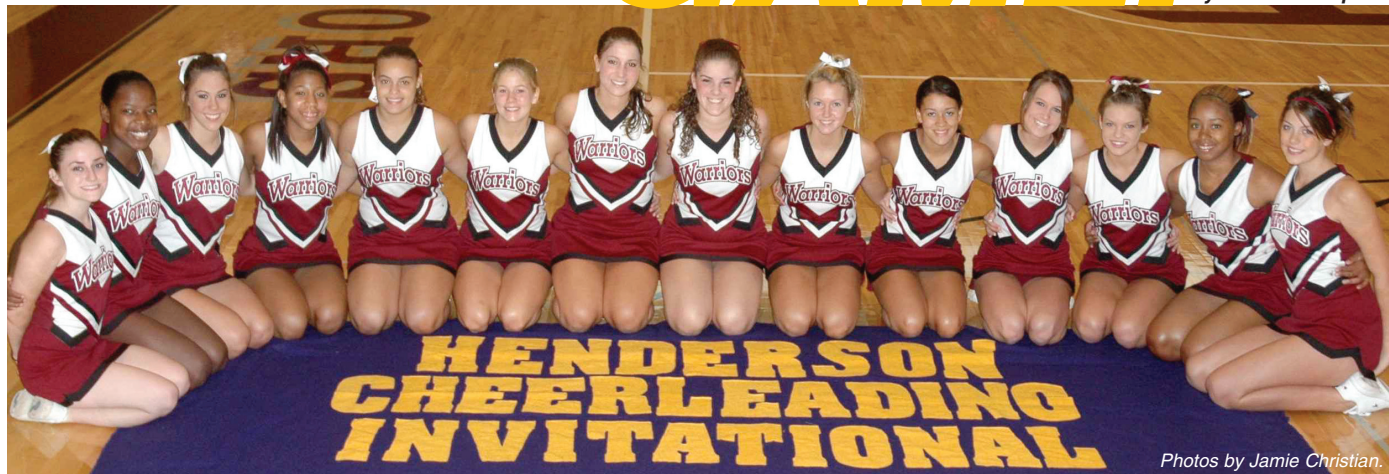


We ARE the GAME!

By Charles Peeples



You'll find them, on any given weekend from November through March, jamming high school auditoriums across the nation: Hundreds of tidy and fresh-scrubbed girls, urgently energetic, dressed to show -bright uniforms, hair drawn back with identical bows, some makeup (but not too much!)... and deadly serious. In their short lifetimes it's always been this way. But it wasn't long ago that this juggernaut called "cheerleading" wasn't even a sport. Certainly most of us boomers recall little more than the pretty girls with pom-poms jumping up and down with their silly chants on the sidelines of the football and basketball games. Heck, as late as the early 80s, the most visible icon of this institutionalized eye-candy was on teen boys' walls in the form of the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders poster, anticipating a day when the Hooters chain would serve it with burgers and beer. But a sport? No way!



It took about a century, from Princeton's male-led "Rah rah rah, tiger tiger tiger, sis sis sis, boom boom boom ahhhhhhh, Princeton Princeton Princeton!" through the female takeover in the middle of the last century (in the dearth of female collegiate sports then). Then came the high-school yum-yum girls, followed by the NFL's introduction of big-time glamor and sophisticated dance moves in the 1970s. Somewhere about this time, building on Title IX, the popularity of gymnastics darlings like Olga and Nadia, and the onset of video, 'cheerleading' as a sport began to take shape. With the help of break-dancing, hip-hop and films like "Flashdance," the whole thing became truly athletic, with difficult stunts and gymnastics de rigeur rather than the exception. Organizations like the AACCA and NSCCE were formed to oversee safety regulations and the certification of coaches. More groups were spawned for the purpose of organizing competitions from the regional to international level. Today there are estimated to be over four million cheerleading participants in the US alone.

The film "Bring It On" and its sequels depict a world of closely guarded routine secrets and cutthroat competition. Lisa Ramos, who coaches the varsity squad at West Chester's Henderson High,

the site of Chester County's premier tournament, dismisses it, "There is always pressure to have something that no one else has, but you don't want anything too "out there." Our routines are developed by the coaches, outside resources and the girls... they must own some of the routine."

"The Routine" includes a music section followed by a cheer/crowd leading section and concluding with another music section. "Music's VERY important, with most squads spending hundreds of dollars to have a one minute recording of songs and sound effects," notes Jessica Pezolano, another coach. "Competition judging is based on numerous factors- music, appearance, cheer, dance, stunting (including pyramids and partner stunts), gymnastics, jumps, spirit, safety, overall crowd appeal, and deductions." As in any other sport, the rules and regulations change. "Just this year we were told that we could now do 'inverted stunts,' which in the past was illegal," notes Ramos. "I had to be trained on how to spot these and how to teach the girls to spot and perform them. Other squads would be doing them, and we don't want to be left behind!"

Of course the downside of being a "real" competitive sport is the risk of injury; media stories have highlighted incidences of paralysis and even death from extreme stunts gone wrong. Statistics showed competitive cheerleading accounting for fifty-five percent of injuries among all scholastic female athletes. Pezolano, a former All-American cheerleading star with numerous awards and titles, knows a thing or two about the hazards behind



the glamor. "Two minor concussions, fractured nose, countless sprained ankles, severe shin splints, pulled/torn hamstrings, ACL reconstructive surgery on my left knee, torn ligaments in my ankles and wrists, black eyes, bloody noses, broken blood vessels...just to name a few.

Cheerleading's dangerous: you're holding someone extended above your head at least 5.5 feet off the ground, or you're being held 5.5 feet off the ground and the only thing keeping you from falling are two girls holding your feet. That's why it's so

important that girls are taught everything in a progression. You never advance to a difficult stunt before you master the easier ones. Unfortunately, a lot of coaches and cheerleaders get too ambitious and try stunts that they know are too advanced for them; that's why people get hurt. There are always extra spotters when we're trying out a new stunt, and we require the girls get training how to spot properly. We also have very strict rules pertaining to the types of stunting they're allowed to do."

"In-season's very rigorous; we practice or have games four days a week, sometimes more if a competition is nearing. Our season goes from late August (with pre-camp "boot camp" practices in the AM and the PM) until the middle of February. During those months, the girls must cheer for football, basketball and competition. Very demanding! Off-season doesn't last very long, as try-outs start in March and summer practice start in July. If girls aren't stretched enough or strong enough they'll strain tendons or ligaments, so we encourage them to work out, and we hold optional cheer/gymnastics clinics at a local gymnastics gym."

It's quite a triumph. Beyond the increased popularity, numbers, and sophistication, cheerleading's done something special: no longer the clique of the school hottie-elite, it's become accessible and merit-based. No longer of mere sideline entertainment fluff at the game, it's earned the right to be called a sport - a demanding, often dangerous one at that. If cheerleading were any easier it would be called football! Cheerleading has national and international titles, with huge audiences coming just to watch them... *just them!* Cheerleading's not just at the game, cheerleading *is* the Game!



Charles Peeples, NSCA-CPT, NCTMB, whose articles have appeared in numerous fitness and bodybuilding magazines, is a well-known proponent for girls' and women's physical advancement (www.teamvalkyries.org). In addition to being a Nationally-Certified Personal Trainer, he is a Nationally-Certified Massage Therapist (www.yourlocalpersonaltrainer.com).