How the Evolution of Cheerleading Impacts the Participating Cheerleaders

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Abstract

This paper is about how the evolution of cheerleading impacts the participating cheerleaders. I researched the academic, social, emotional, mental, and physical impacts. I conducted this research in order to determine whether the various increasing demands of cheerleading has a positive or negative impact on the cheerleaders. In general, the students performed well in school, were involved in other extra-curricular activities, had above average physical abilities, developed strong social skills, and formed bonds with teammates. The emotional and mental state of the cheerleaders were hard to measure given the small sample size and lack of interviewees. The overall responses from the current and former cheerleaders showed that participating in cheerleading has a positive impact on their lives. Due to the lack of data from former and current cheerleaders, I was unable to display a comparison on how the evolution of cheerleading impacted the former and current cheerleaders. Although there were generally positive responses from both former and current cheerleaders, a larger sample size from a wider range of cheerleaders on varying teams, different time periods, and different regions (Northeast, South, Mid-West, West, etc.) would need to be surveyed and interviewed to achieve more concrete results.
1. Introduction

1.1 The Purpose of this Research

Student involvement in sports and extra-curricular activities have shown to have an impact on their social, emotional, mental, academic, and physical development. As cheerleading has evolved to a more demanding sport, it is important to look at how this may impact the participating cheerleaders. Understanding how the athletes are being impacted provides useful information so that the coaches, administrators, parents, and affiliated organizations can provide better resources for the athletes.

Participating in cheerleading allows athletes to form bonds and life-long friendships not only with their classmates, but also with other athletes from all over the world. Social development is vital because it leads to enhancing skillsets that are necessary for cooperative learning, collaboration, critical thinking, and problem solving skills. Furthermore, it is a platform for developing skills in conflict resolution. The athletes learn how to be part of a team that requires the same effort from all members to succeed, as well as knowing how to be a humble winner, while also being able to learn from mistakes from a loss. Athletes take these skills into other social situations, the classroom environment, and into professional settings as adults. An athlete’s character and moral principles can be positively developed through team activities and training. Looking further into the varying factors of the importance of an athlete’s social development will allow coaches, administrators, and involved organizations to better train those responsible for the athlete’s experiences. Conducting more research on the social experiences of competitive cheerleaders will allow the sport to progress in a more positive and productive direction. Numerous studies have shown that children who play sports perform better at school (NDFAdmin 12). Students who are not socially accepted get bullied often or spend time worrying about “fitting in.” When this occurs, students could end up losing focus on their studies and, consequently, this could lead to poor academic performance. Most cheerleading programs require athletes to maintain a specific grade-
point average to remain part of the team or receive scholarships. In addition to the social relief of peer acceptance, being physically active helps stimulate brain function and improve cognitive function. In general, exercise helps improve memory and cognition. The benefits of exercise come directly from its ability to reduce insulin resistance, reduce inflammation, and stimulate the release of growth factors—chemicals in the brain that affect the health of brain cells, the growth of new blood vessels in the brain, and even the abundance and survival of new brain cells (Godman 4). Sports and exercise also improve mood and sleep, reduces stress and anxiety, regulates and reduces weight gain, and overall generally allows for maintenance of your body’s health. Being able to display the benefits of participating in competitive cheerleading will aid in support for current and future cheerleading programs as well as reduce the stereotype of cheerleaders not being real athletes.

The psychology of coaching, sociology of competitive cheerleading, and feminism in sports are all additional factors that have an impact on athletes and their teams. There has been numerous research that demonstrates the positive influence engaging coaches have on their teams when compared to uninvolved ones (Smith; Smoll). In addition, certain demographics and availability of resources play a role in shaping the dynamics of a competitive cheerleading team. Athletes who live in urban vs suburban areas, or who grew up in low vs high income households, have different cheerleading experiences. Furthermore, Feminism is a key factor in the development of the female competitive cheerleader. We’re witnessing increased involvement by females in sports today. Title IX has been impacting competitive cheerleading in schools by providing athletes with equal opportunities. Before Title IX, one in 27 girls played sports and today, two in five girls play in sports (Olmstead 3). Overall, a positive environment and reinforcement are aspects that impact the development of competitive cheerleaders, However, a number of challenges impact their development as well.
1.2 History

Competitive cheerleading has evolved over the decades, from a group of individuals on the sidelines to becoming its own sport, holding competitions and highly demanding training sessions. While various forms of crowd cheering and chanting have been around for thousands of years, this activity at University games was documented during the 1860’s as an “Ivy League” practice. However, in 1884 Princeton University graduate Thomas Peebles brought the idea of organizing crowds to cheer for their home team at football games to the University of Minnesota (UM). In November of 1898, student Johnny Campbell led the crowd in chants and cheers on the football field during one competition between the University of Minnesota and Northwestern University (a Chicago-based university) (ICU 2). Campbell’s “cheerleading” efforts were a huge success and he became the first official cheerleading athlete. Following the next few decades, the concept of cheerleading and the act of entertaining the crowd spread to other university and high school sporting events throughout the United States. As cheerleading grew as a sport, new techniques were developed to further entertain and motivate crowds such as the use of signs, flags, megaphones, poms, arm motions, simple partner stunts, and tumbling skills.

With the growing popularity of cheerleading as a sport came the development of its techniques. Performance Cheer Disciplines were introduced between 1930-1940. This style was partially inspired by the marching styles of school-based Reserve Military Officer Training Corps cadets as well as a way to include more female athletes in the sporting event environment (ICU 2). With these changes, “Performance Cheer” in the style of “High Kick” was created. Kay Teer Crawford and Gussie Nell Davis from Texas were responsible for this transition.

In 1930, Kay Teer Crawford created a new style of cheer, mixing cheerleading with the military marching high kick style (e.g. “Drill Team”) of the time, and thus introduced the Edinburg High School
“Seargenettes (ICU 2).” This team performed to the school’s marching band music throughout the game.

In the same decade, high school physical education teacher Gussie Nell Davis was hired by Kilgore College in East Texas, to form an all-female cheerleading team and entertain the crowds at Kilgore College’s sporting events’ “timeouts” and “half-times” (ICU 2). In 1939, at a Kilgore College football game, Davis introduced the cheerleaders as the Kilgore College “Rangerettes” (ICU 2). The new Drill Team and Performance Cheer High Kick style of cheerleading quickly grew in popularity throughout the US and new teams were created at schools and universities.

Originally, the majority of cheerleaders (also known as “Yell Leaders”) were men. However, women then dominated the sport around 1941, estimated at 85%, when the United States entered World War II, as many men were drafted in the military (ICU 3). By 1949, Cheer Education Organizations developed and continued to grow. Since cheerleading became dominated by female athletes during and post World War II, there became a demand for further Cheer education to athletes around the US. In 1949-Lawrence “Herkie” Herkimer was asked to administer a Cheerleading educational clinic at Texas Teachers College for Cheerleaders requesting education (now called Sam Houston State University) (ICU 3). Herkimer’s first clinic had 52 Cheerleaders, and with the success of the first clinic came a second clinic that consisted of 350 Cheerleaders. With this success, Herkimer launched an organization called the National Cheerleaders Association (NCA). Following the expansion of NCA, the group worked on developing greater team organization with Cheerleading, furthered Cheerleading technique development, created more advanced basic partner stunt skills, and enhanced crowd techniques. The signature NCA jump, called the “Herkie” (named after NCA’s founder), was one of the skills added to NCA’s education.

As the demand for Cheer education grew, other organizations were soon established, one of which is Robert Olmstead’s United Spirit Association (USA), established in California in 1950 (first to initiate
Cheer half-time shows at NFL Games). Another major organization is the Universal Cheerleaders Association (UCA), which was founded in 1974 by former University of Oklahoma Cheerleader, NCA Head Instructor, NCA Vice President and current ICU President, Jeff Webb (credited as the Founder of Modern Day Cheerleading) (ICU 3). These organizations and others throughout the US have been introducing new concepts to further advance Cheerleading and Performance Cheer.

Many new cheerleading skills were quickly developed with Webb and UCA such as: the Liberty, Elevator, Basket Tosses, Toss Stunts, and a wide variety of the advanced Pyramids. These skills are a major foundation to competitive cheer. During UCA’s camps, these skills were put to music, then into a routine, thus creating the concept of the Cheerleading Competition. By 1982, Webb placed the Cheerleading and Performance Cheer competition format on National television (ESPN) (ICU 3).

Through the 1970’s and 1980’s, the demand for more entertainment and variety increased. More specifically, for indoor sports such as basketball. As a result, Performance Cheer athletes introduced new styles of “Jazz” and “Hip Hop” (in addition to “High Kick” and “Pom”) to be performed at games. This was shortly added to the ESPN Performance Cheer Competition Broadcasts. Once the ESPN broadcasts grabbed the attention of global viewers, cheer began to spread to new countries around the world; including but not limited to Japan, Chile, Germany, United Kingdom, Finland, Sweden and Norway (ICU 4). Private gyms began hosting All-star Cheerleading programs as well to keep up with the growing demand of cheerleading. In 2003, the United States All Star Federation (USASF) was established to promote consistency of All Star Cheerleading competition rules in the USA and to administer the “Cheerleading Worlds” as a final competition to institute the very best All Star teams in the United States (ICU 4). Eventually, other country’s teams began to express interest to compete in the “Cheerleading Worlds” so the name International All Star Federation (IASF) was added to the title of the event. In 2004, due to the expressed interest to further organize the Sport of Cheer globally, the
International Cheer Union (ICU), under the sponsorship of the IASF, held its first meeting in Orlando, Florida, US on 26 April 2004 with 13 National Federations in attendance (ICU 4). ICU grew to over 100 National Cheer Federation members located on all continents, administered stakeholder education for over 90 countries, launched continental and regional championships, developed and initiated global Anti-Doping policies as a signatory of WADA, and initiated international recognition of the Sport (ICU 4).

In 2009, the ICU submitted its first application for Sport recognition to SportAccord/GAISF (the union of recognized international sports), and ICU also submitted its first application to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 2010 for IOC recognition (ICU 4). Due to a need for a dual team competition format for Cheerleading in the USA (for enhanced university scholarship purposes), USA Cheer, introduced a new Cheerleading team discipline called STUNT in 2011 (ICU 4). STUNT allows Cheerleading teams to compete in 4 rounds (quarters) of competition against one other opposing Cheerleading team. USA Cheer and ICU also created “Game Day” which is a competition format consisting of Game Cheering in categories that includes Game Day components (Cheer, Sidelines, Fight song, Band Chant, Timeout, Drum Line, etc).

In 2013, ICU was accepted as a member SportAccord/GAISF – recognized as the world governing body for the Sport of Cheer. In 2014, ICU became part of the FISU Family - Fédération Internationale du Sport Universitaire/International University Sport Federation. In 2016, the ICU was provisionally recognized by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) (ICU 4).

Cheerleading participation begins as early as 4 years of age and can extend to past college years. Cheer is a team sport for male and female athletes. ICU has expanded the Sport of Cheer to include divisions for Special Athletes (athletes with intellectual disabilities), ParaCheer/Adaptive Abilities Athletes (athletes with physical and intellectual disabilities), and has introduced Masters divisions welcoming athletes of all ages (ICU 5).
According to ICU, the Sport of Cheer is defined by 2 discipline categories:

1. **CHEERLEADING** (also called “Cheer” and vice versa re: the Sport of Cheer- e.g. “World Cheerleading Championships”): The original discipline category started by Johnny Campbell in 1898 designed to lead and energize crowds at sporting events– which still serves the same purpose, but has been updated and further developed over our 100 year history and into a variety of competitive and recreational formats. Cheerleading has developed to include a span of seven (7) levels of skills (Beginner/Level 0 - Premier/Level 6) – noting that not all levels are available to all age groups/team types, and progression learning is mandatory leading up to the highest level achieved by an athlete. Team types includes Club, All Star, Recreational (Rec), Scholastic (school & university), Masters, Special Abilities, ParaCheer/Adaptive Abilities, National Team within all respective ages, teams sizes and gender groupings for each category. These disciplines can be further broken down into Team Routine, Partner Stunt, Group Stunt, Team STUNT, and Game Day competition formats.

2. **PERFORMANCE CHEER** (originally known as “Drill Team”/“High Kick” but now also includes the styles of “Pom”, “Hip Hop” and “Jazz”): Created by Dr. Kay Crawford (1930) and Gussie Nell Davis (1939) as a new style of Cheerleading to entertain the crowd differently but in coordination with an official musical marching band, as well as the traditional cheerleading team. In its 90 years of history as a discipline category- Performance Cheer began in the tradition of Drill Team/High Kick (in a Military Marching High Kick Style), later developing and adding the styles of “Pom” in the 1940s, as well as Hip Hop and Jazz in the 1970s and 1980s for entertainment variety purposes. Performance Cheer has developed to include the 4 “genres”/disciplines (High Kick, Pom, Hip Hop, Jazz) - within the team types of Club, All Star, Recreational (Rec), Scholastic (school & university), Masters, Special Abilities, ParaCheer/Adaptive Abilities, National Team types within all respective ages, team’s
sizes and gender groupings within each category. These disciplines can be further broken down into Team Routine, Doubles Routine, and Game Day competition formats.

(ICU 5)

1.3 Components of Cheer

Today, there are five core elements that make-up a competitive cheerleading routine: stunting, tumbling, cheer, dance, and jumps. All of these components make up a 2 minute and 30 second routine that is unique to the team creating it. The routine is performed on a 42’ by 54’ performance floor matted with a minimum 1 3/8” carpet bonded foam with panels joined by 4” tape. The performance floor will have a minimum clearance of 4’ on the supporting surface before any obstruction (USASF Cheer Event Sanctioning Standards 2017-2018). Depending on the level of competitive cheer the athlete is participating in, will determine how each of these core components of the routine are performed and how they are scored. In addition to scoring, different rules are set in place for different divisions and levels. Naturally, the higher up the team is, the harder the skills and routine expectations become.

Below is some background information on stunting, tumbling, cheer, dance, and jumps:

Stunting is another aspect of competitive cheer that has moved from being a simple “photo opp” moment to a highly technical and difficult performance. Stunting is one of the key fundamentals in competitive cheer that really set the teams apart. Athletes create pyramids with their entire team or with separate group stunts. The pyramids have become increasingly complex with many tiers that require serious training and discipline to construct. Group stunts can have two – five people. A group stunt is made up of a flyer, a base or bases, and depending on the stunt, a back-spot. Some stunts may require a front spot as well. With stunting being a major component to cheerleading, competitions like STUNT have developed that focus on stunting with some tumbling also incorporated into the routines.
Tumbling is part of gymnastics. When competitive cheerleading started applying tumbling into its routines, the skills became progressively complex as the sport grew. Athletes can perform a single skill such as a standing back handspring\(^1\) or standing tuck\(^2\), or a pass such as a round-off back handspring, full\(^3\). These skills are applied throughout the entire routine in tumbling-specific sections, during stunts, during jumps, and any other place as a filler. Teams often use tumbling in their side-line cheers and half-time performances during games (i.e. pep-rally and homecoming).

Tumbling was originally performed on simple mats and now has a number of different surfaces including tumbling mats, ski floors, spring floors and today’s fiber-glass rod floors, invented by Randy Mulkey. U.S. National Championships date all the way back to 1886 and are still performed to this day in the Gymnastics section of the Olympics (USAG 1).

The cheering section of a routine is ironically to get the crowd to cheer along with the performing team. As cheerleading was originally structured to initiate crowd interaction and school spirit, now the cheering is used to let the crowd know where the team is from and to gain their support.

Motions, jumps, tumbling, and stunting are all part of the cheer portion of a routine. Items such as poms, signs, banners, and more are often used. Teams are judged based on how creative they are, the sharpness and precision of their motions, how clean the stunts, tumbling, and jumps are, their use of materials to engage the crowd, how loud and clear the team is, and overall how positive the teams’ chant is. The cheering aspect changes the more advanced cheerleading becomes. Some groups like All-Star Cheerleading may not even use cheering in their routines.

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\(^1\) A tumbling move where the individual jumps with two feet backward onto their hands and then finishes by landing on their feet.

\(^2\) A tumbling move where the individual jumps with two feet reaching upwards, then brings their knees up and rotates backwards and finishes by landing on their feet.

\(^3\) A tumbling skill where the individual projects their body forward from a lunge position going onto their hands, then lifts their legs into the air (similar to a cartwheel) and the brings them together landing on the floor, then jumping backwards into their back handspring followed by a jump into the air similar to the tuck but instead the individual remains fully stretched out and twists their body 360 degree as they rotate in the air and finally land.
The dance portion of a routine is a chance for the team to demonstrate creativity and excitement. Their sharp motions, multiple transitions, and ability to work together are a major part of how well they will be scored. Like any choreographed dance, if someone is not on point, the entire dance will be off. Depending on the team and level, the style of dance will vary. Jumps and tumbling can even be incorporated into a dance routine. Higher level teams like Team USA Co-Ed does not have a dance portion in their routine.

As the rubric for competitive cheer has progressed, so has the demand for jumps. There are a variety of jumps that can be put throughout an entire routine. The level of difficulty in jumps depends on the level of cheer. For example, a higher level team may be required to hit a minimum of three consecutive jumps as opposed to one. The types of jumps are also based on difficulty level. Some examples of jumps are toe-touches\(^4\), herkies\(^5\), and pikes\(^6\). Teams often add tumbling in their jumps such as a toe-touch into a back handspring. What is more important is that the team performs the skills neatly and synchronized. Jumps are a great way to demonstrate a team’s stamina, endurance, and athleticism.

Competitive cheerleading teams usually practice anywhere from two to five days a week. If it is a school team, their weekends can consist of cheering for football or basketball games or competing at their own competitions. While at games, the teams are not only cheering for their perspective team and engaging the crowd, but also getting in some additional practice for their own routines. Practices can be one hour to three hours and include the same elements as most other sports: warm-up, strength and conditioning, drills, and of course practicing all the components of the routine. Teams will also do team-

\(^4\) A skill where the individual jumps and lifts their legs up and apart. The arms are straight out to the side, slightly towards the front.
\(^5\) A skill where the individual jumps on a right or left angle and lifts one leg straight while the other is bent facing the ground. Arm motions can vary.
\(^6\) A skill where the individual jumps and lifts their legs in front of them and keeps them straight and together. The arms are typically parallel to the legs.
building exercises, team fundraising and events, and attend and host cheer camps. Teams that do not cheer for an affiliated school have the luxury of being able to focus on themselves and the competitions they train for (i.e. All-Stars, STUNT, Worlds). Being on a competitive cheer team can come with additional benefits depending on resources and the level: personal or team training, access to the school’s athletic facility, access to the school’s physical therapists, and even scholarships. Competitive cheerleading has come a long way from its origins of cheers and chants at school games.

1.4 My Experience and Qualifications

After participating in several sports and not quite finding one I really loved, I came across cheerleading when I was about 13. I first started with Shinning Stars All-Star Team in my town to try it out and knew I wanted to stick with it. When I was in high school, I was on J.V. for two years, and Varsity for the last two. We practiced five days a week for at least two hours. In addition to putting together a routine (tumbling, stunting, jumps, dance, cheer, etc.), we also had to make time to practice side-line cheers and half time routines for football and basketball games. These cheers we used at games included stunts and tumbling. Our side-lines were either sections of our routine or something we made up for a specific game. In addition to practice and games, we did fundraising for competitions, uniforms, and any other materials we may need. Before competitions, we would have team bonding at someone’s house where we would do each other’s hair for the competition (it was common to have hair in a high ponytail and put foam-rollers in it to make a tight curl), learn about each other, and strengthen our team bond. At competitions we were given opportunities to warm up whatever we needed before it was time to perform. In a cheer season, teams compete at different high schools until eventually you attend regionals to get a bid to compete in the national competition. My last year of high school our team received a bid to go to UCA’s National Competition in Disney’s Wide World of Sports in Orlando Florida. We aired on ESPN2 and were able to enjoy Disney while we were down there.
After competition season was over in my last year of high school, I began working as an assistant cheerleading coach for the All-Star team I started with when I was about 13. Eventually I started working for a tumbling company called Tumbletown (eventually merging with the YWCA) as an instructor for about three years. The owner of that company decided to shift his focus into cross fit, so when that company closed down, I went to another gym called Spotlight Gymnastics. I worked as a lead tumbling and gymnastics instructor with this company for six years. While working at Spotlight, I also spent some brief time with Westchester Gymnastics as gymnastics instructor. I also ran and organized a tumbling program with the City of White Plains Recreation Department, and started and ran a tumbling program with the Town of Hastings. I started my own business called AntiGravity Tumbling™ where I have taught private and group tumbling and fitness classes. More recently, I started and am running a tumbling program at New York Sports Club in New Rochelle and am teaching gymnastics at JCC in Scarsdale. In addition to teaching and coaching for over 11 years, I have attended in-person, as well as online training through the organization USAG. This training has allowed me to acquire multiple certifications and knowledge to apply to my teaching.

I also have experienced what many competitive cheerleading teams have to deal with; and that’s the lack of support from school administrators, the athletic department, and even peers. As an athlete and coach, it has been frustrating dealing with people who don’t know what it takes to be a competitive cheerleader, let alone the hoops cheerleaders have to jump through to participate. Unlike the south where the cheerleading culture is more accepted, it is common that many Westchester, and northeastern teams deal with a lack of support from their school. Most athletic directors/departments don’t think much of cheerleading and give most of their attention and funding to traditional sports like football, basketball, baseball, etc. Despite how much money and recognition a school may bring in from being an amazing team, they still don’t get the same treatment as other programs (although it can be better at college). This is where the team fundraising and winning competitions become a huge help in
funding cheerleading activities. I have experienced a noticeable preference by athletic directors and administrators for other sports over cheerleading as an athlete and a coach. Sometimes formal proposals have to be made to show the athletic department and administration how supporting a cheer program or starting one can benefit them, the school, the students, and the district. The support varies amongst schools and colleges. Although this is a reality for many schools, some schools do have a fair amount of support with their cheerleading program. All-star programs and higher-level teams (e.g. Team USA) work independently so their structure is different. In addition to administrators not understanding the work that goes into competitive cheer, dealing with the negative perspective of peers is also a challenge. Even after a competitive cheerleader has provided information about practices, routines, competitions, etc. they can still get stigmatized as non-athletes. Most of the time, peers and administrators don’t fully understand the dynamics of a practice. They don’t take into account that in addition to a five or six day a week practice, that the team has to also make time to practice to support other teams (football and basketball). Unlike other sports that have replacement players when someone is injured or sick, if this occurs in cheerleading, the entire routine is compromised. Teams have athletes that perform injured and sick just like any other as well as strength and conditioning training just like other teams. In general, the different parts to cheerleading alone are a challenge, to then put them together requires real talent.

The following sections will demonstrate the research process. Section 2 will review the Theory of how the evolution of cheerleading impacts the cheerleaders. Following the Theory is Section 3 which covers the Method. In the sub-sections of the Method are: 3.1 How will I prove this?; 3.2 What factors influenced the survey and interview questions; 3.3 Participants; 3.4 Former Cheerleader Data; 3.5 Current Cheerleader Data; and 3.6 Interview with Former Cheerleader. After the Methods Section is Results in Section 4. This area provides the data from the former and current cheerleader’s surveys and the interview. The final section is the Conclusion in Section 5.
2. Theory

As competitive cheerleading has become more demanding it has led to more positive outcomes in the physical, academic, mental, emotional, and social development of the athlete. As cheerleading progressed, and is now officially recognized as a sport, the participants naturally needed to maintain physical strength, flexibility, endurance, and stamina to participate. The theory is that as cheerleading has evolved to be a more demanding sport, positive outcomes have followed. Many schools require student to maintain a GPA, which forces cheerleaders to have good grades in order to participate in cheerleading. In addition to having good grades, many of the student cheerleaders tend to be involved with their school and communities. Being involved in productive activities keeps the student on a positive path into their adult lives. Certain sports have traditionally been looked at as “elite” which allows the participating athletes to feel important and valued. Now with cheerleading incorporating stunting and tumbling, more spectators are praising the cheerleaders for their amazing physical talent. Both praise and “elite status” boost confidence and improve their mental and emotional health. Since cheerleaders are typically very involved with their schools and communities, they are always in social situations. These social settings allow the cheerleaders to make new friends and develop important social skills with diverse groups. There can be negative impacts to participating in cheerleading such as: lack of support from family and friends or administrators, pressure to maintain a specific reputation, and pressure to keep up with unnatural physical appearances. I believe these negative impacts are present, but that the positive influences strongly out-way the negative.

3. Method

3.1 How will I prove this?

In order to demonstrate the impact competitive cheerleading has on the participating athletes, I will be conducting qualitative research with current and former competitive cheerleaders. I will be reviewing
the demographics of the athletes such as: age, race, and income level. Other information will include outlooks on: themselves, the team, the coach(s), their peers, the school, the administrators, and their parents and family. Questions relating to their emotional and mental experiences, physical and psychological, and academic and social will also be included. Through a survey and interview process, I will determine the positive or negative effects competitive cheerleading had or has on the participating athletes and what factors contributed to their success or failure. This research is also going to attempt to demonstrate if the athletes were impacted while fluctuations occurred in the industry.

3.2 What factors influenced the survey and interview questions

As the sports industry continues to advance, the expectations of the athletes have reciprocally progressed. Athletes have been known to be role models for their peers, and are often expected to have optimal physical, academic, and social performances. Depending on the sport and gender of the athlete, the expectations will vary. In a sport like cheerleading, there have been major modifications to what is expected out of the participating athletes. Being that cheerleading was originally a male-focused activity meant for crowd excitement at school sports games, the shift in society’s views has had an impact on what the sport of cheerleading is today. Cheerleading is now a predominately female sport that has moved its focus from crowd chanting at games to a physically demanding routine performed at cheerleading competitions.

Naturally, as cheerleading developed into the sport it is today, there are greater demands and expectations of the participating athletes. Not only are there greater physical requirements, but also academic, social, and emotional. As cheerleading started incorporating stunting and tumbling into their performances and routines, the coaches and teammates adopted minimal requirements in order to participate in the sport. Practices and competitions increased in difficulty, therefore, it became vital for
everyone to perform at an optimal level. Coaches began to develop stricter policies for participating in
cheerleading, and teammates began holding each other to a higher standard.

With the original purpose of being a crowd leader, and the stereotype that comes with being a
der idequeue as “not a sport” that does not require any real physical talent. The lack of respect
or care from their fellow classmates is displayed in forms such as adverse comments made to the
cheerleaders or by never attending a competition. Part of this mentality is enabled because
cheerleaders are still expected to attend and perform at football and basketball games; the other
student athletes are not. Although this is not always the case, athletic departments tend to focus their
time and budget on other sports. Having minimal to no support in the athlete’s environment can cause
teams to unnecessarily struggle in many ways to succeed (e.g. moral support, financial support).

In addition to enjoying a sport, people will join an activity to be physically fit. The more competitive the
team, the more demand there is to maintain a certain physique. Competitive cheerleading requires high
levels of athleticism. While there will be a diverse range of sizes from the participants, they need to be in
excellent shape to keep up with the physical demands of cheerleading. As students begin reaching
adolescents, they start to become more aware of their body and their teammates bodies. It is common
that the “flyer” is petite since they are the ones being lifted and thrown into the air. The bases need to
be strong enough to lift and hold the flyer, while also, ideally, being about the same size to balance out
the height. A back-spot needs to be strong as well, and is usually the tallest of the stunt group so she or
he can reach the flyer and assist the bases. Logically, most sports require a certain level of physical
ability in order to perform the proper functions safely and effectively. In addition to physical demands,
cheerleaders often feel pressure to be physically appealing in other ways. They are in the spotlight in
school, at games, and at competitions. They are graded not only on athleticism, but their ability to look neat, clean, and happy while they perform.

This research paper is going to display how the evolution of cheerleading has impacted the participating athletes. These areas include: teammate and coach influence, peer and administrative impacts, parent involvement, geographical variances, and perspectives on self-value. The following text will demonstrate how the physical, emotional, and mental expectations of cheerleaders has changed as the sport became more demanding.

3.3 Participants

I sent out surveys to gather data from Modified, Junior Varsity, Varsity, All-Stars, and College cheerleaders from Westchester County and Fairfield County. The received data came from former and current cheerleaders that have cheered in various regions of New York. In total my sample size was approximately 100; with a total of 17 surveys completed. Both the current and former cheerleaders received a survey consisting of 78 questions which included multiple choice and short answer. These questions were formatted to analyze how participating in cheerleading affected or affects the cheerleader physically, emotionally, mentally, socially, and academically. Cheerleaders under the age of 18 were provided consent forms to give to their parents prior to starting the survey. Four cheerleaders of different biological gender and competitive level were contacted to interview and only one went through the interview process in addition to filling out the survey. The interviewee was asked to go into more depth about her cheerleading experience and how it has impacted her development in the previously listed contexts. Participants were contacted by means of phone, email, or face-to-face conversation. Having worked in the cheerleading industry for over 10 years, I was able to contact coaches, instructors, and co-workers to assist me with reaching a large, diverse sample size. The interview was done with a current co-worker who participated in Varsity and All-star cheerleading.
Between the results of the surveys and responses of the interview, I will access the results and present them in forms of charts, tables, and general text. See table 1 for demographic information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Demographics of Former and Current Cheerleaders</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Former Cheerleaders</strong></td>
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3.4 Former Cheerleaders

The former cheerleaders that were surveyed participated in either Varsity (50%), All-Stars (40%), or College (10%). There were varying results for when participants started cheerleading: 30% started at 12-14 years old; 20% started at 7-12 years old; 20% started at 14-18 years old; 20% started at >18 years old; and 10% started at <7 years old. 50% of the participants had been cheerleading for 0-5 years; 30% had been cheerleading for 5-10 years; and 20% had been cheerleading for >10 years. 80% of the
participant’s primary position on the team was being a base; 10% of the participant’s primary position on the team was being a back-spot; and 10% of the participant’s primary position was being a flyer. A majority (70%) had practice sessions reaching >2 hours; with the remaining (30%) having practice sessions reaching 1-2 hours. Participants recorded practicing 5-6 times a week at 50%; 3-4 times a week at 40%; and 1-2 times a week at 10%. According to the majority of the participants, an average practice consisted of: warmup, stunting, tumbling, cheering, and practicing the routine. 60% of participants felt their practice was extremely productive; 40% of participants felt their practice was somewhat productive. In relation to the size of the team: 30% were on a team of 20-24 athletes; 20% were on a team of 16-20 athletes; 20% were on a team of 8-12 athletes; 20% were on a team of 12-16 athletes; and 10% were on a team of >28 athletes.

The former cheerleading participants varied in the amount of competitions they attended per season with: 20% attending 2-5 competitions; 30% attending 5-7 competitions; 30% attending 7-9 competitions; and 20% attending >10 competitions. Overall, the participants varied in how many times they had won first place with: 30% winning 0-2 times; 30% winning 2-5 times; 10% winning 7-9 times; and 30% winning >10 times. In relation to family, friends, peers, and administrative support, there were mixed results in attendance amongst these groups. For family and friends: 30% stated family and friends attended competitions 0-2 times; 10% stated family and friends attended competitions 2-5 times; 30% stated family and friends attended competitions 5-7 times; 10% stated family and friends attended competitions 7-9 times; and 20% stated family and friends attended competitions >10 times. For peers: 40% stated peers attended competitions 0-2 times; 20% stated peers attended competitions 2-5 times; 30% stated peers attended competitions 5-7 times; and 10% stated peers attended competitions 7-9 times. For the Athletic Director and other administration: 50% stated that the AD and administration attended competitions 0-2 times; 30% stated that the AD and administration attended competitions 2-5 times; and 20% stated that the AD and administration attended competitions 5-7 times.
A majority of the former cheerleaders stated there was a minimum GPA for participating in cheerleading. 20% required a minimum of a 2.0; 10% required a minimum of 2.5; 20% required a 3.0; and 50% were not sure. The former cheerleaders demonstrated good grades with 40% being an A-B student, 30% being an A student, and 30% being a B-C student. Most of the former cheerleaders were involved in more than one extracurricular activity in addition to cheerleading. 70% of the participants felt that participating in cheerleading helped their grades with 30% stating it did not. In this sample size, 80% did not receive scholarships for participating in cheerleading, whereas 10% did, and 10% stated N/A.

3.5 Current Cheerleaders

The current cheerleaders that were surveyed participate in either Varsity (71.4%) or Junior Varsity (28.6%). There were varying results for when participants started cheerleading: 42.9% started <7 years old; 28.6% started at 7-12 years old; and 28.6% started at 14-18 years old. 42.9% of the participants have been cheerleading for 5-10 years; 28.6% have been cheerleading for 0-5 years; and 28.6% have been cheerleading for >10 years. 71.4% of the participant’s primary position on the team is being a base; 14.3% of the participant’s primary position on the team wis being a back-spot; and 14.3% of the participant’s primary position is being a flyer. A majority (71.4%) have practice sessions reaching >2 hours; with the remaining (28.6%) having practice sessions reaching 1-2 hours. Participants recorded practicing 3-4 times a week at 85.7%; and 1-2 times a week at 14.3%. According to the majority of the participants, an average practice consists of: warmup, stunting, cheering, and practicing the routine. 57.1% of participants feel their practice is extremely productive; and 42.9% of participants feel their practice is somewhat unproductive. In relation to the size of the team: 71.4% are on a team of 12-16 athletes; and 28.6% are on a team of 8-12 athletes.
The current cheerleading participants varied in the amount of competitions they attend per season with: 42.9% attending 2-5 competitions; 42.9% attending 5-7 competitions; and 14.3% attending 0-2 competitions. A majority of the participants (85.7%) stated they have won first place 0-2 times with the remaining (14.3%) stating they have won 2-5 times. In relation to family, friends, peers, and administrative support, there were mixed results in attendance amongst these groups. For family and friends: 14.3% stated family and friends attend competitions 0-2 times; 14.3% stated family and friends attend competitions 2-5 times; 28.6% stated family and friends attend competitions 5-7 times; 14.3% stated family and friends attend competitions 7-9 times; and 28.6% stated family and friends attend competitions >10 times. For peers: 85.7% stated peers attend competitions 0-2 times; and 14.3% stated peers attend competitions 2-5 times. For the Athletic Director and other administration: 100% stated that the AD and administration attend competitions 0-2 times.

A majority of the current cheerleaders stated there is a minimum GPA for participating in cheerleading. 57.2% require a minimum of a 70 in classes to participate; 28.6% stated they just cannot fail their classes; and 14.3% stated that there is no minimum GPA. The current cheerleaders demonstrate good grades with 71.4% being an A-B student, 14.3% being an A student, and 14.3% being a B student. Most of the current cheerleaders are involved in more than one extracurricular activity in addition to cheerleading. 71.4% of the participants feel that participating in cheerleading helps their grades while 28.6% believe it does not. In this sample size, 85.7% do not receive scholarships for participating in cheerleading, and 14.3% stated N/A.

3.6 Interview

An interview was conducted on Tuesday, November 19, 2018 with former Varsity and All-star cheerleader Alison DeMichele. The interview consisted of 18 questions that focused on the individual’s perspective of themselves, the dynamics of the two cheerleading teams, positive and negative
experiences the athlete experienced, where the athlete’s overall support came from, and the overall experience the athlete had while participating in cheerleading. Alison gave her consent to be interviewed.

In total, Alison participated in Modified through Varsity cheerleading with school, and levels 3 and 5 with All-Stars. In total, Alison cheered for approximately 6 years. Alison was asked what she liked and disliked the most about being on a cheerleading team in general. She expressed how she came from gymnastics, which focuses on the individual athlete’s performance and not the team’s. Being on a team is what Alison liked the most about participating in cheerleading. What she disliked was the attire that came with cheerleading. Specifically, Alison did not like: “the bows, and the hair, and the uniform.” In regards to which team she liked or disliked being part of the most, Alison stated: “I liked my first All-Star team because, we were a really talented group and we were very successful, and it had a good dynamic; whereas I disliked my Junior year of high school, so my Varsity team the least because there was such a bad dynamic on the team. We were all very caddy and there was very little work ethic and I did not like that.”

The next part of the interview involved positive and negative effects that the athlete experienced from a range of categories. First we discussed the social environment. Alison stated there was a positive effect in the sense that she made new friends with people at her school that she otherwise wouldn’t have interacted with if she wasn’t on the team. A negative effect was that although Alison had friends, there would still be girls that she, as well as a majority of the other girls on the team wouldn’t get along with. These girls were controversial and would “cause drama” with the team and the coach. In relation to the academic setting, there wasn’t much impact except that Alison would have more friends in her classes because she had friends on the team. As far as study time and actual work load, Alison said: “It wasn’t so overwhelming, like practice, that I couldn’t study and what not.” When Alison was asked if she felt
having more friends in her classes made her more inclined to go to school and do well, she responded with: “Yea, I was very shy before cheerleading, and so having these people that I spent extra time with, and I got very close to, it made me a lot more out-going, so it was positive. In my class I would always have someone to sit next to because before that I was an out-cast.” The next part of the discussion focused on the positives and negatives of practice and competition. Alison brought up that a negative would be if the team didn’t perform well, there would be individuals on the team that would point fingers and no one would take any accountability for their actions. This dilemma seemed to be prominent with Varsity than All-stars because the team dynamic and expectations were different. Alison stated: “For All-star, it was a little bit less just because we were all at a higher level; because what happened was my Varsity team was very mixed level and we were too small to make cuts.” Alison expressed a better experience with All-stars; she mentioned how when the team did well they would all celebrate by going to dinner after a competition, that they all took pictures together, and that there was “a lot of comradery.” The next part of the conversation went into positive and negatives regarding home life. A positive impact for Alison was that her brother did cheerleading, and that she received a lot of support from him. A negative was that Alison’s other two sisters did gymnastics, so her parent’s attention and priority was on the two sisters and not her cheerleading: “I could only talk to my brother about cheerleading, and everyone else talk about gymnastics. So, I had a support in him, but it was also a weird dynamic at home.” When asked if Alison was bothered that her parent’s gave more attention to her sisters, she expressed how it absolutely bothered her. Alison’s mentioned how everyone would always attend gymnastics competitions and at one point her mom was working at the gymnastics gym, so the only person Alison could talk to was her brother. When asked about her brother’s support, Alison stated: “He was there for moral support, but for one of my All-star teams he was the coach. So he used to come to the competitions, he would drive me, he was always there.” Since Alison’s parents would not normally attend competitions, she expressed when they would come to competitions that she would get
very nervous. After a certain point she preferred they wouldn’t be there. Finally, Alison was asked to express any overall positive and negative impacts she noticed about herself from participating in cheerleading. The main impact she brought up was how it helped her be more social: “I definitely became more social, and not just with my Varsity teams but especially with my All-star teams. Because there were girls from a lot of different schools. So, I got to really be myself, I went in with a clean-slate, so I could be very out-going. The people from my high school, they’ve known me my whole life, so they would be like, Oh, Alison is the quiet one, but whereas on All-star I was very outgoing, I was completely different.” When Alison brought up the negatives she stated: “I feel like when I hurt my back, especially when I was out of cheer for a while, I didn’t really know who I was at that point. Because I had defined myself as a cheerleader because it had been so consuming.”

The next part of the interview discussed which teams went to Nationals and the experiences that came with it. Alison’s Varsity team went to Nationals three times, and her All-star team went to two different Nationals (USA and NCA Finals). She was on level 3 for one year, and level 5 for one year, therefore attended one Nationals competition for each of those years.

Later in the interview, we went into more detail about her lack of support from parents, and the support she did receive from her brother. In addition to family, we discussed the support or lack thereof from other individuals. Something that impacted Alison was having her boyfriend on her Varsity team. Alison explained how participating in cheerleading impacted her once her and her boyfriend broke up: “When we broke up, it was very uncomfortable because, for the next season – we used to one-man together, he used to be my back-spot – they didn’t put us in any stunts, so the person I was really good with, now I’m not with and it was very uncomfortable. And, no one seemed to understand why I was uncomfortable – they were like, you did it to yourself – which I did, because I was 15 and stupid.” Alison ended up being in other stunt groups that didn’t perform as well and mentioned how she had concerns
for her safety. This worry came from being dropped too often throughout the cheer season, which in turn impacted her performance as a flyer. An additional impact was lack of support from some of her teammates. Alison expressed there would be some jealousy and pettiness with other girls on her Varsity team when it came to Alison being asked to tumble or be put in front for parts of the routine. She mentioned that she would get used a lot because her tumbling was stronger since she came from a gymnastics background.

We went back to Alison’s participation in gymnastics and her choice to switch over to cheerleading. She was asked if she felt her parent’s “judged” her for making that choice since they were so heavily involved with her two sister’s participation in gymnastics: “Yes, they definitely judged me for switching sports. I did gymnastics for 5 years competitively, maybe 8 years total, including rec and pre-team. They definitely judged me because the gymnastics facility that I used to go to had a cheerleading team that was all about the bows and the cropped uniforms and they were like - so that’s what you’re going to do? I don’t understand why you’re doing that – I had to do something.” Alison explained how they didn’t understand the sport of cheerleading, and that they looked at it as an activity when she first started. Once Alison progressed as a cheerleader, her parent’s began to view it as a sport, but they still gave her “grief” for switching sports.

Going back to her brother’s support, Alison mentioned how he would be at all her competitions since he was her coach, but would also be the one she could talk to at any time about what was going on with her. It helped because he understood the terminology and could hold a conversation with her, unlike for example, someone who doesn’t know anything about cheerleading. Alison also brought up how her older sister did try and show support, she just didn’t completely understand some of the jargon that came with her discussions.
Alison also brought up how one of her coaches was supportive in a “ruff way.” While Alison’s coach would tell her “Alison, if you fall again, you’re giving me 50 push-ups,” she still supported Alison and constantly encouraged her. The coach pushed her to try-out for more elite teams like “All-American,” and would be very reassuring when she noticed Alison needed it most.

Next, Alison was asked to discuss if she noticed any difference in her performance overall based on the support she received: “When my brother was my coach, I busted ass. Because if I didn’t he would scream at me on the car ride home. In a good way, it pushed me to be better. My coach Susan, for high school, she was like, I know you want to help these people but you can’t sit there and coach them, you have to be understanding. So she helped me develop as a person. She was like, ok you have to be understanding that other people aren’t where you are.” In general, Alison expressed how her coach grounded her and was definitely a motivator during her cheer career.

We eventually went into more detail about what Alison liked most about cheerleading. In addition to the team aspect, she really liked stunting. Although she loves tumbling, since she had been tumbling almost her entire life, it wasn’t as exciting as stunting was. Alison stated: “I loved basing because I liked being able to throw someone in the air and be like, I’m strong enough to do that. You guys catch balls, and I catch people on my face, and I still get up and stop whining.” Having been a cheerleader myself, I remember it being an on-going pun to make fun of other sports like football where the players would catch a football and complain over little things where cheerleaders had to catch people and would encounter some ridiculous hits and catches and still be expected to keep going. One final comment about what Alison liked about cheerleading was that although she mentioned earlier that she hated the uniforms, part of her also liked dressing up. This would depend on the team and what the uniform was.

In closing, Alison’s final statements were: “I’m glad I did cheerleading. I’m glad that I put myself in a position that was uncomfortable for me because if I didn’t I wouldn’t have grown as a person. I became
very confident in myself because I was so successful as a cheerleader. Usually you don’t want to brag, but sometimes – when people give you shit – you’re like well I have this, this, this, I can list all of these. So it made me very confident, which is a good thing. I don’t regret cheerleading.” When asked if Alison would participate in cheerleading again, she stated that she “would love to cheer again, but can’t because of my back and other issues.” Alison had fractured her back three times: the first time was during gymnastics, the second time was from being dropped in a stunt, and the final time was being constantly dropped in other stunts. Both of these stunting injuries occurred with her Varsity team.

Based on Alison’s comments, it appears she benefited from participating in cheerleading. She was able to benefit socially and in turn, make new friends and develop essential social skills. Her confidence in school and with herself dramatically increased. This helped her do well in school and feel better about herself all around. At one point during the interview Alison brought up how participating in cheerleading was a great way to stay in shape and that she missed that type of training. Despite not having support from her parents, Alison’s brother was there for her emotional and mental support with cheerleading. Overall, Alison had positive impacts socially, mentally/emotionally, academically, and physically, from participating in cheerleading.

4 Results

As a result of the minimal sample size, there was not enough data to be conclusive with the impacts on the cheerleaders. Despite the variety of ages, education level, competitive level, and demographics, there was an overall positive result from participating in cheerleading. The interview also showed to provide positive results from participating in cheerleading.
Former Cheerleaders

After measuring the amount of times a team won first place for the former cheerleader group, there was no drastic difference in what determined a team’s success. There was a small variation in support levels from family and friends, peers, and athletic directors and other administrators.

30% won first place 0-2 times. This included participants from All-Stars and Varsity. The participants practiced over 2 hours or 1-2 hours per practice. Their practices were either: 1-2, 3-4, or 5-6 times a week. The participants attended 2-5 or 5-7 competitions per season. During cheerleading, the participants recorded family and friends attended 0-2, 2-5, and 5-7 competitions; peers attended 0-2, 2-5, and 5-7; and the Athletic Director and other Administration attended 0-2 competitions. Some participants stated there was no GPA requirement whereas others documented either a 2.0 or 3.0 minimum. Cheerleading was funded either through themselves, the school, or parents. Some participants did not go to Nationals whereas others did; and some aired on ESPN/ESPN2 whereas others did not. All participants expressed an importance in being physically fit. None of the participants received a scholarship for cheerleading. Some participants attended outside training as a team and individually such as tumbling or stunting clinics and others did not. These teams were the following sizes: 12-16 athletes, 16-20 athletes, and 20-24 athletes.

30% won first place >10 times. This included participants from College and Varsity. The participants practiced over 2 hours or 1-2 hours per practice. Their practices were either: 3-4, or 5-6 times a week. The participants attended 5-7, 7-9, or >10 competitions per season. During cheerleading, the participants recorded family and friends attended 0-2 and >10 competitions; peers attended 0-2, 2-5, and 5-7; and the Athletic Director and other Administration attended 0-2, 2-5, and 5-7 competitions. Some participants stated there was a minimum GPA requirement of either a 2.0 or 3.0. Cheerleading was funded either through themselves, the school, fundraising, winning competitions and/or parents. All
the participants attended Nationals and aired on ESPN/ESPN2. All participants expressed an importance in being physically fit. Some of the participants received a scholarship for cheerleading and others did not. All of the participants attended outside training as a team and individually such as tumbling or stunting clinics. These teams were the following sizes: 16-20 athletes, 20-24 athletes, and >28 athletes.

There appears to be some differences in administrative support, GPA requirement, receiving scholarships, and attending outside training as a team/individually. It is hard to say whether the teams that won first place frequently received more support and resources because they did well, or they did well because they received this support. More data would need to be collected and measured to determine this.

See chart below for how many times the former cheerleader participants won first place:

See graph below to view the percentages of family and friends, peers, and Athletic Director and other Administrative attendance for competitions.

Table 2: Attendance at Cheerleading Competitions

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Current Cheerleaders

After measuring the amount of times a team won first place for the current cheerleader group, there was no drastic difference in what determined a team’s success.

85.7% won first place 0-2 times. This included participants from Varsity and Junior Varsity. The participants practice over 2 hours or 1-2 hours per practice. Their practices are either: 1-2, or 3-4 times a week. The participants attend 0-2, 2-5 or 5-7 competitions per season. The participants recorded family and friends attend 0-2, 5-7, 7-9, and >10 competitions; peers attend 0-2, and 2-5 competitions; and the Athletic Director and other Administration attend 0-2 competitions. Some participants stated there is no GPA requirement whereas others documented either a minimum of 70 or that they cannot be failing classes. Cheerleading is funded either through themselves, the school, parents, or fundraising. All participants went to Nationals and some aired on ESPN/ESPN2 whereas others did not or were not sure. All participants expressed an importance in being physically fit. None of the participants receive scholarships for cheerleading. All participants attended outside training as a team and individually such as tumbling or stunting clinics. These teams were the following sizes: 8-12 athletes, and 12-16 athletes.

14.3% won first place 2-5 times. This included one participant from Varsity. The participant practices over 2 hours per practice, 3-4 times a week. The participant attends 2-5 competitions per season. During cheerleading, the participant recorded family and friends attend 2-5 competitions; peers attend 0-2; and the Athletic Director and other Administration attend 0-2 competitions. There is a minimum GPA requirement of 70. Cheerleading is funded either through the school, fundraising, or parents. The participant attends Nationals but was not sure if their team airs on ESPN/ESPN2. The participant expressed an importance in being physically fit. There is no scholarship for cheerleading. The participant attends outside training as a team and individually such as tumbling or stunting clinics. The participant’s team is made up of 12-16 athletes.
There was no measurable difference in data due to the small sample size and possibility that the majority of the surveys came from the same team.

See chart below for how many times current cheerleaders won first place:

![Chart showing how many times current cheerleaders won first place](chart.png)

See graph below to view the percentages of family and friends, peers, and Athletic Director and other Administrative attendance for competitions.

Table 3 (Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number)

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Former Cheerleader Results

In relation to parents, friends, and peers, their interest in the participant’s involvement with cheerleading ranged from not at all interested to extremely interested. The average for all three was somewhat interested.

All except one of the participants were told to look happy and enthusiastic during competitions and games. The one participant is male and it is common in cheerleading that the male athletes are not required to look and act “happy and enthusiastic.” Some of the participants expressed that there were
penalties for not looking happy and enthusiastic during games and competitions. A majority of the participants stated there were penalties for dropping a stunt or messing up the routine at a competition or game. An example of a penalty would be running or conditioning. Some participants expressed that they would just work on fixing what went wrong.

The data somewhat varied for whether the participants felt pressured during the school day to maintain a positive image or be a positive role-model for peers, teammates, and administrators. 50% stated they sometimes felt this way, 30% stated they never felt this way, and 20% stated that most of the time they felt this way. Throughout the school day, 70% had school work and grades as their focus, while 30% had club and/or other activities as their focus. As mentioned earlier, all the students did fairly well in school with mostly A’s and B’s. 70% stated they felt cheerleading helped them improve or stay consistent with grades and 30% stated they did not feel cheerleading helped them improve or stay consistent with grades. Since the participants on average did well in school, those that felt cheerleading did not improve or help them may have already been doing well and were simply not impacted by participating in cheerleading.

Many of the participants had to “defend” cheerleading as a sport to their peers. 50% of peers did not view cheerleading as a sport, and 50% did view cheerleading as a sport. 40% of participants stated that they defended cheerleading as a sport “all of the time;” 30% defended cheerleading as a sport “frequently;” 20% defended cheerleading as a sport “never;” and 10% defended cheerleading as a sport “sometimes.”

During the cheerleading season, most of the participants rated their physical abilities during the cheer season fairly high. 50% stated their physical abilities were “above average;” 30% stated their physical abilities were “very high;” and 20% stated their physical abilities were “average.” 90% of participants were satisfied with their physical appearance during the cheerleading season and 10% were not. 60%
thought about their physical appearance during the cheerleading season “sometimes” and 40% thought about their physical appearance during the cheerleading season “frequently.” 80% stated their teammates did not make comments to the participants about their physical appearance where as 20% stated their teammates did make comments about their physical appearance. 90% of participants stated they did not make comments to other teammates about their physical appearance and 10% of participants stated they did make comments to teammates about their physical appearance. 90% of participants stated their coach never made comments about their physical appearance where 10 % stated their coach did make comments about their physical appearance. 60% stated their coach would make comments about their physical abilities and 40% stated their coach would not make comments about their physical abilities. 90% of participants stated their parent/guardian did not make comments about their physical appearance and 10% of participants stated their parent/guardian would make comments about their physical appearance. 70% of parents would make comments about the participant’s physical abilities and 30% of parents would not make comments about the participant’s physical abilities. Peers were 50/50 in regards to making comments about the participant’s physical appearance. In relation to physical abilities, 60% of peers did not make comments and 40% did. Athletes were most conscious of their physical appearance during cheerleading season at competition (40%). The Second highest was practice (30%), then games (20%), and lastly social environments (10%). A majority (90%) of participants were satisfied with their physical appearance and abilities during the cheerleading season and 10% were not satisfied with their physical appearance or abilities during the cheerleading season. All participants felt their coach was satisfied with their physical appearance during the cheerleading season, and a majority (90%) felt their coach was satisfied with their physical abilities during the cheerleading season. 90% felt their parent(s)/guardian were satisfied with their physical appearance and abilities during the cheerleading season and 10% did not feel their parent(s)/guardian was satisfied with their physical appearance or abilities during the cheerleading season. All participants
felt their peers were satisfied with their physical appearance and abilities during the cheerleading season. All participants felt that cheerleading improved their overall physical performance.

In general, the participants had positive statements about their coach. 100% felt their coach motivated them to perform better. 100% stated their coach was informative of the current trends, rules, policies, and regulations involved in the cheerleading industry. 90% felt their coach was encouraging and 10% felt their coach was not encouraging. In relation to the team performing poorly, 80% stated their coach responded by trying to figure out what is wrong and work towards fixing it; 30% stated their coach would yell at the team to fix the problem; 20% stated their coach would “punish” the team by making them run laps or condition; 10% stated their coach would ignore the problem; and 10% stated their coach would have team meetings to talk about the team’s performance. 80% of participants felt their coach’s method of conflict resolution was effective and 20% felt their coach’s method of conflict resolution was not effective. The data varied for whether the participants were comfortable going to their coach for help (personal or cheer related): 30% were “somewhat comfortable,” 30% were indifferent,” 20% were very comfortable,” and 20% were extremely comfortable. Participants were asked to provide three adjectives that describe their coach: [selfless, motivated, nurturer], [tough, perfectionist, successful], [friendly, considerate, realistic], [respectful, motivated, dramatic], [passionate, intense, competitive], [positive, supportive, and cheerful], competitive, spirited, fun], [tough, knowledgeable, strict], patient, kindhearted, organized], and [loving, dedicated, inspiring].

Below are the responses for how participants described the dynamics of their cheer team:

> It was like a family, not everyone got along, some were closer than others, but we all loved each other. Some were more dedicated than others and it showed in their behaviors.

> Everyone was rather close everyone mostly got along with each other.
For the most part we got along and did what we needed to do. At times there wasn’t drama and arguing but not about cheerleading.

We were a big family - for the most part, everyone got along but there was definitely arguing at times.

great social discourse

everyone got along for the most part. we were all friends and loved to cheer. there were sometimes where we argued but we all had a good time.

For the most part everyone did get along but there were times of argument if we were all stressed about an upcoming competition. And inevitably there would be some "outside" drama that would spill over into the gym that had nothing to do with cheerleading.

Most people got along very well. Being that the team was an all-star team, there were various age gaps and cliques began to form due to age.

Everyone got along on almost every team I was on. Only one team did not get along and that was due to the fact that most of the girls were young (middle school age) and immature so they fought a lot.

Below are the responses for what the participants loved most about cheerleading:

I love the sport, putting up a stunt is way more fascinating than watching a ball be thrown back and forth. Its fast pace and energetic. Everything From the competition routine, the dancing, the tumbling, the music gets your heart pumping and adrenaline rushing. And when everyone does their part, it all comes together and all the tough hard work, blood sweat and tears are worth showing off to the crowd.

The adrenaline involved in doing single base stunts and flipping baskets. 2 1/2 High pyramids. And the compliments I got from people saying that they didn’t know that “cheerleading was like that” and how “they could never do that”

the energy and positive vibes we all got from each other

Being with my friends and doing something we loved.
Competitiveness, comrade

Tumbling

Stunting

I loved being a part of a team and working towards a common goal. I loved competing and doing well.

Its athleticism, team bonding, and performing.
Meeting new friends

Below are the responses for what the participants disliked most about cheerleading:

I didn't like how some of my teammates changed over the years (freshman-senior). How teammates would react when someone new takes over the position of power (captain). I always felt like not everyone was as motivated/dedicated as I was. There was a lot of unnecessary drama, and there were times people were disrespectful.

The culture of the sport is unbelievably toxic, especially in all star

lack of consistency

Drama and running

Demanding schedule - all year round

cheers and dancing

N/A

I disliked how much we had to defend ourselves as athletes.

The injuries and the time commitments

It's very hard on the body

Current Cheerleader Results

In relation to parents, friends, and peers, their interest in the participant’s involvement with cheerleading ranged from not at all interested to extremely interested. The average for all three was somewhat interested.

All of the participants are told to look happy and enthusiastic during competitions and games. Some of the participants expressed that there are penalties for not looking happy and enthusiastic during games and competitions. These participants stated the penalties for dropping a stunt or messing up the routine at a competition or game are running or getting yelled at in addition to running laps and doing push-ups. Others stated they are just told to smile.
The data somewhat varied whether the participants feel pressured during the school day to maintain a positive image or be a positive role-model for peers, teammates, and administrators. 28.6% stated they always feel this way, 28.6% stated they most of the time feel this way, and 28.6% stated that they never feel this way, and 14.3% stated they sometimes feel this way. Throughout the school day, 71.4% have school work and grades as their focus; 14.3% have club and/or other activities as their focus; and 14.3% have home life stressors as their focus. As mentioned earlier, all the students do fairly well in school with mostly A’s and B’s. 71.4% stated they feel cheerleading helps them improve or stay consistent with grades and 28.6% stated they do not feel cheerleading helps them improve or stay consistent with grades. Since the participants on average do well in school, those that feel cheerleading does not improve or help them may already be doing well and are simply not impacted by participating in cheerleading.

Many of the participants have to “defend” cheerleading as a sport to their peers. 57.1% of peers do not view cheerleading as a sport, and 42.9% do view cheerleading as a sport. 71.4% of participants stated that they defend cheerleading as a sport “all of the time;” 14.3% defend cheerleading as a sport “frequently;” 14.3% stated “NA.”

During the cheerleading season, most of the participants rated their physical abilities during the cheer season on the higher end. 71.4% stated their physical abilities are “above average;” and 28.6% stated their physical abilities are “average.” 57.1% of participants are not satisfied with their physical appearance during the cheerleading season and 42.9% are satisfied with their physical appearance during the cheerleading season. 57.1% think about their physical appearance during the cheerleading season “frequently” and 42.9% think about their physical appearance during the cheerleading season “sometimes.” 85.7% stated their teammates do not make comments to the participants about their physical appearance where as 14.3% stated their teammates do make comments about their physical appearance.
appearance. 85.7% of participants stated they do not make comments to other teammates about their physical appearance and 14.3% of participants stated they do make comments to teammates about their physical appearance. 85.7% of participants stated their coach never makes comments about their physical appearance where 14.3% stated their coach does make comments about their physical appearance. 71.4% stated their coach does make comments about their physical abilities and 28.6% stated their coach does not make comments about their physical abilities. 71.4% of participants stated their parent/guardian does not make comments about their physical appearance and 28.6% of participants stated their parent/guardian does make comments about their physical appearance. 85.7% of parents make comments about the participant’s physical abilities and 14.3% of parents do not make comments about the participant’s physical abilities. Peers/friends are at 57.1% stating they do not make comments about the participant’s physical appearance and 42.9% do make comments about the participant’s physical appearance. In relation to physical abilities, 71.4% of peers/friends do not make comments and 28.6% do make comments. Athletes are most conscious of their physical appearance during cheerleading season in social environments (42.9%). The Second highest is in school (28.6%), then practice (14.3%), and lastly competition (14.3%). About half (57.1%) of participants are satisfied with their physical appearance during the cheerleading season and 42.9% are not satisfied with their physical appearance during the cheerleading season. About half (57.1%) of participants are not satisfied with their physical abilities during the cheerleading season and 42.9% are satisfied with their physical abilities during the cheerleading season. All participants feel their coach is satisfied with their physical appearance during the cheerleading season, and about half (57.1%) feel their coach is satisfied with their physical abilities during the cheerleading season. All participants feel that their parents/guardian are satisfied with their physical appearance and abilities during the cheerleading season. All participants feel their peers are satisfied with their physical appearance and abilities during the cheerleading season. All participants felt that cheerleading improved their overall physical performance.
In general, the participants had positive statements about their coach. 85.7% feel their coach motivates them to perform better and 14.3% feel their coach does not motivate them to perform better. 100% stated their coach is informative of the current trends, rules, policies, and regulations involved in the cheerleading industry. All of the participants feel that their coach is encouraging. In relation to the team performing poorly, 85.7% stated their coach responds by trying to figure out what is wrong and work towards fixing it; 42.9% stated their coach yells at the team to fix the problem; 42.9% stated their coach “punishes” the team by making them run laps or condition; and 14.3% stated their coach ignores the problem. 57.1% of participants feel their coach’s method of conflict resolution is not effective and 42.9% feel their coach’s method of conflict resolution is effective. The data varied for whether the participants are comfortable going to their coach for help (personal or cheer related): 28.6% are “extremely comfortable,” 28.6% are “very comfortable,” 28.6% are “somewhat comfortable,” and 14.3% are “not at all comfortable.” Participants were asked to provide three adjectives that describe their coach: [way too nice, understanding, kind], [supportive, motivational, loving], [hardworking, talented, caring], [funny, hardworking, caring], [strict, fun, friendly], [caring, strict, contradicting], and [loving, touch, skillful].

Below are the responses for how participants describe the dynamics of their cheer team:

- yes we get along
  - We all have a great bond with one another.
  - We are all like sisters
  - Some arguing, some people do not like each other or do not talk to one another.
  - everyone gets along
  - Strong bond
  - All the girls on my team have such a strong bond. There is a boy on the team and I personally have issues with him but I do not let them effect my performance on the mat.

Below are the responses for what the participants love most about cheerleading:

- Stunting
The memories and friends made
The friendships and bonds i have made with my teammates
It is just really fun for me.

stunting
The bond between my teammates
The bond I'm able to make with the girls on my team and how rewarding it feels when we do well at comps.

Below are the responses for what the participant dislike about cheerleading:

Jumping
It's very time consuming
The stress it brings when things aren't working right
When people do not do their part in a stunt.
jumps
Being discouraged when things go wrong
That the sport is so underestimated and not looked upon as a “sport”.

Former and Current Cheerleaders and Interview

Overall, because of the small sample size, the data is inconclusive. A large sample size with more diversity in relation to team level, demographic, and location would need to be conducted for better comparison.

The current cheerleaders seem to have more focus on their appearance compared to the former cheerleaders. The current cheerleaders also seem to “defend” cheerleading as a sport more frequently than the former cheerleaders did. This may be a result of the “dynamic” of the school they attend or attended, or the area they are or were in. High school, College, and All-stars have different expectations
and cultures around them that influence how the team functions and how others respond to them.

Interviewing and gathering more data would better to determine if these differences have any impact on the athlete and their performance.

In relation to academic impacts, the participants did or do well in school (A-B students). Some felt cheerleading helped or helps them be “good” students whereas other did or do not but still performed or perform well. There were mixed results regarding a GPA requirement, but either way the participants did or do well with or without one. Academically, cheerleading appears to have a positive impact.

Based on the surveys, it is hard to say whether cheerleading impacted the athlete’s emotional and mental health. The data varied in who supported the cheerleaders, where the support came from, how they viewed themselves, and how others viewed them. More questions would need to be asked to determine where the cheerleader’s mental and emotional health is, and if it impacts their individual performance on the team. Referring to the interview, cheerleading presented to have a positive impact on the participant’s mental and emotional health.

In general, cheerleading appears to help athletes make new friends and develop social skills they may not have had the chance to develop without the forced interactions. Many of the participants stated they were able to make new friends and form bonds with their teammates. Most of the participants were or are also involved in other extracurricular activities in addition to cheerleading. Based on the feedback from the surveys and interview, it appears that participating in cheerleading has a positive impact on the athlete’s social development. More data would need to be collected to determine the level at which this positive social impact occurs and the specifics of how. In relation to the interviewed participant, cheerleading contributed to social benefits by allowing the participant to gain confidence and develop stronger social skills with diverse groups of people.
A majority of the participants were satisfied with their physical performance. According to the surveys, participating in cheerleading improved their overall physical performance. Almost all of the former cheerleaders were satisfied with their physical abilities, and almost half of the current cheerleaders are satisfied with their physical abilities. It is hard to determine based on the data what caused the participants to be or not to be satisfied with their physical abilities. More questions would need to be asked to determine where these viewpoints come from (coach, personal, home, school, etc.). In order to determine the amount of increase in physical performance, a larger range of data from varying time periods in cheerleading would need to be collected from former cheerleaders. Data would need to be compared from participants that did cheerleading before there were strict tumbling and stunting requirements to participants following the progression of these strict changes.

5 Conclusion

Overall it is evident that cheerleading has a positive impact on the participating cheerleaders in the areas of: social, emotional, mental, physical, and academic. Despite any discrepancies the participants may have encountered, they all expressed a love for cheerleading. It can’t be measured how much change occurred in relation to expectations and impacts on the cheerleaders throughout the evolution of cheerleading because of the small sample size. More samples and interviews would need to be conducted from a wider range of cheerleaders on varying teams, different time periods, and different regions (Northeast, South, Mid-West, West, etc.). All participants did well in school with grades mainly ranging from A-B, whether there was a GPA requirement or not. Regardless if participants had support or not, they still participated in cheerleading and loved it. All participants mentioned some level of satisfaction with their physical abilities; with some minor differences in satisfaction with physical appearance. Almost all participants were involved in other extracurricular activities in addition to cheerleading. Most of the participants expressed social benefits from being a cheerleader. It was hard
to determine what level cheerleading benefited the participants emotionally and mentally given the lack of interviews and small sample size. Based on the interview, there is a clear benefit to participating in cheerleading. It would seem those factors would be attributed to the interviewees moral support from her brother and new-found confidence from being successful on the team. Making new friends and finding something she loved also contributed to a positive emotional and mental health. Exploring this data more would allow coaches, parents, administrators, and affiliated organizations to acquire more information on how to better provide for their athletes.
References


