

Ready? Okay!

ESPN Brings On Cheerleading as a Full Contact Sport



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By JOE RHODES

There are nearly 6,000 of them, traveling in swarms, brightly-colored gangs of teen-agers, mostly girls, some of them with their ponytailed hair pulled back so tight that you think their foreheads might possibly snap off. They're all giggling and squealing and doing little cartwheels in their 16-pleat skirts and their two-tone monogrammed tops, stopping in front of every reflective surface they encounter to check their make-up and their eye glitter and their newly-polished teeth, all of which are big and clean and whiter than Minneapolis-St. Paul.

They have taken over Walt Disney World -- not an easy thing to do -- on a bright spring Orlando morning, 325 cheerleading squads from 31 different states, their bellies full of Mickey Mouse-shaped breakfast waffles and their heads full of color-coordinated bows. They're all smiling and hugging and shouting things in unison, battle cries disguised as cheers: We Are -- clap, clap -- The Marauders -- clap, clap. It's a weird little head game, each team flashing their synchronized smiles, trying to look happier and prettier than the next, as if they're all competing to be the next weekend anchor on Entertainment Tonight. If perkiness was a weapon, they'd have killed each other by now.

It's not for the weak-hearted, these National High School Cheerleading Championships, not when you're in the midst of all these little girls being tossed 25 feet in the air and doing back flips and flying

blind into the arms of jangly-nerved teammates who may or may not be ready to catch them.. Not when you're surrounded by an arena full of suburban moms carrying hand-painted signs with their children's names, wearing fright wigs and animal masks, mouthing the words to 2 and a half minute cheerleading routines they've seen a thousand times before, throwing hip-swiveling body English to help with the most difficult tricks. You have not really lived, my friends, until you've seen hundreds of Capri-clad women from suburban Memphis, many of them in matching t-shirts, standing and swaying and shouting out "Check It Out Now, Stone Soul Brother" over and over again as their daughters and nieces and neighborhood friends do the officially-sanctioned, professionally-choreographed pompon bump-and-grind.

This is not your old-fashioned Betty-and-Veronica stand-by-the-sideline "Go, Team, Go" kind of cheerleading. If it was, it wouldn't be one of ESPN's steadiest fill-in-the-gap ratings draws (Because, after all, you can only watch so many Monster Truck Rallies), so successful that ESPN and ESPN2 are televising 31 cheerleading/dance competitions (high school and college) this year, all of them organized and marketed by the Memphis-based Universal Cheerleaders Association, the brainchild of founder, CEO and chief television anchor, Jeff Webb.

Webb, a former gymnast and cheerleader at the University of Oklahoma, started the UCA in 1974 as an organization that sponsored summer cheerleading camps . Offering an alternative to the older, more traditional National Cheer Association (founded by the legendary Herkie Herkimer, inventor of the pompon), UCA's camps put more emphasis on stunts and showmanship, human pyramids and flashier routines.

"We were the ones who introduced the concept of cheerleading as entertainment," Webb says, "treating it more like choreographed gymnastics."

The competitions began in 1981 with 20 hand-picked teams and a single-event syndicated television deal. "We really envisioned the competitions as a way to get an exposure for our style of cheerleading and to encourage people to come to our camps," Webb says, admitting that the televised events are still more of a marketing tool than a legitimate sporting event.

"The events themselves are not that profitable," he says, "but it is an important aspect of promoting the company. We now have over 220,000 kids attending our camps every year. And television certainly had an impact on that."

Part of ESPN's programming since 1984, the televised competitions (edited down to tightly-paced one hour shows) are a non-

stop blaze of loud music, bright lights and dazzling gymnastic stunts, combined with the remnants of old-school cheerleading. Every team -- and some in the Large Varsity and Large Co-Ed divisions have up to 18 on a squad -- must not only do tumbles and aerial maneuvers, but they are graded on crowd appeal and "practical" cheers, which means they must, at some point, stop the music and yell through megaphones, the way their grandmothers used to do it.

"To me, it's still about the basics you still have to excite the crowd, says Candy Berry, coach of the Greenup County (Kentucky) for the last 22 years and, since her teams have won six national championships, considered to be the John Wooden of cheerleading coaches.

"It's important to do the stunts and the tumbling, but I don't like all these sing-songy razzmatazz things," she says. "A lot of schools have separate squads, one for cheering at games and one for competitions. We don't do that. I don't think it's a good idea to put all your eggs in one basket. The routines here only last 2 and a half minutes. And there's only one squad that's gonna win. It needs to be about more than that."

And yet there are competitors walking around Disney World wearing t-shirts that say "I've trained 11 months for 2 and a half minutes," a notion that troubles many in the organization, including Webb.

"We really try to fight against that," he says. "It's why we still have the squads do a cheer or a sideline chant. We don't want it to be all about the competition. We want them to develop school spirit, confidence, leadership. But it's up to the school and the coach to make sure there's a proper balance. We can't tell them how much money they should spend. Or how they should spend it. We're not a sanctioning body. We're not the NCAA of cheerleading. We just put on the event."

"There are other schools that have teams of outside coaches," says Donna Robinson Wilson, who, in addition to coaching the cheerleaders for the past 20 years, teaches health and physical education at Henry Clay High School in Lexington, Ky. "They have professional choreographers. They have a gymnastics coach, a pyramid coach, a dance coach. But here, I'm it. And it's just about killing me."

Like it or not the competition does seem to reach life-and-death proportions for some competitors and especially their parents, many of whom seem unduly perturbed when the judging -- a 100-point admittedly subjective scoring system that grades technique, precision, difficulty and "presence" -- doesn't go their way.

"I don't think the males get as irate as the females do," says Allen VanLandingham of Southaven, Miss., "I think a lot of the moms are

re-living their childhood through their kids. We're not. Look, there's nothing easy about any of this. These kids work all year round. It's like boot camp. But they teach 'em good morals, they teach 'em respect. And it keeps them off the streets."

It is grueling. Most teams practice 12 months a year, 5 days a week, 2-3 hours per day. When they arrive in Orlando, they're shuttled into an orientation tent, assigned hotel rooms and warned that, among other things, "there's no partner stunting on the concrete" and "no practicing after 10 p.m."

Because there are so many divisions and so many teams, the cheerleaders are moved from place to place with military precision. "Please report to the Stretching Area," they are told in the warm-up tent. "You have Four Minutes to Stretch."

"Okay," Rhonda Dulworth, coach of the Red Oaks (Texas) junior varsity, tells her troops just before they go on, "everybody take out their belly button rings."

There are pre-show rituals everywhere, a team from Connetquot, Long Island, playing a hand-clapping, bottle-tapping game they learned from an episode of "Full House." The team from Century High in Santa Ana, Ca do deep breathing episodes and whisper, "love, love, love, love" on the exhale. There is always time for one last layer of lipstick, one more tightened

braid. And then they run onto the massive platform stage, bathed in light, a giant video screen to their left. The music starts. The stunts begin.

They all come off giddy and, win or lose, they all start to cry, hugging and praying and watching themselves on the screen. The paramedics say that, after wrist sprains and groin pulls, the third most common injury is from fainting as they leave the stage.

"When you first get out there, says Red Oak sophomore Erin Etter, "you're just so scared, cause you're ready for the music and you give it all you've got and, like, the cheer starts and you have so much adrenaline and, like, I really don't remember after that. It's all kind of blurry, pretty much."

They all wander back to their buses, some headed for the Magic Kingdom, some headed back to cry in their rooms. But they will, within hours, be traveling in swarms again, some of them now wearing t-shirts that defiantly read, "Is Your Game Good Enough for My Cheer?"

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