

The Reality of Cheerleading Safety in 2007

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Here we go again. Another round of articles and follow-up articles on cheerleading safety is making its way around the newspaper, television and internet circuit.

Informing the Public or Ignoring the Facts?

We would welcome the attention on cheerleading injuries if in fact the articles provided real solutions and information that give a reasonable amount of perspective. Instead, the stories are sensationalized by presenting the information in the worst possible light, and even mislead the public in possible causes of cheerleading injuries. Here are some examples:

Incomplete Information

The numbers being used are the same as those over the past two years, yet they are given as if this is continuing information and that injury rates continue to rise. No participation figures, relevant background information or corresponding data for other athletic activities are presented in these articles. In fact, no actual injury rate is ever given.

Inaccurate Information

Media statement: "Of all the serious injuries to female high school and college athletes, more than half are from cheerleading. More than football, more than hockey, more than all other sports combined." That is an actual quote from George Stephanopoulos, Good Morning America.

Fact: Cheerleading does not have more serious injuries than football, hockey or all other sports combined. Over 350,000 people were treated in emergency rooms for football related injuries in 2004. That number is often ignored because there are probably more football players than cheerleaders, and it is primarily males that participate. It may be more realistic to compare cheerleading numbers to women's basketball as the participation numbers are likely similar. In the same year in which 26,000 cheerleaders were treated in emergency rooms, they were sitting next to over 100,000 female basketball players. Nearly quadruple the amount of emergency room visits for women's basketball, who a) have more access to an athletic trainer to filter out minor injuries and b) who do not participate in a year-round activity. * For complete information on fatalities, catastrophic injuries and serious injuries directly related to activity, see the table at the end of this article.

Inaccurate Comparisons

The numbers being given also do not account for the fact that cheerleading is nearly a year-round activity that takes place across sports seasons. Any comparison to other activities must account for the shorter participation time for those sports. Consider an athlete that participates in football and in basketball and is injured once in each season. Now consider another athlete participating on a cheerleading squad that cheers for football and basketball and is injured once during each of those seasons. The two injury rates are statistically equal, yet cheerleading will be shown to have twice the number of injuries. Without injury rate information, the statistics show what the author intends to show.

Use of Emergency Room visits

Using emergency room visits is also inflammatory in that the vast majority, over 98% of those visits, were classified as “Treated & Released, Or Examined & Released Without Treatment“.* The average person reading “emergency room visit” envisions 26,000 cheerleaders going into the emergency room on a stretcher. There are obviously serious injuries that need emergency procedures including hospitalization, but to not include the percentage that were treated and released or even released without treatment needed only adds to the misrepresentation of cheerleading injuries and the strides that have been made with regard to safety.

Filtering the Facts to Make a Point?

The primary concern for any safety organization is the minimization of catastrophic and fatal injuries. The numbers that have been shown regarding catastrophic injuries in cheerleading are again somewhat misleading. The most often cited numbers come from the National Center for Catastrophic Sport Injury Research study. They include injury data that goes back to 1982. The figures used in articles state that “over 50% of catastrophic injuries to female athletes are from cheerleading.”** Again, with no participation numbers, no reference to the fact that during a large majority of that date range cheerleading was one of the only athletic opportunities for females and without any other activity’s numbers for comparison, one is left guessing as to how many girls are actually catastrophically injured.

The saying that “one injury is too many” is certainly true, and our goal should be to have none. However, the number of catastrophic injuries and even deaths in other sports is never mentioned in these stories to give the reader any perspective with which to compare the risks in cheerleading. Nowhere does it state that there were thirteen deaths to high school pole vaulters between 1982 and 1997.** Nowhere does it state that the year 1990 stands out for football because there were no deaths reported that year. Furthermore, since 1990 there is a “positive trend” toward only single digit annual deaths as if it is an accepted risk in football.*** To reduce those catastrophic injuries, they don’t recommend eliminating tackling or removing the kickoff from the playbook. They recommend increased safety awareness, training in proper techniques and proper supervision. The same recommendations should be true for cheerleading, and have been made by several national organizations and safety studies.

Positive Steps in Coach’s Education

State activities and athletics organizations, national associations and even individual institutions are increasingly requiring cheerleading safety and risk management training for their coaches. The very fact that cheerleading is an athletic activity that involves risk should require that someone supervising the activity is well-versed in skill techniques, the use of skill progressions, safety training and other risk management procedures that have been developed.

NCAA:

At the college level, the NCAA recently made a requirement that in order to have catastrophic insurance coverage for their program the cheerleading squad must be supervised by a safety certified coach. The AACCA, along with providing this training, also made additional restrictions on where basket tosses and high pyramids can be performed. These two measures lead to a great reduction in the risk to cheerleaders involved in NCAA programs.

High Schools:

On the high school level, cheerleading coaches now have access to a comprehensive program developed by the National Federation of High Schools, the AACCA and educational

organizations like Universal Cheerleaders Association. However, just like all other sports and activities, the NFHS does not actually govern cheerleading. That is done on the state level by each state's activities or athletics association. Most states actually do regulate cheerleading in one way or another, from requiring that schools follow the established national guidelines all the way to requiring specific training courses for their coaches prior to allowing teams to participate in partner stunts, pyramids and gymnastics. Some states do regulate cheerleading as a sport, but there is no indication that this has made cheerleading any more safe in those states. In fact, it could be argued that increased competition and decreased preparation time, just part of the requirements often placed on an activity being labeled as a sport, may lead to increased exposure to injuries.

All Star (Non-school) Programs:

There is another large segment of cheerleaders that have emerged on the scene during the past ten to fifteen years. Non-school teams, also known as "all star" teams, have formed in gymnastics centers and more recently in gyms devoted solely to competitive cheerleading teams. The primary purpose of these teams is to compete and to practice for competition. It is not uncommon for an all star program to encompass four or five teams and 100 to 150 participants. During the development and expansion of all star programs, there were no official governing bodies to provide any rules provisions or coaches training requirements, as these are private businesses outside the reach of state and national associations. However, in the past few years, the vast majority of all star programs and the competitions that they attend have joined with the United States All Star Federation, which has developed rules for the various participation levels and provides credentialing programs for their coaches.

These recent efforts and successes made in the area of safety rules and coaches training are so often overshadowed by statistics that are pulled from as far back as 25 years ago.

Changes Have Been Made For the Better

The last point to be made is that contrary to the information in recent articles, cheerleading skills are not more dangerous than they were ten, fifteen and twenty years ago. Cheerleading coaches and cheerleaders themselves will be the first to point to the rule restrictions under which they live. Prior to 1984 there were no cheerleading rules at all. Twenty five years ago, high school cheerleaders were building three level high pyramids and even flipping off of them. Not to an awaiting set of three catchers, but to the ground on their own feet - from fifteen feet in the air. At the college level teams used to be able to do two back flips in one toss. These double back flips are now prohibited for colleges, and high school teams may not flip at all. While skills are more intricate than in the past, they are now performed at a lower level, resulting in more control in the event of an error.

We believe that most coaches and institutions do make safety a priority. With millions of children and young adults participating in cheerleading, there are going to be injuries as with any athletic activity. To discount the effect of a catastrophic injury or a death of a loved one would be to compound a tragedy. But to make it appear that cheerleading injuries are rampant does a disservice to every good coach supervising this activity.

Our job as rules providers, safety educators and coaches is to follow the accepted standards of care with regard to how we minimize the chance of injury. The job of parents and participants is to make sure they are participating in programs that are following the rules and to speak up if they have concerns. The job of governing associations is to provide a framework wherein the supervisors of our children are given the tools they need to provide a reasonably safe

environment that minimizes risk while providing opportunities for athletic and personal development.

We all need to address the safety of our children when participating in an athletic activity. It is important to keep safety on the front burner. There are measures that can be taken to ensure that they are put in the best possible position to balance out the risks of participation and the rewards that also come with participation. We feel that at the same time, perspective should be given so that educators, parents and participants can make educated choices about how to specifically address those safety concerns.

For more information on the AACCA, NFHS and USASF programs, visit www.aacca.org or call 800-533-6583.

Table I - Fatalities, Catastrophic and Serious Injuries (1982 – 2005)**

High School	Fatalities	Catastrophic	Serious	Total
Football	98	236	238	572
Track	20	16	21	57
Wrestling	2	32	18	52
Baseball	9	16	19	44
Cheerleading****	1	13	24	38
Ice Hockey	2	7	9	18
Basketball	2	4	11	17
Soccer	6	3	6	15
Swimming	0	9	4	13
Gymnastics	1	8	4	13
Lacrosse	2	4	2	8
Field Hockey (since 1996)	0	3	0	3
Softball (since 1993)	1	2	0	3
Cross Country	0	1	0	1
Volleyball (since 1994)	0	1	0	1
Tennis	0	0	0	0

College	Fatalities	Catastrophic	Serious	Total
Football	9	32	85	126
Cheerleading ****	1	7	12	20
Ice Hockey	0	4	8	12
Baseball	3	3	5	11
Lacrosse	4	4	2	10
Track	3	4	3	10
Basketball	1	1	6	8
Gymnastics	0	5	1	6
Soccer	0	1	2	3
Field Hockey (since 1988)	0	0	2	2
Wrestling	0	1	0	1
Swimming	0	1	0	1
Equestrian (since 2003)	1	0	0	1
Skiing (since 1989)	1	0	0	1
Cross Country	0	0	0	0
Softball (since 1993)	0	0	0	0
Volleyball (no data for college)				
Tennis (no data for college)				

Combined High School and College	Fatalities	Catastrophic	Serious	Total
Football	107	268	323	698
Wrestling	21	23	33	77
Cheerleading ****	2	36	26	64
Swimming	12	19	24	55
Gymnastics	5	17	26	48
Ice Hockey	5	11	12	28
Basketball	3	5	17	25
Soccer	6	8	7	21
Field Hockey (since 1988)	0	10	6	16
Cross Country	1	8	6	15
Volleyball	2	5	2	9
Baseball	0	4	0	4
Lacrosse	2	2	0	4
Track	1	1	0	2
Tennis	0	1	0	1
Softball (since 1993)	0	0	0	0
Equestrian (since 2003)	0	0	0	0
Skiing (since 1989)	0	0	0	0

Source: National Center for Catastrophic Sports Injury Research - Twenty-third Annual Report: Fall of 1982 - Spring of 2005.

Note: All other sports/athletics shown are for one-season sports. Cheerleading is a year-round activity.

Table 2 - Emergency Room Visits for 2004, Ages 5 – 22*

Football	346,285
Basketball – Males	330,004
Baseball	122,742
Basketball – Females	100,019
Soccer	76,015
Softball	56,204
Swimming	49,393
Volleyball	35,980
Wrestling	31,273
Gymnastics	30,245
Cheerleading	27,726
Track	18,249
Ice Hockey	15,971
Lacrosse	9,680
Tennis	7,260
Field Hockey	4,671

Source: Consumer Product Safety Commission – National Electronic Injury Surveillance System.
Note: All other sports/athletics shown are for one-season sports. Cheerleading is a year-round activity.

* Consumer Product Safety Commission's National Electronic Injury Surveillance System (NEISS) – 2004, Females ages 5 – 24; <http://www.cpsc.gov/LIBRARY/neiss.html>

** National Center for Catastrophic Sport Injury Research - National Center for Catastrophic Sports Injury Research - Twenty-third Annual Report: Fall of 1982 - Spring of 2005.

*** National Center for Catastrophic Sport Injury Research - Annual Survey of Football Injury Research, 1931-2006

**** All other sports/athletics shown are for one-season sports. Cheerleading is a year-round activity, but the numbers are being compared to one-season sports.