

THE DARK SIDE OF SPORTS

Pom-poms and Broken Necks

What must be done to stop the devastating epidemic of injuries in cheerleading

BY DR. MARC RABINOFF



It is impossible for me to put into words the emotions I experience when I am called into a courtroom as a forensic expert for cases with high school cheerleaders with spinal injuries. These young people's lives have been forever altered; often they will require a lifetime of daily medical care. This experience disturbs and angers me, and I can't imagine what would be going through my mind if this were *my* daughter in that wheelchair. How would you feel?

The alarming truth is that we forensic experts are being called

to break their necks and become paralyzed. In fact, cheerleading has become the number-one cause of injuries in young women, and the severity of their injuries can be as bad as anything you would ever see on a football field.

What makes this trend even more frustrating is that most cheerleading injuries, and certainly the most devastating ones, can be prevented. The evidence shows that injuries are usually a result of incompetent coaching and inadequate conditioning. Let me explain.

poms and dance routines.

Parents don't really think about their daughters being lifted from the ground, thrown in the air and then caught (hopefully!) by another adolescent student. Parents don't think about balance moves, tumbling, acrobatics and stunts that require significant levels of strength or conditioning. And in every cheerleading case I've been on (I've done three this past year) the concept that the teens have when they sign up is not the same as what they are ultimately being told to do at cheerleading practice.

In addition to providing spirit

...cheerleading has become the number-one cause of injuries in young women...

upon ever more frequently to testify in cheerleading cases. Just this year, for example, I was in the courtroom working on several cases involving cheerleaders with permanent disabilities and two cases in which serious falls caused two young women

A Failure to Communicate

When parents sign the waiver and approval form to say that their daughter or son can try out for cheerleading, the perception of parents is that what their child is getting involved with is *cheering*: singing and pom-

and emotional support at athletic competitions, cheerleaders often participate in competitions. Cheerleading competitions are usually not funded by school districts but by additional money from the cheerleaders, their parents and/or fundraisers. The level



With the higher levels of difficulty associated with their sport, cheerleaders should make weight training an essential part of their training. A cheerleader at Hunter High School in Salt Lake City, Utah, Vicelia Tavo works hard in the weightroom with core exercises such as parallel squats and power cleans.

of skill necessary to be competitive is higher than that required in cheerleading just for the school.

One of the goals of competition, of course, is to win. As a result, cheerleading coaches are trying to recruit stronger boys who will serve as more stable bases and who will be able to throw the girls even higher. And some of these young men are even being encouraged to learn how to tumble and perform other skills in order to have a competitive cheerleading team. Many cheerleading coaches want their squads to compete in these competitions, so they push the kids and try to teach them basic gymnastics, which is also called acrobatics.

When I recently testified in a trial in Louisiana for a cheerleader who was

seriously injured, the defense attorney, on the subject of gymnastics coaches training cheerleaders, pointed out the differences between cheerleading and gymnastics – for example, there is no hand balancing or two- or three-man stunts in gymnastics. While that is certainly true in the artistic gymnastics seen in the Olympic Games, *cheerleaders in competition are performing many of the same skills as acrobatic gymnasts*. The difference – and this is key – is that the acrobatic gymnasts are being coached by gymnastics instructors, not by people referred to as *cheerleading advisors*.

You see, in the manual for cheerleading you'll see the term cheerleading advisor – this is the only sport I know of

in which a coach is referred to as an *advisor*. The reason for this is that in the past those adults who trained cheerleaders were often just teachers or parents who would help them with their cheers. And at the time, this situation worked fine because no one was being thrown in the air and no one was tumbling. A cheerleader really didn't need to train hard to be good at this type of activity, as there was little athleticism involved. But over the past 10 years, athleticism has been pushed big-time – as a matter of fact, the National Cheerleading Association clearly says in all of its publications that cheerleading has become more athletic.

Please don't misunderstand me – I'm not against cheerleading becoming more athletic, nor am I against young people striving to compete at the highest levels in this sport. What I'm arguing against, and my testimony in court confirms this, is that the training and conditioning methods currently offered to cheerleaders often are falling well below the standard of care needed to minimize the risk of injury. As a result, many high schools have even banned cheerleading squads from participating in cheerleading competitions. Rather than resorting to this extreme measure, I recommend that schools outsource their cheerleading programs to local gymnastics schools that have the necessary equipment and trained coaching staff to teach these advanced skills.

Regarding cheerleading advisors who have no gymnastics background but say that they can teach and spot stunting movements and that they know the biomechanics of these movements, I would ask, "Where did they learn it?" I used to run cheerleading camps in the 1970s back in Florida, and we always had gymnastics classes for cheerleaders taught by gymnastic coaches.

Cheerleading is a sport, and, as

such, cheerleaders should have access to the competent coaches, sports medicine care and supervised strength and conditioning programs that other athletes

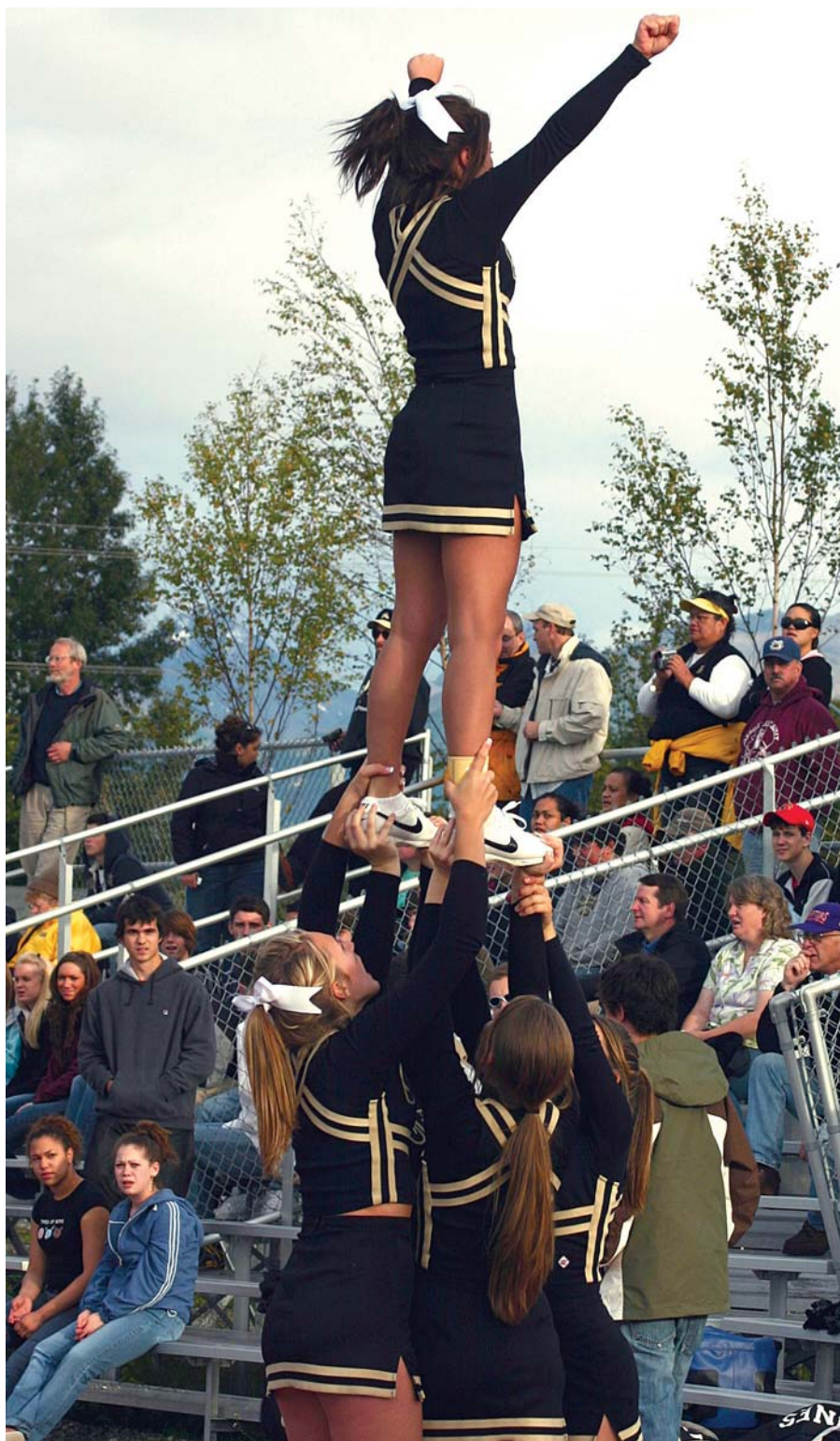
have. As a matter of fact, the manual of national standards for cheerleading, which was modeled after the gymnastics safety manual that I helped developed,

clearly states that all cheerleading programs must have sound conditioning programs. However, I have yet to find one high school in any the cases I've been involved with where there was anything that resembled a sound strength and conditioning program for competitive cheerleading.

I've seen the BFS program, and obviously it's a great program for a contact sport such as football – but it would also be a sound program for cheerleading, as these athletes need to be strong, powerful and highly athletic to perform the stunts they do in competition.

In the most recent statistics the number-one sport for injuries for high school girls is not basketball, volleyball or softball – it's cheerleading. It's not just sprained wrists and turned ankles; there are serious knee injuries and broken necks. In the last year I've been retained as an expert witness in numerous cases involving cheerleaders. All four of the girls who were injured suffered severe, permanent injuries; two of the girls were paralyzed.

We must raise the qualifications for cheerleading coaches/advisors, and cheerleaders need to become involved in serious strength and conditioning programs and be treated as the athletes they are. We can no longer have untrained, academic teachers teaching young women and men to perform these complex, potentially dangerous lifts, throws, stunts and tumbling maneuvers. Those days are over. BFS



Acrobatic lifts, along with tumbling and throwing, have increased the physical demands of competitive cheerleaders. In the past 25 years, cheerleading has been responsible for 65 percent of all catastrophic sport injuries among young women in high school.

"The Dark Side of Sports" is a regular feature by Dr. Marc Rabinoff that answers questions about safety and liability based upon actual litigations.





PROTECT YOUR PROGRAM AGAINST WEIGHTROOM LAWSUITS



\$149

ITEM #325077

BFS SAFETY PACKAGE

IMPLEMENTATION
INSTRUCTIONS

1 YEAR MAGAZINE
SUBSCRIPTION

SAFETY POSTERS &
TRAINING POSTERS

WEIGHTROOM SAFETY
VIDEO

IN YOUR PACKAGE

SIX ABSOLUTES
8 POSTER SET

WEIGHTROOM RULES
POSTER

STUDENT/ATHLETE
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT
FORM

SAFETY & LIABILITY
MANUAL

Prepare yourself with the information you need as a coach or administrator to avoid and/or win lawsuits that deal with the weightroom.

BIGGER FASTER STRONGER

BFS

DEDICATED TO HELPING ATHLETES SUCCEED SINCE 1976

SAFETY IS NO ACCIDENT - CALL 1-800-628-9737

online at www.biggerfasterstronger.com • email us at info@bfsmail.com

843 West 2400 South, Salt Lake City, UT 84119 • Fax (801) 975-1159