

PERFORMANCE
GROWS WITH

PASSION

BY: AMY SCHUTT

Emily Coxwell practicing at
the Peach Bowl in 2017



It smells like sweat. Runners wiz by, troops for Auburn Sing rehearse for competition and tumbling lessons are afoot. The Coliseum, once used for Auburn basketball games, has been replaced for many years by the shinier Arena for the university's official rivalries. Now, it's become a make-shift community

center utilized by students and citizens alike. In the spring, you'll find its participation up-swing with women rehearsing for a group you've seen a lot of but don't really understand: color-guard.

At Auburn, you've seen these women everywhere. On game-days, they're treated as local celebrities. People flock to the sequin-clad beauties like moths to a flame. Bystanders ask if the girls could take a picture with their toddlers. Obliging, the entertainment squats down to eye level with the little ones and gives them their swing flag to pose with. (A swing flag is a small piece of equipment about a yard long in which to swing about the body. A standard flag is usually 5 1/2 to 6 feet tall; Not swing-able.) Parents coo as they snap a picture of someone they've never met hugging their children. But that doesn't matter; On the mantel it goes!

This is a scene I know well because for four years, I too was a member of this group. And I can tell you from experience that, though the micro fame is as fun as it looks, it's much more than that. It's a sport that takes hard work and dedication. That's something Emily Coxwell knows well.

"You're running around doing what you need to do for the show and you have to have these bursts of energy that you have to conjure up," said Coxwell. "You have to have strength.

That doesn't mean, however, that she automatically makes the team. Just like everyone else, Coxwell has to audition every year. As a result, she's been working on her audition routine for weeks. Her song is "Crazy = Genius" by Panic! At The Disco. She performs it for me in the coliseum with the energy of what I imagine a squirrel hopped up on Adderall would look like. She gives it punch. Her blond hair flies as the flag flips around in her hand, giant grin fixed into place. She executes moves like 45-tosses, high kicks, leaps, flat tosses, turns and silk tricks.

Through all the flare, she makes you feel the music. The frantic craziness that is Brendon Urie comes through like a cosmic wave. Watching her breathless performance, it's easy to recognize the duality in this activity. It's surely a sport. But, it's also an art.

"We provide visuals for people; we're trying to entertain; it is a form of art," said Coxwell. She elaborates, "People consider dance an art. People consider theater an art. And we're kind of doing similar things to those programs...We're doing a bunch of things that are considered art, I just don't think people tend to think of it as art. They don't think 'oh they're painting or doing this,' but [we] really are creating a show."

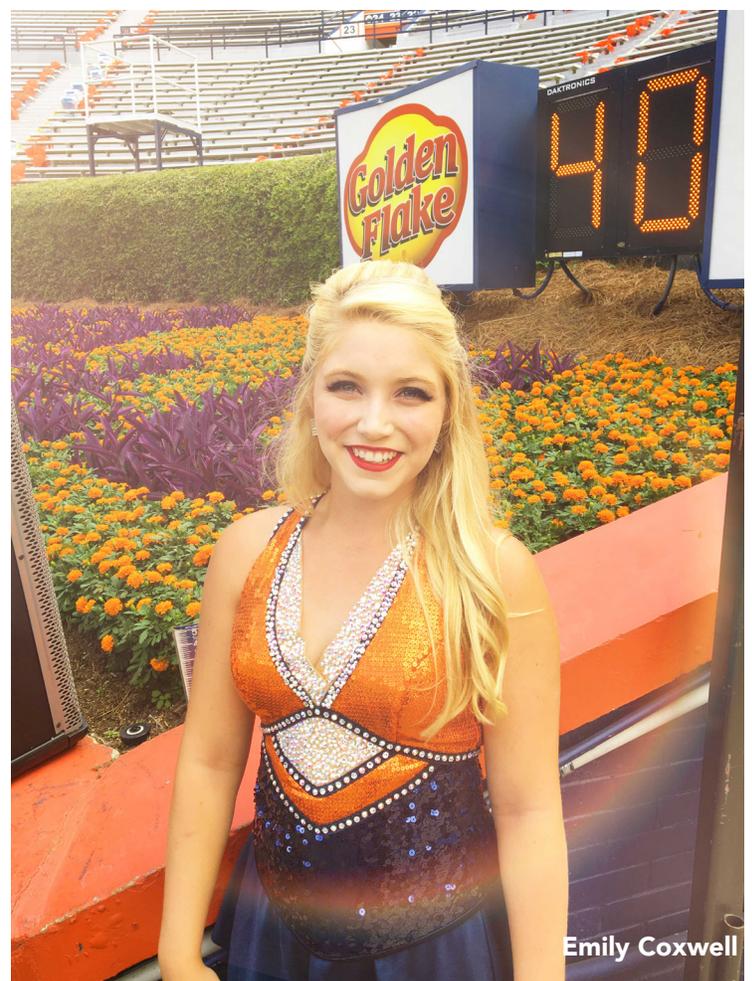
This isn't her first time choreographing a routine. Coxwell has been a part of three performing ensembles and has written for all of them. She started out like most of us do when exploring a new craft: throwing together the fundamentals. In high school, where she was captain of her guard in Tallahassee, Florida, she first wrote routines for their auditions.

Having a strong core helps with things like presenting yourself and having good posture... You're having to do chassés and sautés and all these things that requires so much muscle. Particularly with auburn, when we do pregame, it turns your calves into just these muscles things. There's just so much more to it."

Coxwell was co-captain for the 2017 season of the Auburn University Marching Band (AUMB) flag line and is running for captain as she enters her senior year.



Left: Brook Couch
Middle: Allison Eason
Right: Emily Coxwell



Emily Coxwell



Far Left: Brook Couch Middle Left: Rachel Bolden Middle Right: Emily Coxwell Far Right: Mary Emma McLaughlin

BUILDING THE SKILL

“I was just trying to make something that was similar but different to what we’d done in years past,” said Coxwell. “I used a lot of Jenny’s moves (Coxwell’s instructor from high school) because they were all I knew. That’s what I had been exposed to. Now, I really wasn’t the type of person who would look up color-guard videos [on YouTube]. I just used what I was given in years past to come up with something because it was the first time I had ever choreographed anything.”

Coxwell has come a long way. Since then, she’s written routines for the AUMB flag line and for individuals auditioning for other programs. Recently, her skills have extended beyond creation and into coaching by helping a freshman at Auburn High School prepare for their auditions.

After demonstrating to me the progress she’s made on her audition routine, Coxwell’s young pupil, Kate Mills, and mother, Jessica Mills, walk into the coliseum. Teacher and student get right to the lesson while mom and I lean against the white-washed walls.

At first, mom seems intense. She corrects her daughter throughout the lesson and admits that she made her cry the day before. But, after all, the audition is tomorrow and Kate still has a lot of work to do. After a while, though, it’s easy to see the warmth Mills feels for Kate. This is the first thing Kate has been involved in, and she wants her to have a normal high school experience filled with friends and fun. Though, so far, Kate hasn’t had the easiest time at school. She has a lisp and recently had some issue with bullying. Mills becomes teary-eyed as she describing Coxwell as “a God-sent.”

**"She's been
so good-
so good
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Like, life
changing."**

"She's been so good—so good with her. Like, life changing good."

Eventually, it's 9 p.m. and the coliseum is closing. We all walk to the parking lot together, and Mills hugs me goodbye. Though Coxwell didn't finish her routine today, she feels slightly more prepared for the six-hour audition that awaits her and 50 other women in the coming weeks.

Admittedly, I'm glad that part of my life is over. No more 5 a.m. call-times or concussions. Yet, there's nothing like marching out in front of 80,000 people once a week. Looking at someone like Kate who's just learning to be a performer, to put in sweat, to break bones (or teeth in my case) and to express herself, I'm a little envious. Regardless, I'm comforted knowing that this weird sport, filled with misfits, will continue on.

Kate made the line.

Far Left: Darion Williams **Middle Left:** Hannah O'Brien
Middle Right: Haley Kinchler **Far Right:** Emily Coxwell

