Band lacks pep

It may have been a friendly "Battle of the Bands" Saturday night at Marquette's Lakeview Arena, but it was no contest from start to finish.

Michigan Tech's pep band won hands down.

Not that Northern Michigan University's pep band didn't try at the MTU-NMU hockey game. It did. But the effort and enthusiasm nowhere near matched that of the Tech band.

It was disappointing. Maybe even embarrassing. Northern's pep band was supposed to spark both the crowd and Northern's icos with some snappy fight tunes. It failed to do either. I've heard more noise at a funeral.

I was a fan at the hockey game instead of the Journal's sports editor Saturday night. As a fan, I expected to be lifted right out of my seat by Northern's band. I expected to be both entertained and energized. And when the Wildcat icos needed a lift in the third period, I expected the band to ignite the team to bigger and better things.

Instead, I got a band that played just four times (by my count) in the final period and failed to stir any emotion in me whatsoever. I could easily have fallen asleep had it not been for Tech's small — but energetic — pep band, directed by Mike Griffith.

I was ready to hang each member of the NMU band in effigy after the game. At the very least, I was ready to disown the Northern band entirely and demand its ouster from the arena. I wasn't alone, either.

But then I talked with NMU band director Alan Black. Monday. The more I talked with Black, a music instructor in his first year at the university, the more I began to understand why Tech's band was so superior to Northern's Saturday night.

First off, the Huskies have been using pep bands for 20 or 25 years, according to MTU sports information director Dennis Hanks. In addition, the MTU band is made up of two groups, the Silver and Gold bands, one plays Friday nights, the other Saturday nights.

Black pointed out that in comparison with Tech's veteran — and multi-member — band, Northern's is just in its first year. It was formed in October and 40 students showed interest. Now the number of active band members ranges from 15-30, with about 20 the norm. All are volunteers.

"We try to practice for an hour each Tuesday, but most of the students are music majors and when other (music) events are going on, they have to go to those," Black said. Saturday night an Upper Peninsula Youth Orchestra performance was being held and the pep band lost two of its tuba players to that.

Tech's band makes a lot of noise with cymbals and a the Huskies play, you have nothing hearing them.

Black says the Tech band can't use a drum set at the Student Ice Arena in Houghton because of some cramped quarters, whereas Northern has enough room for such a set at Lakeview Arena. Black added he doesn't have a choice of what instruments will be played at Northern's games, either. Those who show up, play.

"We had a real good group in the beginning, but it has dwindled down," he said. "I guess the students don't want to take the time to do it. Some get busy with other things. But the kids who come out are happy to be there. They do what they can. It's a small group and comparing them with a larger group is hard."

The Tech band members chant, run into different sections of the bands and wear jazzy red-and-gold uniforms (overalls). They also seem to have endless different musical pieces to play.

Northern, meanwhile, has no uniforms. Only hats. Uniforms may come down the line, if some money is raised. NMU band members sit airy quietly in their seats and have about 40 songs in their folder.

"But we can't play much with the short amount of time we have to play during the game," Black said.

I sympathize with Black's plight. He's starting something from scratch, with no money to boost the band's image and no guidelines from which to direct his group.

So before issuing the NMU pep band a failing grade for lack of style,azz and technique, we should give it a chance to grow and bring that music up to passing or better. It needs time to develop.

But a lot of improvement is needed. Of that there's no doubt.