

"Sometimes we would just walk by and let it go. Sometimes ... I'd have to stop and just say a few words," Mrs Burkin said.

Things improved later in high school, Jonathan Burkin said, as more people appreciated his talent and he became more self-assured.

He was successful too. At last count, about 280 sparkling trophies were sitting in his garage. Mr. Burkin has been crowned a national champion in each of the last three years by different organizations, and he also qualified to compete in the world championships in Belgium in April.

It's no accident. Knowing how others in and out of the sport might view him, he resolved to answer naysayers with his performances.

"If you're going to do something that's different, you have to make sure you do it well," Mr. Burkin said.

During the summer, he practices two to three hours every night and spends at least 12 hours training each Tuesday.

"With baton you have to make sacrifices," he said.

One of them was not getting his driver's license, since he decided he couldn't take two weeks off to receive driver's education instruction. Another has been to defer for a year his dream of attending Ohio State University, where the young man hopes to study nursing and one day be drum major.

Because of *America's Got Talent*, his inability to drive, and the upcoming world championships, he has enrolled for this year at Tiffin University, where his mother works as assistant to the vice president of enrollment management.

Even with this change in plan he only had time to attend the first day of regular classes Monday before flying to Los Angeles to prepare for the TV show, which is hosted by Jerry Springer and whose other judges include Sharon Osbourne and Piers Morgan.

Tuesday's episode will mark Mr. Burkin's third performance for the show. After his initial audition, he did a routine in Las Vegas to the tune of "Footloose."

Each original routine has been purposefully designed to build upon the last, increasing in difficulty and energy, he said. He wouldn't reveal what particular skills or song he'll use next week, only saying, "The lyrics portray my attitude."

This time it's the television audience, not the judges, who determines who stays on the show. Mr. Burkin's coach hopes viewers will enjoy it but also be changed by it.

"We want to show that it's a sport," said DeDee Carte, a director of Hi Society who thinks more boys will be captivated by the activity. "It takes a true athlete to be able to do it. It's not just about flipping a baton."

That's something a few of Mr. Burkin's former tormentors may have finally realized, even if it's a bittersweet victory for him.

"It's weird looking back now because it takes someone being on TV to make kids that used to make fun of me say: Oh, I'm really sorry," he said.

As he prepares for his next appearance, the Clyde teen refuses to daydream just yet about how he would spend the \$1 million in prize money.

"I would love to win but the chances that I'm going to win are not great," he said.

He just says he's grateful for the support of his hometown and the little perks that come with being on television.

"Being noticed at the grocery store is nice," he said.

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