

**The Impact of a Competitive Cheerleading Experience on the Development
of Female Athletes**

by

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ABSTRACT

Competitive cheerleading is a sport that has received very little research attention yet was of great interest to the researcher who has coached this sport for over six years. This research asks, “What is the impact of a competitive cheerleading experience on the development of female athletes?” The literature surrounding cheerleading, the sports environment, psychology of coaching, sociology of sports, and feminism in sports is reviewed. A case study approach using both quantitative and qualitative techniques for data collection was used. Participants were five females who had been involved in competitive cheerleading for a mean of 4.4 years. Each participant completed a questionnaire as well as an interview with the researcher. Seven themes were found in the narratives: athleticism, team dynamics, unique aspects of competitive cheerleading, social skills, negative impacts of competitive cheerleading, involving male athletes and peer perception. Within each theme, there were key findings. This study filled some of the gaps in past research by using female participants, qualitative research methods, and the analysis of one sport.

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Chapter #1

Introduction

The World of Competitive Cheerleading

I will never forget the wave of panic that came over me the first time I walked through the stadium doors. A cloud of hair spray engulfed me as my senses were immediately overwhelmed by stimuli coming from all directions. Girls moving like robots with their ringlets bobbing, staccato words sounding in unison, bodies being contorted into inhuman positions, girls free flying far overhead, men and woman with “coach” on their shirts shrieking over the noise and rising above the din came the thunderous applause from the thousands of spectators inside the arena. Never before had I experienced an event so overwhelming; and as I glanced back to the doors, glimpsing the palm trees calmly swaying under the California sun, I was met by twenty-six pairs of panic-stricken eyes. My team of innocent Canadian cheerleaders was experiencing its first true exposure to the competitive world of cheerleading. As I, their “fearless” leader, took them through the doors to compete against the best teams in the United States at our first USA Nationals competition, all I could think of was, “what have I done?”

As I begin my sixth year of coaching competitive cheerleading and look towards my fifth USA Nationals’ competition, that question continues to haunt me. As a coach, I feel I have a responsibility to my athletes to fully understand the impact that the competitive cheerleading experience has on their development. As a researcher, I have the opportunity to explore this relatively new sport for Canada.

The unique demands, pressures and requirements of competitive cheerleading make it stand out from other competitive sports. It combines the strength of football, the agility of gymnastics and the grace of dance. The athletes are required to commit to a rigorous practice schedule where they are expected to perform dangerous and difficult stunts and tumbling moves. The physical stress that the body is subjected to is paired with the enormous mental stress of performances where even the slightest error by one member can cost the championship for the entire team. Hours of time are spent primping for competitions as the competitors strive to achieve a unified look where one athlete cannot be physically distinguished from another. These and other factors have led me to question the effect that the competitive cheerleading experience is having on athletes.

Get to Know the Team

As this research project draws participants from the team I coach, it is important that the reader understand the context of their competitive cheerleading experience. Many people hear the word “cheerleader” and picture a blond girl in pigtails standing on the sidelines in a short skirt cheering on the football players. One must cast that image aside in order to appreciate the full depth of this research.

The team I coach has been in existence for six years and consists of female athletes in grades eight through twelve. The number of athletes varies each year from twenty-six to thirty-one. They compete in the Senior Girl Varsity Division and have been ranked as one of the top teams in Canada. They have also competed in the USA

Nationals, one of the most prestigious competitions in North America, for the past four years. This past year, the squad placed in the top eight and was the only Canadian team to bring home a trophy. There are three assistant coaches who help at practices and four captains who assist with administrative duties. The athletes train together an average of ten hours per week; however, many have developed friendships with team mates that extend beyond practice time. In order to promote healthy relationships and to downplay the competitive nature of the sport, "Fun Nights" are organized throughout the year where the focus is on team bonding and fun! In addition, the athletes are actively involved in their school and community. The team supports a child in Ethiopia and volunteers at different school and community events.

Performing and cheering at games is a sensitive subject for the team as we are committed to dispelling the cheerleader stereotype. As a result, we have stated that we will perform at games if the team that requests our presence will come and cheer us on at our competitions. This policy has contributed to the respectful image the team has laboured to generate over the last six years. All types of talented athletes are attracted to being part of the team. As a result, we have had six successful seasons and have seen the program expand. This year, we have a Junior and Senior Highschool squad with a total of fifty-six athletes. In addition, I have begun an All-Star cheerleading program which offers five teams for athletes in grades three to twelve. Over one hundred athletes participate in these programs in addition to the Highschool squads.

Tryouts are held at the end of May where more than one hundred girls compete

for the thirty spots available on the team. After a two-day tryout, the team is chosen and summer training begins. For nine weeks, athletes train three hours twice a week at the local gymnastics facility while also doing individual conditioning at home. They attend a summer camp where they learn the latest stunting techniques and are challenged to expand their skill level. In addition, new athletes complete an eight module training workbook. At the end of summer training, all athletes complete a ten page written exam as well as a skill assessment. They set goals and ways to achieve these goals in a number of areas including health, fitness, cheerleading skills and relationships. These goals are reviewed by the coaches and athletes are assessed throughout the season on if they are meeting their goals.

A typical practice begins with a short warm-up followed by approximately twenty minutes of conditioning. Plyometrics and other sport specific techniques are used to condition the body for the unique movements needed in cheerleading. Athletes are then debriefed on the practice plan and new stunt sequences. They spend the majority of practice perfecting these stunts. The last half hour of practice is focussed on dance and cheer, as athletes are physically spent from stunting, making it dangerous to continue. Athletes cool down and stretch for the last fifteen minutes and are given “homework” to complete for next practice. Homework usually consists of memorizing new counts, stretching out new moves and/or conditioning.

In September, regular training begins. The team trains together two times a week for three hours each time. From September through to November, practices focus on

routine building. Competitive cheerleading routines are three minutes long in Canada and two and a half minutes long in the United States. They consist of a music section and a cheer section, both of equal time. The most important part of a routine is the stunting and tumbling. Cheer and dance are components of a routine; however, they count for a significantly smaller portion of the overall score. Judges award the most points for difficult and original stunts, as well as a large number of team members executing advanced tumbling skills. In the United States, for example, many teams have all athletes performing advanced tumbling.

The competitive season begins in December and continues until April. After each competition, the scores are reviewed and the routine is revised. Stunting and tumbling difficulty is increased as the skill level of the team develops. Athletes continue to average ten hours of training per week in addition to a minimum of one competition per month.

The season reaches its climax at the USA Nationals in California where the athletes join 50,000 other cheerleaders who compete over three days. By this time, the team has a challenging routine of which they are confident and proud. Qualification for Nationals is a difficult and competitive process that occurs in December when a video of their first competition is submitted. Only the top fifteen percent of teams in North America are accepted to Nationals. It is a privilege just to be there, and the athletes proudly represent Canadian cheerleading.

Upon returning home, the team has a few weeks off before the year-end banquet. Awards are given out and the athletes are honoured for their achievements over the past season. Tryouts are held a few weeks later and a new season begins.

Definition of Cheerleading Terms

In this research, a number of technical terms are used by both the researcher and participants. The following are definitions of applicable terms as defined by the researcher.

Stunting – the main component of competitive cheerleading. Includes lifts, throws, baskets, and pyramids.

Base – athlete who does the main lifting of a stunt and who holds the majority of the flyer's weight.

Flyer – athlete who is lifted/thrown.

Third – athlete who lifts the back of a stunt and is responsible for the execution.

Front – athlete who lifts the front of a stunt.

Stunt group – usually made up of five girls who perform stunts together made-up of two bases, a flyer, third and front.

Double Base – flyer stands on two feet and the bases extend her to chest level or to fully extended level where the bases' arms are extended above their heads.

Liberty – flyer stands on one foot and is extended fully above her bases' heads.

A skill is usually performed at this extended level. This would include heel-

stretch, scorpions, bow-and-arrows, scales, arabesques, etc.

Basket Toss – flyers are thrown in the air with no contact with their bases until they are caught.

Pyramids – a number of chest and extended level stunts are connected together.

Mount – the flyer is loaded into the bases' hands and lifted to the extended position.

Dismount – the flyer is unloaded from the stunt usually by throwing her into the air and catching her in a “bride” style position.

Fulls – flyers complete a full 360 degree horizontal rotation in the air after being pushed out of the stunt and before being caught.

Double fulls – flyers complete two full rotations (720 degrees) before being caught.

Tumbling – advanced gymnastic skills involving head over feet rotations (flips) and aerial skills such as tucks.

Highschool Teams – made-up of athletes from one Highschool.

All-Star Teams – made-up of athletes from a geographical area.

What Guided my Research

As a child and youth care graduate student, I desired to do my research in an area where youth were actively involved yet had not been a typical area of focus for child and youth care research. In the United States alone, more than 20 million children between the ages of six and eighteen participate in non-scholastic sport programs and millions

more participate in interscholastic programs (Smith, Smoll & Christensen, 1996). The high popularity of athletic programs amongst youth made the sports environment an appropriate context in which to begin my inquiry process.

I wanted to research something that I was already familiar with and involved in. Epistemologically, I strongly value the role of personal experience in guiding research. As a coach of an all girl competitive cheerleading squad, I anticipated that my personal experience with this sport and age/gender specific youth would provide direction for my inquiry as well as allow me to compare the literature and findings against my own experiences.

A fundamental ontological and epistemological belief I hold is that we, as human beings, exist and create our reality within the context of relationships. In my work, I attempt to understand individuals in terms of the different influential relationships in their lives. I was interested, therefore, in the role of relationships in a competitive cheerleading experience. These would include but are not limited to athlete-athlete, and athlete-coach relationships. I also anticipated that the existing relationships I had with my participants would enhance my research possibilities. I hoped that these established relationships would facilitate the data collection as a level of trust and understanding were already firmly in place with all the participants.

The team dynamics of a competitive cheerleading squad involve a multitude of relational and psychosocial factors. I have a strong theoretical orientation toward the

internal or psychological processes of individuals. In this inquiry, I was curious about the cognitive and psychosocial experiences of the athletes. Issues such as self-esteem, self-concept, stress management, conflict resolution, peer perception and cooperation were just some of the things that I was interested in.

Cheerleading is undergoing a major paradigm shift as it moves from being a sideline activity to a sport in its own right. Despite its growing popularity, very little research has been done on the dynamics and characteristics of this sport and its athletes. These reasons furthered my desire to research the impact of a competitive cheerleading experience on the development of female athletes.

My research objective is to create a thick description of a competitive cheerleading experience from the perspective of the female athletes involved. As my analysis of the research shows, there are many gaps in the literature. I desire to generate a study which fills some of the gaps of past research by using female participants, qualitative research methods, a systems epistemology and the analysis of one sport. It is anticipated that the research will generate a narrative description of how the athletes' sport experiences impacted their physical, social and psychological development. Lastly, it is expected that this research will reveal unique characteristics of competitive cheerleading that either contribute to or hinder the development and experience of the athletes.

As a coach, it is important that I appreciate the sport's impact on the physical,

social and psychological development of athletes. This insight would allow me, and other coaches, to create an environment that promotes healthy development and which mediates any harmful effects of competitive cheerleading. This research may contribute to the knowledge surrounding female athletics and an understanding of how females develop through sports. It will also give females a voice for something which, in the case of this research, is uniquely their own. In the male dominated realm of sports, females have very few opportunities to excel at something that highlights their abilities and dedication.

Purpose of my Research

The purpose of this research is to seek a competitive cheerleader's interpretation of her sport involvement. Specifically, it asks "what is the impact of a competitive cheerleading experience on the development of female athletes?"

I will begin by reviewing the literature surrounding cheerleading, the sports environment, psychology of coaching, sociology of sports, and feminism in sports. This will be followed by my own analysis of the literature. As a researcher and coach, I have many questions, suppositions, and observations as to the impact of the competitive cheerleading experience. I will raise these throughout the research paper; however, my purpose remains to share what the athletes experienced. Using a case study approach, I desire to "tell the stories" of my five participants. The results section shares these stories in narrative form. The discussion section reflects the common themes found in the

narratives, my interpretations of them, how they relate to the literature as well as areas for future research.

Research on competitive cheerleading is very limited. As a result, this is an opportunity to investigate something novel to child and youth care. The research is not grounded in any specific theory. My reactions to the literature, observations over the years and own experiences influenced the development of the questionnaire and interview questions, thus shaping the research. The purpose, however, remains - to share how athletes interpret the impact of a competitive cheerleading experience on their development.

Chapter #2

Review of the Literature

A Journey through the Literature

This literature review included searches using the data bases PsychINFO, ERIC, Social Work Abstracts, Alt HealthWatch, Canadian Reference Centre, and Health Source - Consumer Edition using keywords such as cheerlead (ing/er/ers), competitive, adolescents, youth, females, sports, development, leadership, coaching, systems, injuries, psychosocial and aesthetics. In addition, Internet searches were conducted using the same keywords and many books were used. After eliminating duplicates in the research retrieved, over eighty different pieces of literature were examined. The following is a review of the relevant literature.

Cheerleading

Interestingly, cheerleading began as an all male activity. On November 12, 1889, a man named Johnny Campbell is credited with beginning what is now known as cheerleading. He and a small group of men led a stadium full of spectators in cheers for their university football team. In the 1920s, tumbling was added to the organized cheering that began to appear on university campuses across the United States. It was not until World War II that, due to a shortage of men, women began to become involved in cheerleading. In 1948, the first National association was formed by Lawrence “Herkie”

Herkimer after whom a popular cheerleading jump was named. In 1978, CBC televised the first collegiate championship and marked the beginning of a new form of cheerleading - competitive cheerleading. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, stunting and tumbling became increasingly complex and safety guidelines were created to regulate the sport. In the last five to ten years, competitive cheerleading has been recognized as separate from the traditional sideline cheerleading. Reserved for elite athletes, competitive cheerleading has become a sport in itself. “‘Competitive cheer’ has become the fastest-growing high school sport for girls; about a third of US high schools have competitive teams, sometimes in addition to the more traditional squads” (Time, 2000, p.63).

Competitive cheerleading shares the most in common with gymnastics and figure skating in terms of its demands and requirements (eg. Borgen & Corbin, 1987; Lundholm & Littrell, 1986; Reel & Gill, 1996). There is a strong physical and training component; however, the public experiences a visual presentation that is centered on appearance. A crowd pleasing routine is one which seems effortless, natural, and full of athletes who are smiling and performing with ease. What is not seen is the physical, mental and emotional sacrifice that these athletes must commit to in order to perform well.

Further studies were conducted on athletes for whom thinness is a salient goal. These athletes were found to have a higher tendency toward eating disorders than other athletes (eg. Borgen & Corbin, 1987; Lundholm & Littrell, 1986; Reel & Gill, 1996). Cheerleaders have the added pressure of stunting; which is quickly becoming the most

important part of a routine. More than half of the marks assigned for a routine come from the difficulty of the stunts performed. More difficult stunts require smaller, lighter girls with an ideal 'flyer' being one whose body shape lacks curves or definition. Ryan (1993) found that girls, in attempting to reduce the effects of puberty, would starve themselves in order to maintain the proper body shape. "In starving off puberty to maintain the 'ideal' body shape, girls risk their health in ways their male counterparts never do" (p.9).

An interesting and somewhat disturbing qualitative study was conducted by Joan Ryan (1993). This narrative piece delves into the world of competitive female gymnastics and figure skating. Numerous stories are presented of young athletes who were seriously physically or emotionally scarred by their athletic experience sometimes to the point of death. "The intensive training and pressure . . . often result in eating disorders, weakened bones, stunted growth, debilitating injuries and damaged psyches" (p.7). The source of the pressure was the coach. As the coach exerted more influence than even the athlete's parents, the girls were at the coach's mercy. Although this study looked at the elite level of these sports, most of the athletes had the tone of their athletic experience set early on by their first coaches. These men and women used elite coaches as their role models and adopted a similar value system which placed athletic success above the athlete's personal development.

Ryan puts much of the blame for the coach's behaviour on a society that places these demands on the sport. Coaches are merely producing what society demands, despite the effect that this drive for success has on the athletes. Those athletes who do

suffer are brushed aside as failures and new “stars” take their place. Although these seem like extreme examples, I believe they should not to be ignored. Ryan presents a moving piece of imagery at the end of the book.

We don't want to see them parade past us with their broken bodies and mangled spirits, because then we would have to change forever how we look at [these] darlings. They are the pink ballerinas inside a child's jewellery box, always perfectly positioned, perfectly coiffed. They spin on demand without complaint. When one breaks, another pops up from the next box. To close the lid is to close down that part of our soul that still wants to believe in beautiful princesses and happy endings (p.243).

The most common injuries in high school cheerleading are to the ankle and knee and include both ligament and muscle strains. When compared to other sports, cheerleading is found to have a relatively low risk of injury; however, those injuries that do occur tend to be severe in terms of time lost. Cheerleading is considered a year-round sport. The “constant ‘in-season’ state does not allow appropriate time for recuperation or conditioning, which in turn magnifies the risk of overuse injuries” (Hutchinson, 1997, p.86).

The Sport Setting

The sport setting has been identified by behavioural researchers as an ideal

naturalistic research laboratory. The phenomenon of interest occurs in a restricted area and is largely open to the public making it accessible for observational study.

“[T]here are few psychological processes that are not relevant to sport and that cannot be studied in that setting. Learning and performance, motivation and emotion, competition and cooperation, leadership, aggression, stress and coping, social interaction, and many other classes of psychological phenomena invite the attention of researchers” (Smith, Smoll & Christensen, 1996, p.3).

In the last two decades, youth sports has drawn an increased amount of research attention. “One reason is the recognition that youth sports is an important setting for social and skill development in children” (Smith, Smoll & Christensen, 1996, p.4). Despite the role that sports plays in development, the youth sport environment is still largely untapped as a setting for research (Smith, Smoll & Christensen, 1996).

Sports Theories

A linear, individualistic epistemology is generally subscribed to by sports psychologists. . . Missing from the sports psychology literature are strategies that address team-as-a-whole and interactions of team members (Zimmerman & Protinsky, 1993, p.161).

A linear epistemology focuses on the athletic development of the athlete only. An

athlete is viewed as independent from other team mates. A systems epistemology considers the overall development of an athlete including athletic, social, emotional and psychological. Athletes are seen as functioning within the team structure and attention is given to the dynamics of this group setting. When the team is approached with a systems epistemology, the athletes show less stress, more confidence and improved relationships with their team mates. In terms of athletic development, peak performance and team cohesion were equally affected (Zimmerman & Protinsky, 1993).

By conceptualizing a sports team as a group, one can see potential for applying group work strategies (Gerber, 1998). Group work strategies include teaching athletes conflict resolution, communication and problem solving skills. This is particularly significant in the case of youth sports. The primary focus for youth sports is to have fun, develop skills, and be involved in social interactions. "Thus, athletic teams are meaningful groups that can address important developmental needs of youth" (Gerber, 1998, p.35).

The Psychology of Coaching

Within the natural group of a sports team, the coach occupies the central role. "Many of the challenges one faces as a coach are similar to those faced by a worker with a group" (Gerber, 1998, p.45). A coach must invoke the principles of group work. These include creating team cohesiveness and collaboration, understanding individual personalities and being able to adjust to their respective athletic abilities, creating a

structure within which the players can solve problems collectively and work together effectively (Gerber, 1998).

“The dynamics of the sport domain stimulate frequent and intense interactions between coaches and athletes” (Price & Weiss, 2000, p.392). The coach-athlete relationship is viewed as an essential component of the sport environment (Price & Weiss, 2000, p.406).

The manner in which coaches structure the athletic situation, the goal priorities they establish, the attitudes and values they transmit, the behaviours in which they engage can markedly influence the effects of sport participation on children. Not only do coaches occupy a position of centrality in the athletic setting, but their influence can extend into other areas of children’s lives as well. For example, because of the high frequency of single-parent families, coaches frequently occupy the role of a substitute parent” (Smith, Smoll & Christensen, 1996, p.29).

Differences in coaching behaviour accounted for almost all of the systematic variance in outcome of a study measuring psychosocial factors. It was not the win-loss record that affected an athlete’s enjoyment or self-esteem rather, it was their relationship with their coach (Smith & Smoll, 1997). Coaches who used high levels of “positive reinforcement for both desirable performance and effort, responded to mistakes with encouragement and technical instruction, and who emphasized the importance of fun and personal improvement over winning” had the greatest outcome effects (Smith & Smoll,

1997, p.17). Athletes indicate that their relationship with their coach is the “ultimate quality and perceived success of their competitive sport careers” (Vealey, Armstrong, Comar & Greenleaf, 1998, p.298).

In contrast, coaches who were rated as less empathetic, lacked praise as a motivational technique, were autocratic, and emphasized winning had “athletes who scored higher on the dimensions of negative self-concept, emotional/physical exhaustion, psychological withdrawal, and feelings of devaluation” (Vealey, Armstrong, Comar & Greenleaf, 1998, p.313).

“Coaches provide their athletes with feedback and reinforcement about performance that athletes use to correct, motivate and reinforce skills and behaviours” (Price & Weiss, 2000, p.392). This feedback will affect an athlete’s anxiety level, motivation, assessment of competence and their attitude toward the coach (Price & Weiss, 2000). Another study found that an athlete’s feelings about their sport were more affected by their coach than by their most influential parent (Givvin, 2001).

Compatibility is an important component of the coach-athlete relationship. Compatibility was defined as “the degree to which your goals, personality and beliefs are consistent with your coach’s goals, personality and beliefs” (Kenow & Williams, 1998, p.254). Those athletes who felt compatible with their coach experienced fewer negative somatic and psychological effects than those who felt less compatible (Kenow & Williams, 1998).

Despite the crucial role that coaches play in the sport environment and the significant impact they have on the athletic and psychological development of their athletes, many coaches are unprepared for the task at hand.

Most athletes have their first sport experiences in programs staffed by volunteer coaches. Although many of these coaches are fairly well versed in the technical aspects of the sport, they rarely have had any formal training in creating a healthy psychological environment for youngsters. Moreover, through the mass media, these coaches are frequently exposed to college or professional coaches who model aggressive behaviours and “winning is everything” philosophy that is highly inappropriate in a recreational and skill development context (Smith, Smoll & Christensen, 1996, p.29).

The Sociology of Sports

“One of the cultural practices most significant in the construction of gender is sport” (Theberge, 1993, p.301). It is interesting to take a brief look at the role that sports is said to play in the construction of gender.

A qualitative study was done by Eder and Parker (1987), where the researchers observed the “effects of athletic-related activities on the peer-group culture of students” (p. 200). Through ethnographic observation, male athletes and female cheerleaders were

observed both in practice and during informal times such as lunch hour. This study found that “the high level of interest surrounding male athletic events was not present for female athletic competition . . . The lack of official support for female athletics limited its cultural significance in the school” (Eder & Parker, 1987, p.203-204). Prestige was gained from high exposure as peers came to watch games that were central to social gatherings. Athletes were also visible at school as they wore uniforms to promote games. “Because of the low visibility of girls’ athletics, it did not provide females with an avenue for achievement and power status, as had been expected” (Eder & Parker, 1987, p.204).

The only females who attained the same elite status as men through the means of exposure were the cheerleaders. They received high exposure as they were present at all the male games and would also wear their uniforms to identify themselves in school. While both female cheerleaders and male athletes held the highest status, male athletes were encouraged to be achievement oriented, competitive, and aggressive; cheerleading candidates were encouraged to smile and be concerned about their appearance. These values were further modified and interpreted in the context of informal peer interaction (Eder & Parker, 1987, p.209).

Based on their observations of cheer practices and tryouts, the researchers felt that cheerleaders maintained the value system that perpetuated the gender-typed beliefs of men occupying a role of power and prestige while females needed to be concerned with appearance and presentation. They felt that the activity’s emphasis on maintaining a smile was “early training in emotional management, which is important for such

traditional female occupations as secretary, stewardess and nurse” (p.210). The researchers concluded that “these activities promoted traditional gender relations and values, showing how schools continue to play an important role in reproducing gender differences” (p.211).

Feminism in Sports

The sport environment is one that is dominated by men, which the literature suggests is an opportunity for men to display power and authority (Theberge, 1993). The exclusion of women or admission on restricted basis, has not only denied women this opportunity but has also perpetuated the myth of female frailty as well as exerted control of women’s bodies under patriarchy (Lenskyj, 1986; Theberge, 1993). “The near absence of women in all but a few sports has provided fertile territory for the growth of an ideology of gender” (Theberge, 1993, p.305).

“Aesthetic sports that emphasize grace and form are thought to be feminine; those that stress strength and power are viewed as masculine” (Theberge, 1993, p.302). The literature also suggests that this distinction in gender-appropriateness of sport is supported in the peer environment. It was found that girls who were associated with gender-appropriate sports (ie. those displaying feminine qualities) were viewed as more desirable friends and partners than those who were associated with less gender-appropriate sports (Sutor & Reavis, 1995).

We have already seen the important role that the coach plays in the team environment, therefore, I was interested in exploring how the coaching role is implicated in this gender differentiation.

Perhaps of all positions in sport, coaching captures the central features of the stereotypical view of sports as masculine. As agents of sport organizations, coaches have considerable power over the athletes in their charge. In addition, coaching is a technical activity, concerned with training in the skills and techniques, that is, the *practice* of sport. The conception of coaching as quintessentially masculine is supported by the reality that most coaches are men (Theberge, 1993, p.305).

At the heart of this is “an assumption that men are naturally superior athletes and on this basis, also superior coaches” (Theberge, 1993, p.305). Women coaches often coach aesthetic sports where they are seen as appropriate. “Because coaches and others (most importantly athletes and parents) see and understand gender as integral to sport, women’s differences are continually reconstituted in spite of their efforts to fit in” (Theberge, 1993, p.308).

In conducting a search of sports magazines such as “Sports Illustrated” and I made a surprising discovery. Of the fifty magazine covers that I looked at (dated 1999 – 2002), there was only one which featured a female athlete. A Canadian figure skating couple were featured together in a perfect pose, smiling at the camera and displaying

their medals. This image was in sharp contrast to the sweaty, dirty, grimacing men in action that adorned the other covers.

Interested in this contrast between how male and female athletes were presented, I explored the literature surrounding the values inherent in female sports. Interestingly, cheerleading became the most appropriate means of exploring this as it has been identified as the most feminine sport and the most appropriate for females from a list of sports (Csizma, Wittig, Schurr, 1988).

In the ethnographic study discussed earlier by Eder & Parker, 1987, the cheerleaders served as models for female values. "An ideal candidate was someone who had a pleasant expression and a pleasant personality and who was always in a good mood" (Eder & Parker, 1987, p.208). These values were then passed on to their peers by means of their elite social status and high exposure. "Cheerleading has a direct effect on female adolescents culture through its focus on appearance and attractiveness . . . and represents the general importance of attractiveness and appearance for female adolescents" (Eder & Parker, 1987, p.208).

Being an integral part of a cheerleading program, I was interested in how the cheerleaders themselves viewed this gender typing. "Cheerleading was gender-typed as feminine but, as expected, was viewed as more gender-neutral by cheerleading participants" (Clifton & Gill, 1994, p.158). "Cheerleaders believe that their sport is appropriate for both sexes, regardless of how it is viewed by others" (Clifton & Gill,

1994, p.159). The cheerleaders were also very accurate in predicting how the non-cheerleading sample would respond and identified that this population would view cheerleading as much more gender specific (Clifton & Gill, 1994). “These findings raise interesting questions: Who decides gender typing of a particular sport? If those involved with cheerleading do not view their sport as feminine, is it a feminine-typed task?” (Clifton & Gill, 1994, p.159).

One further finding concerned the confidence level of female athletes surrounding their expectations of athletic success. In a review of the literature surrounding expectation levels of women in sports, Gill (1992) found that females report lower levels of expectations for success than males. This was not the case, however, in a study on cheerleading by Clifton and Gill (1994). This study measured the confidence ability of male and female cheerleaders on different cheerleading tasks and it was found that the females had a higher confidence level than the males (Clifton & Gill, 1994). According to Clifton and Gill (1994), finding females with higher levels of confidence than males is very rare in the literature on gender. This may be due to the earlier socialization of females into cheerleading, which allows females more experience and opportunity to develop skills and confidence in their ability. “Females in this study began cheerleading at a much earlier age (12 years) than did males (19 years)” (Clifton & Gill, 1994, p.160). “Cheerleading is one of the few, if not the only, physical activities that females are socialised into at an earlier age than males are” (Clifton & Gill, 1994, p.152).

Analysis of Literature

There were a number of critical studies that guided my inquiry process. Some of these studies addressed the restriction or exclusion of females from sports (eg. Clifton & Gill, 1994; Eder & Parker, 1987; Theberge, 1993). Eder and Parker's (1987) qualitative study on the cultural production and reproduction of gender was particularly significant in directing my inquiries. Their ethnography on the effect of sports on peer culture concluded that through the means of athletics, males demonstrate their values of achievement orientation, competitiveness and aggression. Females, on the other hand, through cheerleading, reflect their values of attractiveness, presentation and appearance. These conclusions were drawn from the researchers' experience as observers.

After reading their study, many questions came to mind. For example, what did the cheerleaders think of this assessment? Although to an observer, attractiveness and presentation may appear to be salient values for these athletes, I do not believe that these are necessarily the only or most important values. I know from experience that many competitive cheerleaders struggle with the sport's appearance requirement as this is not a value that they hold or wish to portray. Perhaps these observers were unable to identify other values due to their distance from the cheerleaders. Watching cheerleaders perform versus interacting with them behind the scenes is likely to result in very different assessments of their values.

This incongruence between the literature and my experience opened up an area of

exploration. I became interested in how competitive cheerleaders conceive their role in the gender-typing of sports. What do these female athletes, who participate in an extreme feminine typed sport, value? Is it consistent with the literature that suggests a focus on attractiveness and presentation? If not, what type of values do they hold?

The study by Clifton and Gill (1994) was also critical to my inquiry process as it looked at feminine typed tasks and, specifically, cheerleading. This study revealed that cheerleaders are accurate in predicting that their peers will gender-type their sport as feminine; however, cheerleaders view the sport as gender neutral. Expanding on the questions that arose from the last study, these findings led me to question how cheerleaders deal with the values that their sport and others project on them. I became interested in how the incongruence between peer and self-perception of one's sport affects the development and experience of an athlete.

Numerous studies addressed pressures associated with cheerleading (Borgen & Corbin 1987; Littrell, Damhorst & Littrell 1990; Lundholm & Littrell 1986; Reel & Gill, 1996; Taub & Blinde 1994). These studies, however, were inconclusive in their findings making it necessary to continue investigation in this area. As Reel and Gill (1996) state, "it is important to examine the individual pressures in cheerleading" in order that interventions may be developed by cheerleading coaches, consultants and the athletes themselves (p.203).

My belief that coaches need to be concerned with the overall development of their

athletes is strongly supported in the literature. A critical group of studies on male athletes and coaches was conducted by Smith and Smoll (1989, 1990, 1993, 1996, & 1997). In these studies, the researchers examined the cognitive and psychosocial development of athletes in the sports environment. They investigated the coach-athlete relationship and how it contributes to the athlete's development and experience. These studies found that the coach plays a significant role in structuring the sport environment. Those coaches who structured it in such a way as to promote the growth of athletic skills, as well as social and psychological development, had athletes who rated their sport experience as very positive. This was contrasted with the negative assessment by athletes whose coaches were concerned with athletic development only.

Gerber's (1998) and Zimmerman and Protinsky's (1993) conceptualization of the sports environment were fitting to my research. These studies approached the team as a natural group in which group work approaches could be used to promote overall development in athletes. Within this group setting, coaches were able to teach athletes skills that extended beyond those athletic skills specific to their sport. As I am interested in the dynamics of the sports team and the relationships within, these studies provide a strong basis for my inquiry. I am particularly interested in examining the dynamics of an all-female team. The importance of relationship and the different socialization of females suggest that group work processes may be particularly powerful within the female athletic setting.

My desire to look beyond athletic skills to the holistic development of athletes is

supported by the literature. Zimmerman and Protinsky (1993) state that the sports realm needs to adopt an approach that addresses the needs and dynamics of the team rather than the traditional focus on the athletic skills of each individual. Within the team setting, the coach needs to adopt a more deliberate role in the development of their athletes beyond athletic skills (eg. Gerber, 1998; Kenow & Williams, 1998; Price & Weiss, 2000; Smith & Smoll, 1997).

My focus on female athletes addresses a need identified by the literature. Smith and Smoll (1997) state, in reference to the lack of research that has been done on female sports, that “girls’ programs clearly deserve empirical attention” (p.20). In reference to their coach effectiveness training, Smoll, Smith, Barnett and Everett (1993) state that

Given the dramatic increase in the number of female participants in organized sport programs over the past decade, it would be of considerable interest to assess the effects of our training program on girls (p. 608).

They also stated that the fundamental differences between boys and girls may mean that the current findings that use male participants may not be transferable to females.

I have a number of critiques of these studies. First, the majority of the studies used male athletes and male coaches as participants. Further studies need to be conducted that use female participants. Second, the majority of the studies used quantitative or observational methods of data collection. Further studies need to be

conducted that allow the athletes to share their experiences and their interpretations. Third, most studies looked at one particular sport and generalized to all sports. Further studies need to be conducted that examine individual sports and the characteristics unique to that sport. In addition, further studies of multiple sports need to be conducted in order to increase the generalizability of findings. Fourth, many of the older studies used a linear epistemology that is proving to be ineffective. Further studies need to be conducted using a systems epistemology. This approach looks at the team as a whole entity and seeks to foster development beyond athletic skills alone. Fifth, the current literature has not adequately explored the dynamics of how relationships outside of the coach-athlete relationship may influence the athlete's development and/or sport experience. Further studies need to look at other influencing relationships in the sport environment such as the athlete-athlete relationship.

I was not able to find any Canadian research surrounding competitive cheerleading. Therefore, this study will contribute to a better understanding of Canadian youth involved with this sport. This study seeks to give female athletes a voice in order that they might describe their experiences. It examines one sport, competitive cheerleading, and is interested in the sport's unique characteristics. This study uses a systems approach and is concerned with understanding the different factors that influence the athlete.

Chapter #3

Methodology

Inquiry into the Experience

Research Design

A case study approach using both quantitative and qualitative techniques for data collection was used in this study. Gall, Borg and Gall (1996) define case study research as “an in-depth study of the instances of a phenomenon in its natural context and from the perspective of the participants involved in the phenomenon” (p.545). In order to gain an in-depth account of the experience of being a competitive cheerleader (ie. the phenomenon), key informant interviews were used. Gall, Borg and Gall (1996) describe key informants as

Individuals who have special knowledge or perceptions that would not otherwise be available to the researcher. Key informants have more knowledge, better communication skills or different perspectives than other members of the defined population (p.306).

Cuddy (2000) lists some strengths and weaknesses of the case study method. Case studies are useful in preliminary stages of inquiry. They often produce rich data; they are conducted in a natural setting and are an efficient method of data collection. On the other hand, case studies provide retrospective information, participants can have

biased recall, it is difficult to assemble a good control group and there is a loss of reliability and exactness in the data.

Since competitive cheerleading is an area of research that is relatively new, and I had access to it in its natural setting, case study seemed an appropriate and effective method of data collection. The generalizability of this research, however, is compromised because of this choice. The results are unique to the selected participants and can not be used to describe competitive cheerleading in general. The purpose of this research, however, is to seek a competitive cheerleader's interpretation of her sport involvement. The results of this research, therefore, could be a starting point for further study in this area. Methods that provide generalizability could be used once the groundwork has been set in this area of inquiry.

Participants began by completing a questionnaire with both questions using a Likert 7-point scale as well as short answer questions (Appendix A). The questionnaire used for this study was constructed for the purpose of this study only. While a few questions were drawn from questionnaires used in previous studies, the majority of the questions were based on my observations and curiosities over the past five years as a competitive cheerleading coach. Data such as other activities and sports that the athletes were involved in was also collected. The purpose of these questions was to help create a picture of how the competitive cheerleading experience influenced and was influenced by the other systems in the participants' lives.

Following the completion of the questionnaire, an interview session was arranged with each participant. I have an excellent relationship with all of my participants; therefore, the context for dialogue was already well established. “The inter-view is an inter-subjective enterprise of two persons talking about common themes of interest”(Kvale 1996, p.183). The main objective of the interview process was to allow the participants to share what *they* believe was essential to their athletic experience. The participants were interviewed individually. Due to one participant moving away for school, only four interviews could be conducted. The questionnaire data for this participant was included in the quantitative analysis.

Probing, open-ended questions were used in the interviews. The reason for this interview technique is that I desired to explore the values and meanings of the experiences discussed. I wanted to ensure that the participants had the opportunity to share what their experiences meant to them and not leave this for the researcher or reader to infer or interpret. For example, if a girl responded that her peers criticize her for being a cheerleader, I might follow this up with “tell me more” or “because?” I was more interested in understanding what the experience of criticism means to the participant rather than simply reporting that cheerleaders are criticized by their peers for their participation in the sport.

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed later by the researcher. The interviews were put into narrative form and were returned to the interviewees. They had the opportunity to dialogue and discuss any changes or new issues that needed to be

addressed with the researcher. These subsequent discussions were also recorded for reference, if necessary.

Six interview questions were created which expanded on the questionnaire. The first question, ***“How did your competitive cheerleading experience impact your development as an athlete and as a student?”*** allowed participants to expand on their athletic experience. This question also had participants address the relationship between their sport participation and academic experience.

The second question, ***“Are there aspects or pressures of competitive cheerleading that you feel had a negative impact on you?”***, looked at what I have labelled the “dark-side” of cheerleading. I was interested in identifying pressures that are unique to the sport in order to generate awareness among those invested in the sport. By creating an awareness, precautions and interventions could be generated to reduce the harmful impact on the athletes.

The third question, ***“Are there team dynamics that you feel make competitive cheerleading a unique sport?”***, asked participants to consider the sport’s structure. I was interested in whether they felt competitive cheerleading had a unique team organization and how this affected their experience.

Expanding on this, question four explored the role of the female identity within this sport context by asking participants ***“How do you think being a co-ed squad might***

change this?” My squad has historically been an all-girl squad and I was interested in how participants perceived this experience by asking them to consider what it would be like to integrate males into the team.

The fifth question was composed of two related questions, *“How do you view competitive cheerleading in relation to other competitive sports?”* and *“How do you think your peers view it?”*. These questions probed into the participant’s perception of how competitive cheerleading fit into the realm of competitive sports followed by an evaluation of how their peers view their sport. If there was an incongruence between the two perceptions, participants were probed with further questions into how this incongruence affected their experience.

The last pair of questions were *“What values do you think are reflected in competitive cheerleading?”* and *“How do you feel about these values?”*. To contextualize these questions, participants were first debriefed on the Eder and Parker (1987) study. It was explained that, through observation of high exposure athletics, males were identified as being achievement oriented, competitive and aggressive. Females, based on their observation of the cheerleaders, were identified as being concerned with appearance, prestige and presentation. Participants were asked for their interpretation of these “values” as identified by Eder and Parker. They were also asked to identify other values that may not be immediately apparent to observers.

Participant Selection

Participants were five females aged 17-18 years selected based on their involvement in the Coach in Training (CIT) program at South Delta Secondary School. In order to be a CIT, participants had to be senior students, have a minimum of three years cheerleading experience, possess leadership skills as well as advanced social skills (eg. ability to communicate well, excellent interpersonal skills, composure under stressful situations). Being part of this program meant that participants would also have extensive theoretical and practical coaching experience.

Most of these girls have been part of the team since its conception and have been fundamental in its growth and success. They bring a unique perspective as they have experienced incredible obstacles and triumphs in establishing this team over the last four years. They bring a maturity of age and experience as well as an investment in the purpose of this study as many of them want to continue coaching. They have proven themselves competent and dedicated athletes. Over the years, they have demonstrated their perseverance to achieve, their dedication to athletic superiority, as well as exceptional interpersonal and leadership skills. This remarkable competence contributes to their credibility as key informants for this particular study. I believe that this group of girls exemplifies the essence of female athletics and they were able to clearly articulate their experiences as athletes.

Data Collection

All five CITs received a letter of recruitment (Appendix B) that explained why they were chosen to participate in this research. Their parents also received a letter informing them of the nature and purpose of the study (Appendix C). Participants met individually with the researcher to discuss the purpose and procedure of the study and were given the consent form (Appendix D). Participants were sent home with the questionnaire and given a two week time limit to complete it. Upon completion, the questionnaires were returned to the researcher and appointments for interviews were arranged with each participant. Participants had the opportunity to “flag” areas of their questionnaire that they wished to expand on or discuss in their interview. For example, if a participant did not wish to answer a question on the questionnaire because they did not understand it or they wished to go into further detail, they would simply star it. The interview would then include a discussion around this question. These interviews were conducted at the participant’s home with only the researcher present. All interviews were audio-recorded and took an average of eighteen minutes and thirty seconds.

Participants were only required to talk about what they were comfortable discussing. If there were painful memories or issues that they were not ready to address, then they had total freedom to refuse commenting on them. Participants also had the option of dropping out of the study at any time with no consequence. If the process made them uncomfortable, they simply had to cease participation. If they continued to participate, however, all efforts were made to help them deal with past issues. The

researcher was available at any time throughout and after the research process for participants to contact and talk to.

After the interview session, the interviews were transcribed. Each participant had the opportunity to read what I had written, provide critical feedback and had the opportunity to expand or clarify on what they had said. I repeated this process until each of my participants was satisfied that she had been clearly represented and understood.

Data Analysis

As I read over the transcribed interviews and searched for common themes or meanings, I continually asked myself the question suggested by Kvale (1996), “how can I reconstruct the original story told to me by the interviewee into a story I want to tell my audience?” (p.185). My objective was to create a thick description - “statements that recreate a situation and as much of its context as possible, accompanied by the meanings and intentions inherent in that situation” (Gall, Borg & Gall 1996, p.549). I looked for themes, “salient, characteristic features of a case” (Gall, Borg & Gall, p.549). I searched for themes and constructs that might be common to all the participants; however, I attempted to maintain the unique characteristics of each. These themes are expanded upon in the results section of this work.

Human Subjects

For this study, I was the researcher while also maintaining my distinction as the coach. As the volunteer coach of the squad, I am in a position of authority over the participants during the regular school year. In order to prevent the possibility of implicit coercion to participate in this study, I collected the data when the cheerleading season was over and I was no longer in a coaching relationship to the participants. As graduates, these participants were no longer in a position where I have authority over them in the future. In addition, the questions in the questionnaire and interview never directly asked for or inferred an assessment of my coaching ability.

Maintaining my role as coach was extremely valuable for this study. There is an emphasis on “the constructive nature of knowledge created through the interaction of the partners in the interview conversation” (Kvale 1996, p.11). After having seen my athletes develop and change over the years, I was able to bring valuable insight that contributed to this constructive nature of knowledge described by Kvale. My experience with these athletes provided insight into areas of their development that they might not have initially been aware of.

This study sought to maintain an emic perspective, which is the perspective of the case study participants (Gall, Borg & Gall, 1996). By intimately knowing my participants and experiencing their development first hand, I believe that I was better able to share this emic perspective. I do not believe that I could have reached the depth that I

desired with strangers as participants. The relationship I shared with my participants may have been one of the keys to a true expression of their experiences.

Further ethical issues include anonymity of my participants. Their identity was protected in the data collection process. The questionnaires were identifiable by numbers only with the researcher being the only one who was able to identify the number with the individual participants. Pseudonyms were used, and all efforts were made to conceal their identity in the narrative process. All data was kept in a locked drawer in the researcher's office. All transcribing of the data was completed by the researcher. Anonymity could not be guaranteed, however, as the criteria for being a participant was very specific. If someone desired to find out who these five participants were, it would be possible. It would be impossible, however, to determine which narratives belonged to which participants.

There was also the concern of causing upset if the research process brought up sensitive areas in the participant's life. I was attentive to this in my questioning and probing as well as responsive to any signs of distress. If a participant did become upset, I ensured follow-up, including a referral to counselling if necessary, in order to reduce any harm that may have been caused. I ensured that I received informed consent from all my participants and that they understood the purpose and commitment required of this study. In addition, participants were made aware that they could drop out at any time during the study and that their data would be destroyed upon successful completion of the thesis defence.

Chapter #4

Results

Making Their Voices Heard

The purpose of this research is to seek a competitive cheerleader's interpretation of her sport involvement. Specifically, it asks "What is the impact of a competitive cheerleading experience on the development of female athletes?" The following are the narratives of five competitive cheerleaders who share their experiences as athletes and the effect that their sport involvement had on their development.

Demographics

Five participants completed the questionnaire and four of these participants completed a semi-structured interview with an average length of eighteen minutes and thirty seconds. The mean number of years that participants had been involved in competitive cheerleading was 4.4 years. The mean age of participants was 17.4 years. The mean time spent practicing each week was 7.6 hours plus an additional 3.8 hours coaching cheerleading. A mean of 3 hours per week was spent engaged in other physical activities with an additional 3.5 hours per week spent in non-physical extra-curricular activities.

The results of participants' intention to be involved in cheerleading after graduation varied significantly due to different opportunities available to cheerleaders at

the post-secondary level. The individual results are presented in graph form (see Appendix E) as mean scores did not present an accurate description of the data. Only one athlete was attending a post-secondary institution that offered a competitive cheerleading program. Two athletes were moving away and entering demanding post-secondary programs, therefore, limiting their potential for continuing to coach competitive cheerleading. The mean score (on a Likert-scale of 7) for recommending competitive cheerleading to younger athletes was 6.2.

Analysis of the Data

My analysis of the data involved a search for themes and constructs common to all participants. As I reviewed the questionnaires and transcribed interviews, I coded the data using colors to represent ideas. For example, anything relating to social skills was highlighted in blue. What I found was that all the data could be coded by seven colors. I then grouped all the data of each color together. At this point, there was some data that fit more appropriately in a different color group and was, therefore, moved. Some responses had also been coded with more than one color. These were either recorded in each color group or put in the most appropriate group. Saturation was achieved when all the data had received a color code.

After reviewing the data in each color group, a theme was generated that most accurately described the data. The themes were not predetermined, rather, they naturally emerged from the grouped data. Using this method of analysis, the responses could be

best understood in terms of seven themes: athleticism, team dynamics, unique aspects of competitive cheerleading, social skills, negative impacts of competitive cheerleading, involving male athletes and peer perception. Both quantitative and qualitative data appear in each theme category. All quantitative data is represented by a mean score out of seven (Likert-scale was used).

I chose this approach as it allowed all the data to be presented in a coherent manner. Participants often answered questions very differently and touched on a number of ideas within one response. Participants reviewed the seven themes generated by the researcher's analysis as well as the data in each group. They agreed that these themes reflected the values, feelings and ideas that they had desired to share in this research.

Athleticism

Currently, there is much debate over whether or not cheerleading can be defined as a "sport". Most definitions for sport identify two main criteria: physical exertion and competition. In other words, the purpose of the physical exertion is for competition. The problem for cheerleading is that there are often two purposes for a cheerleader's physical exertion: to compete and to perform/entertain. Because many competitive cheerleading teams compete as well as continue to engage in the more traditional role of supporting other school teams, the label of "sport" has not been given to this activity.

British Columbia School Sports Association does not recognize competitive

cheerleading as a sport and, therefore, does not provide governance for interschool competition. As a result, in BC and other provinces, cheerleading associations have been created to govern the sport. Such associations are made up of coaches, teacher sponsors and other cheer experts who are invested in governing and advancing the sport in their province. Rules, guidelines, regulations and other decisions are all made by these individuals.

For the purpose of this paper, however, I will refer to competitive cheerleading as a sport. My squad does meet the requirements for a “sports” team in British Columbia. It is also modelled after the competitive squads in the United States where many are recognized as sports teams within their schools and state. In addition, our school does include us as part of their sports program and athletes receive sport credits for participating.

Because of the lack of recognition on the governing level, there is a stigma attached to competitive cheerleading. Since it is not identified as a “sport”, the athleticism is often not acknowledged or appreciated. Participants, however, identify their cheerleading experience as a strong contributor to their athletic development. The physical demands required participants to be in top physical condition.

Participants were asked, in the questionnaire, to rate how their competitive cheerleading experience impacted their fitness goals (see Appendix F). The participants rated competitive cheerleading as helping them establish fitness goals (mean of 5) and

achieve their fitness goals (mean of 5.6). Had they not participated in the sport, the participants rated the probability of achieving their fitness goals as 3.6.

Participants were asked to rate the influence of competitive cheerleading on their physical development, which was divided into five sub-components. The following mean scores represent the influence that the participants felt their cheerleading experience had on these components: cardiovascular (3.6), strength (5.6), flexibility (5.2), nutritional health (3.8) and life style choices (4.8) (see Appendix G).

Participants identified themselves as athletes who trained hard to achieve their goals just like other competitive sports. Although active in other sports, Kerry states, “I think it made me a better athlete: stronger, more fit.”

In comparison to other competitive sports, Marcy found the training and physical requirement to be the same:

I think it is just as competitive. You need to be in the same physical shape as you need to be for gymnastics or any sport when you are at that level. I don't see why some people don't classify it as a sport because I think it has all the attributes of a sport and a competitive sport so I think it is just the same...same amount of dedication, same amount of work....I don't see why it's...I don't know...disregarded as a sport.

She continues to expand on this by using a poignant illustration:

I remember reading something about the Canadian University of Western Ontario Cheer Team and that the school's football coach would threaten [the football players] to run practice with the cheerleaders if they didn't shape up. The football team would see [the cheerleaders] running stairs and stuff all hours of the day and night.

Beth points out the demanding nature of the sport and the need to train. "As an athlete it really encouraged us to stay fit and stuff cause it was so physically demanding on your body. If you weren't prepared for it you'd....die and get hurt." In terms of the level of training needed, she says:

I think it is about how good you want to be. Like if you want to be in the Olympics, you are going to train hard so you can be. I don't know if it has training wise a lot of difference from other sports...it's about how bad you want it.

Joanne points out a distinction between training for aesthetic reasons as opposed to the need to meet the athletic requirements of the sport:

Physically, I've always had a thing about my body image as it was. I think I worked out more not just for the physical aspect but for the

strength and endurance that I needed for the sport. Physically I think I was in better shape than if I wasn't involved in it.

Participants felt that there is a very high physical expectation of them. They train long and hard despite their activity not officially being identified as a “sport”. They credit their competitive cheerleading experience with much of their athletic development.

Team Dynamics

Competitive cheerleading was identified by participants as being distinctive from other competitive sports in terms of team dynamics. These distinctives create a unique team environment where relationships become the central focus. Key words such as “dependence”, “bonding”, “trust”, “communication”, “teamwork” and “cooperation” appear throughout the data.

Question twenty-two on the questionnaire had twenty-two items drawn from the literature, my own experience and stereotypes surrounding cheerleading. Participants were asked to rate the importance of these items for competitive cheerleaders. The results are presented in graph form (see Appendix H) and a summary of the results is given below.

Cooperation and trust were both rated as a 7. There were eight traits which received a score of 6 or higher. These included teamwork, communication, dedication,

strength, fitness, responsibility, discipline and goal setting. There were three traits that received a score of 2 or lower. These included physical beauty, popularity, and body shape.

Traits impacting team dynamics were identified by participants as being the most important to the competitive cheerleading experience. Within this system of relationships, cooperation and trust play a central role. Working together to achieve a common goal and trusting those whom you depend on, were foundational to a healthy team environment. Many participants used words such as “family” and “sisters” to describe the relationships she shared within the team.

Kerry identifies the work done in small stunt groups as significant for the development of dependence, trust and cooperation:

We work in little groups then switch around so you get closer to people than if you were a football team or a soccer team ...it's not like you have to work together as much...your not as dependant on each other. In cheerleading you are very, very dependant on each other.

Those five girls, they NEED to work together but on a team of like twenty people like a soccer team or something, you just mix them around and do whatever. They can do little bits by themselves and then pass it on but in cheerleading you do everything together. There's a lot of cooperation,

teamwork and all that stuff. It takes a lot of effort.

The girls on a cheerleading team must have a large amount of trust for each other. If there were no trust, the team wouldn't progress at all.

Respect is another aspect as well as communication.

Marcy compares her cheerleading experience to other sport experiences and notes the unique sense of closeness that she shared with her team mates:

I have done a couple sports and of all the sports I have done, I don't think I've had the level of trust needed and the level of dependence. Like soccer you just sub with someone else but in cheerleading you can't replace a girl...you have to rework the entire thing so you are extremely dependant on one another. I have never experienced that before. It makes it really unique. In cheerleading, we felt almost like a bunch of sisters. We could talk about anything and everything....I felt bonded with those girls. The team is very dependant on each member; if one person is not there, you can't do the routine. It forces everyone to get along and to be responsible for their whereabouts.

I don't know if on football teams and other sports you get to know other people so quickly and so well as with cheerleading and I really experienced that at South Delta. I don't think I have ever bonded with so many girls who are so different, so quickly just because of the environment

you are working in. I think that is an awesome experience. I wouldn't have traded it for anything.

Beth comments on the importance of each individual and the bonding of these individuals into a cohesive team:

The closeness the team needs to have in order to function is very important. We depend on each other so much, each person is needed. Just cause one of the major aspects is stunting, and the trustyou really do bond as a team. I remember being in soccer and I didn't really know any of the girls. Travelling and stuff as a team, stunting and winning as a team, that really bonds you. I think we tried really, really hard to bond as a team and it always worked. Every single year we had a really strong group of girls and everyone was getting along.

A lot of people can dance and a lot of people can do gymnastics but it is different if you value teamwork. You can do it individually but if you choose to do it as a team, that takes it to a whole different level.

I became interested in Beth's repetitive use of the word "bonded" and asked if she felt that was requirement in competitive cheerleading. She responded:

Just cause if you are stunting and are all mad at each other then nothing

works and you just get frustrated and then the stunts don't work. That's a vicious cycle cause when the stunts don't work, you get more frustrated then you get mad at each other and that kinda stuff. Obviously that does happen but I think the more casual you can be with each other and the closer you are, the easier it is. You can take constructive criticism better when you know the person cause then obviously you know they aren't meaning it towards you.

Joanne notes the physical contact and time spent with your team mates as having a significant impact on the team experience. The closeness of the team sets it apart from other sport teams. She also considers how important it is for everyone to work together. The success of a team depends on how the individuals pull together for the common good rather than allowing an elite group to bring success for the whole team:

You have a whole lot more physical contact than you would in any other sport. I think of the amount of time and how important the sport and the people involved becomes to your life. Not many people get a chance to experience a team that is so closely knit, that has to work together and has such a huge domino effect within the mechanics of the team. This sets it apart from other teams that I have personally been involved in.

I think it is different as it is solely based on how you work as a team. One person can't save the rest of the team. It's different in that one person

can't be the star, one person can't score that goal, one person can't get it back. In cheerleading, you all have to work as a team, you all have to become one to make it work. I think it differs because you are connected at all times whereas you are individuals combining in soccer or hockey or field hockey or whatever else.

The time we spend together transforms us from a group of individuals to a family. We have to work together and communicate in order to operate as one for our common good. Cheerleaders have an especially "close" relationship.

Curious about Joanne's comment on the physical contact present in the sport, I probed further into this aspect of the sport and its impact on her experience.

Physically when you spend that much time so closely with your teammates, I think you can't help but get more emotionally attached to them because you have to be really comfortable and trust them a lot to be that physically close and to let them invade your personal space that way. I think you can't help but be closer to them.

The physical closeness required of athletes is unique to competitive cheerleading. In order for a stunt to be executed effectively, a group of four or five girls must, in a sense, become knitted together. All energy must be executed in unison and with

precision as if that source of energy were coming from one being. Catching flyers often entails the sacrifice of the catcher's own well-being for the sake of the one she is catching. Stunting requires athletes to suspend natural boundaries of "appropriate" and "inappropriate" areas of their physical bodies. Altogether, such physical closeness appears to have a significant impact on the relational connections athletes develop.

Sheila identifies trust as foundational to the cheerleading experience:

I believe that I became familiar with my team mates quite quickly because of the trust that I had to develop with them. As a flyer, I had to trust my bases' abilities and care and as a base I had to trust that the other bases would not hesitate when stunting. I also had to trust that the rest of my team was dedicated towards a clean routine and a confident performance during competitions. Such a trust with the activity led to a trust vocally.

All participants drew on comparisons from different sports and pointed out that in other sports, reliance on the individual athlete is not as intense as in competitive cheerleading. In one sense, individuals can become a "star" on other types of teams, however, they can also be replaced relatively easily. Participants felt the replacement of the individual was virtually impossible in competitive cheerleading. It is not so much about the individual athletes as how the athletes form a team where each member is needed. This cohesive requirement of the sport, in addition to the large amounts of time spent working together in close physical contact, led to a relational bond that was not

found in most other sports.

All participants referred to the unique ability of their competitive cheerleading experience to bring “different” people together into relationships that would not have existed without their team involvement. Whether personality or age differences, this was identified as a contributing factor to the team environment. Kerry says, “*It was good...it was fun meeting new people and getting close to people.*”

Marcy values the opportunity of interacting with so many different personalities in the team environment:

I think it really helped me to get along with different people, people I'd not normally be friends with and I just got to meet a lot of different personalities and I really enjoyed that.

The unique age composition of the team is discussed by Beth:

It was good cause I met a lot of people of different age groups which I most likely wouldn't have. Even most of the other school teams are Senior teams or the Junior teams. This 'Senior' team was grades 8 – 12 so you got to meet a bunch of new people.

Participation on the competitive cheerleading team encouraged relationships to be

formed with people that the athletes may not have socialized with outside of the team environment as Joanne observes:

Socially, I got to know different people that I wouldn't have known otherwise and I got to build relationships with people of all ages and not just people my age whereas I wouldn't have met them outside of cheerleading. So that was nice. There were a lot of different kinds of people as well...personalities and stuff.

Within our community, individuals tend to be very "cliquey". Cheerleading brought us out of this comfort zone to bond with many other people whom we probably would never have gotten the chance to meet otherwise.

Sheila says, *"The relationships I developed within the team opened me up to many more relationships within the school."*

The team dynamics of competitive cheerleading set this sport apart. Stunting requires athletes to work physically close, to have complete trust and dependence on one another and to cooperate in order to accomplish the task. More time is spent practicing together than competing allowing for personal and intimate relationships to develop. Communication is essential in everything the athletes do. The ultimate goal is to present a routine in which the athletes appear to be one being where no individual athlete stands

out. Working to synchronize all the movements, positions, and motions creates a sense of oneness. The participants experienced bonding with their team mates that they compared to that of “sisters” or “family”. The different age groups and personalities added to the experience as they were able to develop deep and meaningful relationships with people with whom they might not otherwise have had contact.

Unique Aspects of Competitive Cheerleading

This section of results is closely linked with the Team Dynamics of competitive cheerleading. Although they could have been combined into one category, I felt there was a difference in how each category impacted the individual athlete. Team dynamics seemed to have a direct impact on the relationships formed in the team environment whereas unique aspects of competitive cheerleading were experienced on a more individual level.

Competitive cheerleading was identified as a combination of different sports. This combination resulted in a need for more all-round and intensive training.

Joanne compares competitive cheerleading to other competitive sports:

[Competitive cheerleading is] similar [to other competitive sports] in that you have to tune your skills. You have to tune your stunting, your form, technique, etc. At the same time it's different. I mean in every sport you

have to work different muscle groups, different cardiovascular aspects but again they are different in that cheerleading uses both strength endurance and cardiovascular endurance whereas most other sports uses one more than the other. I see the strength, the training, the athletic ability to do what the gymnasts do, the stunting, how much strength and skill it takes.

Kerry sees cheerleading as a combination of team environments ranging from individual to large team situations:

It combines different sports together. It isn't just about one thing. You work in groups of like five but you also work in the big group for the dances, and we also work independently for the tumbling so it's got every single aspect of an individual sport, a team sport and.....a small team sport I guess....the stunts.

Two participants also commented on the structure of the cheerleading season where “evaluations” of a team occur less often than in other sports. More time, therefore, is spent preparing for these evaluations rather than competing in them. Kerry says “*In softball you take a little bit of time preparing but then you have your “competitions”, your games...or whatever but you don't prepare as much. Cheerleading there is a lot more practice and teamwork and preparing than most other sports do.*”

Beth notes the different means of evaluation in competitive cheerleading. Rather

than competing weekly, monthly competitions allow for long term focus which she finds more encouraging:

Again comparing it to soccer where you have games every weekend. For cheerleading, having competitions once or twice a month, it is really something to look forward to and when you have a competition. You can set your goals and you have time to work towards them. You achieve them and then set more goals. It's really easy that way to see improvement and so it's really easy to stay encouraged throughout the year.

Competitive cheerleading is an intense, competitive, and physically demanding sport. An outstanding routine, however, is one in which the athletes perform a challenging routine with ease and grace. There is a considerable amount of emphasis within the sport on appearance. Unlike other sports where two teams go head to head in competition, competitive cheerleaders work hard to perfect an aesthetically appealing routine which they perform in an exhibition format. Interested in how athletes processed this appearance requirement, I explored the values they felt surrounded competitive cheerleading.

Kerry shared her view of cheerleading before she was involved in the sport. Watching sideline cheerleaders, she felt there was little substance to the activity:

People think that it is all like "girly" ...jumping around but it's

not.....there's a lot of competitiveness. Before, I didn't see the competitiveness cause you only see cheerleaders on TV that cheer at games and there is no competitiveness in that except maybe in between one or two girls...like, cat fight! But, I don't know, it kinda seemed meaningless almost. It was just like a "girl" thing to do. It had no real goals or meanings or values. It was kinda emptiness. There was not really a point....just like icing, you don't really need it but it's there.

Now that she has been involved in competitive cheerleading, she sees the physical appearance requirement differently:

Appearance does matter....not really physically as much as you think. Obviously a top has to be somewhat small so it's kinda important there. The appearance of the routine is very, very, very important. You can't get anywhere if you don't have a good routine.

Marcy identifies showmanship and presentation as the reasons for the appearance requirement. In order for a team to look unified, they must focus energy on their appearances:

I mean, in cheerleading, yes appearance is important because we are marked on it but that is definitely not all we are about. It's just part of the showmanship of it.

I mean if you are going to show up with ugly hair, unpolished girls, unmatching uniforms, you are not going to look like a team performing a routine. Football, you play something and you don't need to look so coordinated but cheerleading everything needs to be together. You need to look like one body and you can't have that if everyone is looking unpolished and different from each other.

Beth remarks on the “entertaining” aspect of competitive cheerleading:

I think a lot of us value entertaining. A lot of us are dancers and gymnasts and a lot of us feel we were born to perform and this is a really good way. I think other people would say that we value showing off....like who can do the best stunts, who can do the most creative stunts. When you are at a competition, you totally see the people out there thinking “we want to look the best out here”.

Joanne observes how it is not set-up like a “typical” sport. Unlike most sports, such as soccer or basketball, there are no games to win or lose. Instead, a team’s success is based on its performances and placements over a season:

Most people who I have talked to don't view it as a sport because it is not two teams head-to-head. It's not one-on-one. It doesn't use balls and you

can't just go out and watch it and know they've scored a goal. It uses judges instead and because of that people think of it as more of an artist merit than it would be a sport. I see it as a sport because I see how much the athletes put into it. I see the strength, the training, the athletic ability to do what the gymnasts do, the stunting, how much strength and skill it takes but I can see how someone watching would see "that's just dancing". It isn't two teams going head to head, one being able to stop the other team and having to rely on skill.

Joanne continues by commenting on the hard work her team puts in to achieving their goals. She hopes that people can see this dedication to hard work, success and each other:

I think it's hard for any team not to value prestige. Obviously everyone wants to go out there and do their best but they want to be recognized for being the best so I think that is hard to argue. Anyone who would see us at practice working on what you would see on the sidelines or on the competition matt would know that beauty is NOT one of our most valued aspects. I think people see how hard we work. I think it is hard not to watch one of our teams and see how far you can come from nothing and not realize how hard we work. I think people definitely recognize that. I think people would see how much we value our relationships with each other. It is hard not to see the closeness that cheerleading brings to

individuals to become a team. It is hard not to see the relationships that develop. We definitely value our relationships, we value how well we do, we value progress, I think everyone can see that. Our dedication definitely.

In comparison to other competitive sports, cheerleading was seen as requiring more all-round training. Competitive cheerleading incorporates such skills as strength, cardiovascular, flexibility, coordination, and balance. The team structure also incorporates a number of different team environments. Individually, athletes must work on skills such as tumbling. They work in small groups while stunting and as a whole team for dance and cheer. The appearance requirement was seen as important for the unification of a team's performance. Although to spectators it appears teams are judged mainly on aesthetic merits, the participants identify the strong physical requirements behind a routine.

Social Skills Developed

Within the team environment, shaped significantly by the unique characteristics and team dynamics of competitive cheerleading, participants identified a number of social skills that were developed during their cheerleading experience.

Kerry felt she matured in her ability to communicate and participate in a group:

I learned how to communicate with people a lot better cause I used to be super, super, super, super shy and now I am just a little bit shy. I can talk in front of a class now. I seriously could not do that before. Having to voice my opinion to make something work, I had to say something otherwise things wouldn't work or a stunt wouldn't work.

Marcy reiterates the value of trust and dependence while extending her experience to how it will impact her in the future:

I have a theme of trust and dependence in this thing but it's just because its an experience that I have only gotten from cheerleading as a sport so I really think that is a HUGE one. Friendship is a big one. Also, even if you don't like people on the squad, you still have to work with them and I think that is a really good lesson to learn in life because you are going to have to work with people you don't like and I think doing it in such a trustworthy and dependant environment really prepares you for what you are going to experience out in the work force.

Trust, valuing the strengths of others, leadership, initiative and cooperation are some of the values Joanne learned by being part of a competitive cheerleading squad:

Value of trust is defiantly number one. If you don't trust your team, your team is going nowhere. I think trust really leads to all the other values

that it holds like being unified. You have to trust your team mates. You have to learn patience when you are stunting. You learn the value of other people's strengths because everyone's strengths put together is what makes a team. If everyone could just do one thing you wouldn't have all the different aspects that makes a good cheerleading team. It teaches you leadership as you move from position to position as you have to take the initiative to learn and develop those skills. To help your team develop, for example as a third, you need leadership to conduct a stunt or as a top you need to show leadership if your bases are doing something wrong. Cooperation obviously.

Individuals, such as Sheila, experienced greater confidence in relationships and her expression of self through her competitive cheerleading experience:

I developed a lot of confidence. Before cheerleading, I was a very quiet individual who required a large amount of familiarity with a person before opening up. I have gained the confidence of voicing my own opinion and socially interacting with people. Although I am still learning how to use this vocal confidence, I continue to benefit from it.

A skill most participants identified was that of time management. As cheerleading occupied a significant amount of time in their lives, they were required to learn how to balance their other commitments.

Marcy says, *"First, as a student, it forced me to manage my time a lot better. Cheerleading nine hours a week forced me to get my homework in order and learn how to prioritize."*

Friends, homework, family, work, and other activities needed to be arranged around cheer practice. Beth learned about time management through her experience:

And school wiseumm, I thought it was good because it did actually teach time management. At a time when most people don't really, like grade 11 and 12, most people just kinda goof off or they focus too much on school or whatever. It just really helped balance time between friends, cheerleading, homework and work. You had to fit it into your schedule.

Joanne echoes her team mates:

As a student it helped teach me about time management. Since I spent so much time cheerleading, I had to learn when to do my homework, fit school in and say for competitions, work I had to make up. I had to fit all that in. I think it impacted me in learning how to manage my time.

Within the competitive cheerleading environment, athletes have many opportunities to develop different social skills. The unique structure of the team creates

the means for skills to emerge, mature and eventually transfer to other areas of life. Trust, dependence, cooperation and communication were just some of the skills participants identified. Increases in confidence, ability to work with others, valuing the strengths and weaknesses of others, and taking on leadership were also noted by participants. Most participants also experienced a maturity in their time management skills as competitive cheerleading took up so much time. The team environment provided a safe and challenging environment for these and many other skills to be developed in the athletes.

Negative Impact of Competitive Cheerleading

The questionnaire asked participants to rate the influence of certain characteristics of competitive cheerleading on their experience as athletes. These characteristics were drawn from past studies, personal observation and some stereotyped ideas surrounding cheerleading. All the items included have been identified by various sources as having a negative impact on the athlete. If an item had a positive impact on their experience, participants were asked to rate it a 5 or higher (7 indicating a very positive impact). For example, the significant time commitment required of competitive cheerleaders was rated as 5.6 meaning that it had a positive impact on their experience. The fact that they learned how to properly manage their time could be a possible explanation for this positive rating. If they felt an item had a negative impact on their experience, they were to rate it 3 or lower (1 indicating a very negative impact). They were asked to rate an item as 4 if it did not impact them either positively or negatively.

The results are displayed in graph form (see Appendix I) and it is interesting to note that six out of the eleven items were rated as having a positive impact and two items were rated as neutral. Weight of the flyer, stereotyping and injury/risk of injury were the only items that were rated as having a negative impact by participants.

Kerry identifies the stress of competitions as a negative aspect. It is closely linked to the reliance of each individual:

Stress of doing well. Like at competitions, if you're stressed out like "oh my god, am I going to do well or screw up?" Cause everyone has to work together and if one person makes a little mistake it effects everyone. So everyone is thinking "I can't make a mistake cause it'll screw up everything else." So the negative impact would have been stress. Just the environments at the competitions, there was tension. Once we get in a competition environment, everyone is a threat to everyone and they all get defensive and kinda mean. I'm not saying competitions weren't fun but they were the most stressful point.

Kerry also identifies a stress in stunting:

Basing is also hard. You have so much weight on you both physically and emotionally. The pressure to make sure the stunt works is somewhat

nerve-wracking and the weight of the flyer is straining and tiring after doing it over and over, dozens of times.

Marcy echoes that performance stress played a significant role in her experience, however, she does not identify it as necessarily negative:

You get stressed out around December (referring to competition time) but you get stressed out with a lot of things so I think overall it was positive. You could always go there to unwind as well, just work out your frustrations and stuff. Competitions you are thinking, "oh I don't think we are going to do well" but you get stressed with everything in life. With school, with family, so I don't really think of it as a negative thing, it is just something that comes with what you sign up for.

Beth identified injuries as having a negative impact on her experience. In a position of leadership on the team, Beth also experienced some difficulty in trying to define herself as both friend and leader:

Injury, that is a huge one. Also, I am pretty sure that this is with every team, but also leadership roles. Even once roles were defined - who gets what role - there was still a lot of cattiness on the squad. With peers trying to take leadership, it's really hard. People talking about you and stuff. That had a negative impact on me friend wise. Cause you are all

part of a team but outside of the team you are totally fine, you're friends and stuff, but as soon as you are in practice and one person steps up, that can cause problems.

Joanne also felt she had been impacted by injuries, however, she felt that it was an unavoidable consequence of being active:

It impacted me physically as well cause I had a lot more injuries than I would have but again that happens in every sport. Whether I had wrist problems or not, if I were running, I would have had problems with my knees. It's just part of the sport.

Pressure was also identified by Joanne as being a difficult aspect of the sport; however, she felt that it had long term positive effects on her development:

Pressure you put on yourself as well as when you are trying to get a stunt. You are working at it and working at it and you can't get it and you just feel heavy almost cause you just want it to go. You just want it to work but it's just not the right day for it. There's so much pressure to get it and to have it stick. If all the other stunts are up and all the other stunts are working and yours isn't, it's just really. I mean it is also a tough aspect of the sport but at the same time in the long run, it teaches you a lesson and it becomes positive.

Sheila identifies performance stress as having a negative impact on the team by increasing the risk of injury, causing conflict between members and generally disturbing the team attitude:

I despise performance stress! Because I have been performing for so long, I have lost my agitation and nervousness at competitions. Performance stress, however, can cause injury from not thinking clearly during stunting. It causes conflict between team mates and can either cause positive or negative emotion within the team. There is never a happy medium.

In terms of reducing or eliminating harmful aspects of competitive cheerleading, participants had a variety of answers. Kerry felt that they could not be eliminated as it was an important part of learning. “*You need to practice to make it perfect.*” Marcy felt that it was too individual. “*It is all how people feel. It would be hard to get in 28 girls’ heads and quell their insecurities.*” Joanne felt that “*it is all part of the sport*”. Sheila thought that “*performance stress is reduced by a widespread confidence which increases a positive attitude.*”

It was surprising how few negative impacts were identified by athletes. Injury was the most harmful consequence of competitive cheerleading. It is, therefore, essential that coaches are educated in safe stunting and training techniques. Injured athletes have a

detrimental effect on team success as we have already seen the importance of each individual. Performance stress was identified as a difficult, yet unavoidable, part of cheerleading.

Despite identifying a number of potentially negative aspects of the sport, the participants did not feel that these could be avoided or reduced. The good and the bad were accepted as a natural part of the sport.

Involving Males Athletes

Delving into the “feminist” side of competitive cheerleading was not the purpose of this research; however, I was interested in the impact of the all-girl environment on the development of the athletes. In order to explore this idea, I asked the participants to consider how the team dynamics of the team would change with the addition of male athletes.

Kerry did not feel that males are necessary on a cheerleading team. She felt that the female athletes were capable on their own:

Ummm....hmmmmm (laugh). How many boys? I think it would change the attitudes of the girls cause they'd be like “I have to impress them” but I don't know.... I can't imagine how the team would be with a boy on it.

You don't really think you need a guy. So, it's kinda like, “what are you

doing here? We can do it ourselves." It would be kinda weird.

Marcy, who participated on a co-ed squad at the university level, considers the differences. She notes the difference in the quality of relationships that she developed with her team mates on the two squads:

Well there is a little bit of awkwardness at first just with catching and what not. I think I bonded a lot more on the varsity squad. I felt there was more freedom to talk about whatever we wanted to talk about. I felt a little bit reserved on the coed team. On cheerleading we felt almost like a bunch of sisters, we could talk about anything and everything it felt like. But, on the other squad, we'd talk about cheerleading, talk about school, not really much else.

Beth considers the possibility of developing intimate relationships, the increased jealousy as well as the decreased opportunity to bond with team mates on a co-ed team:

I think it would bring girl-boy relationships on the squad and if they didn't work out they would mess up the squad. That would be so weird! I don't know. Jealously would be a whole lot different, there would be a whole different aspect to it. I don't know if you'd be able to bond as well. We do the stupidest stuff cause we know that guys aren't watching us so we go crazy. If guys were there then we'd be a little more reserved and then you

wouldn't be able to bond as well.

Joanne returns to the physical closeness required in cheerleading and how males would complicate this. Instead of drawing team mates closer, the physical closeness between opposite sexes may create difficulties. In addition, Joanne notes that traditionally males and females have been separated and that few co-ed teams exist at the Highschool level:

I think at times it could be uncomfortable having guys. That sounds childish but at the same time I think it would be uncomfortable for some people to have guys that physically close as compared to girls. We are teenagers so there is the hormonal thing. I think you could enter a "zone" that could get really uncomfortable whereas instead of bonding, you might feel further away from your team mates. At the same time it could have the opposite effect and be exactly the same. I think it depends on the individuals involved.

Males and females have always been separated. I mean in teams, in everything, girl/boy changing rooms, it's almost weird if you have a boy as your best friend. All our life we have been separated so it is almost a new experience. There aren't very many co-ed teams. I think that psychologically we are developed separately.

After my interview with Joanne, I was intrigued by the idea that co-ed teams are rare at the high school level. I began looking for sports where males and females participate on the same team and found the following: tennis, golf, swimming, skiing, figure skating and curling. Even within each of these sports, females and males are often separated. Besides tennis, figure skating and curling, these sports involve individual contribution rather than team effort. Co-ed tennis pairs, co-ed figure skating pairs, and co-ed curling teams were the only sports that I found where males and females work together towards a common goal. None of the physical closeness of competitive cheerleading, however, exists in either tennis or curling.

Involving males in competitive cheerleading is becoming more and more popular. At the university level, co-ed teams are becoming the norm. Participants in this research felt that males would detract from the team cohesiveness and relationships formed. Results thus far have indicated that the relationships between athletes are central to the competitive cheerleading experience. If involving males deteriorates this bonding process, how will this affect the overall experience of athletes?

Peer Perception

Cheerleaders have traditionally been a strongly stereotyped group. The media often portrays cheerleaders as beautiful, popular and of low intellect. Their purpose is to entertain, often in a highly sexual and degrading manner. Waving pom poms is as

“athletic” as these stereotypes get. I was interested in what participants felt the misconceptions were surrounding their sport and how they thought these were perpetuated.

Kerry does not feel people understand that there is a new type of cheerleading that exists as a sport in itself. She feels people still hold to the older stereotypes:

Many people don't even know anything about competitive cheerleading. They think that the only kind of cheerleaders that exist are the kind that “cheer” on “sports” teams. I think the universal stereotype of cheerleaders is one of ditsy, big busted girls.

Marcy finds that people think the purpose of cheerleading is to cheer on other teams and they do not realize that the main focus is on preparing for competitions:

A misconception is that cheerleading is just about cheering at football games and basketball games, but we hardly do that. We spend our time readying ourselves for competition. TV provides a large misconception.

Beth draws on a common misconception that cheerleaders must be thin, therefore, all cheerleaders must have eating disorders. Beth blames the media, cheerleaders in the past and those today who continue to confirm stereotypes:

A misconception is that we all have eating disorders and our parents are crazy! I think the main contributors to these misconceptions are movies, cheerleaders in the olden days, football squads and "sideline" girls.

Joanne blames the older generations for passing on misconceptions to the younger generations. Like Beth, she also notes that some cheerleaders today continue to perpetuate the misconceptions by living up to the stereotypes:

I think a lot of the misconceptions come from the attitudes of parents growing up and their views of cheerleaders from the past. This gets passed down. The attitudes of a few athletes can corrupt the opinion of others.

Sheila feels that the media does not properly convey those elements that are essential to a successful team such as strength, endurance, intelligence, maturity and technique:

I don't think people understand the physical strength and the endurance involved. The intelligence and maturity of the team and the technique involved is really misunderstood. A lot of these misconceptions come from TV and movies.

In a humorous manner, Kerry shared her frustration as she tries to convince her peers that what she does has athletic merit:

Well, when they see us they realize it isn't as stupid as they think it is. Like when I say I have to go to cheerleading they are like "oh, cheerleading". They don't understand how much work it is, they really don't.

It makes me want to prove something almost. It makes me want to work harder, to prove that they are wrong. Me personally, I have to be right. It makes me want to say, "well, look at this if you think it is so stupid ... can stupid people do this?"

Marcy puts a lot of the responsibility for stereotypes on the athletes themselves. She believes the athletes are responsible for changing the stereotypes rather than being angry about them. She felt that most people were actually interested in learning more about the sport rather than judging it:

I think a lot of the girls are mad at the stereotypes but don't do a lot to rectify them sometimes. I didn't really care, I just liked to do it. I did it cause I loved it and I just did my thing. If that changed a stereotype than "whatever". I just tried to ignore that. I didn't really feel it at school actually.

My friends they came out and supported me whole heartedly. They thought it was great. I didn't have anyone make judgements ... I didn't have any of my friends make judgements on me because of it so maybe I chose wisely with my friends. I found that going into university and telling them about cheerleading, I didn't get a negative response, I just got interest. Like "what was that like?" So I haven't experienced any negative feedback or negative responses from telling people I was a cheerleader in high school or I was a cheerleader in university. Most people need me to explain it so when I say "cheerleading" they say "like at football games" and I'd say "no, more like throwing people in the air". "Oh, like the stuff you see on TSN and the sport stations?"... "yeah, that's what we do". They were really interested in that like "oh, that's so cool! Was it hard?" and I'm like "yeah, it's hard work but it was a lot of fun".

Beth also believes that misconceptions are rooted in a lack of knowledge about the sport. As people become more educated as to what competitive cheerleading is about, they acknowledge its athletic merit:

I don't know, I think people who don't know about the sport, don't think it's intense and don't think there is any training involved. I think you have to know about the sport to know that it is a sport and that there is actual training involved.

Joanne found that people do not acknowledge what she does as a sport because it is not set-up like a typical sport situation. Its artistic merit undermines its athletic merit:

Most people who I have talked to don't view it as a sport because it is not two teams head to head. It's not one on one. It doesn't use balls and you can't just go out and watch it and know they've scored a goal. It uses judges instead and because of that people think of it as more of an artist merit than it would be a sport. I think for how immense the world of cheerleading has become it is very underrated as a sport.

People don't understand the hard work, dedication, skill building, and life skills learned. It is a sport, not a popularity contest.

Sheila feels that the majority of people are not interested in appreciating cheerleading as a sport. People do not make the effort to show their support for the athletes:

My peers could care less. Your friends care cause they care for you but your class could care less. The school supports us like they would support any team. They enjoy watching our performances at the school but they would never put out the effort to attend a competition.

Some of the participants shared how they felt the stereotype might be changed within their peer groups and society in general.

Kerry suggested that getting the right information is important. Assumptions are what have perpetuated the misconceptions for so long:

Mostly just talk to someone who is really involved in it. Be informed, get the right information, don't just make assumptions. Competitive cheerleading is becoming more and more recognized and this is helping to eliminate the misconceptions.

Cheerleaders themselves play a large role in maintaining or dispelling the stereotype image according to Marcy. Athletes have a responsibility to exhibit the values they hold rather than simply complain about stereotypes:

What people see...I hope they see friendship, I hope they see athleticism, I hope they see girls having a good time. I hope they don't see the stereotype but I think it is how we project ourselves as well and we are partly responsible for any stereotype they get from us. So I think if we go out there, we have to make our own impression. We have to want to change stereotypes and not just complain about them. The more our team does demonstrations, the more we fight those misconceptions.

Beth thought misconceptions could be “*eliminated by the continuously growing popularity of the sport and the real media coverage*”. Joanne thought that “*exposure and informing the public of the aspects of cheerleading could help to eliminate these negative biases.*” Sheila felt that “*the more we perform and support our school in a professional way, the more credit and support we will receive.*”

The cheerleader stereotype of blond, ditsy, beautiful and popular continues to be prevalent today. Participants blame the media, older generations and some cheerleaders today for the continuation of this false image. The lack of recognition of the athleticism and dedication required, however, does not have a significant impact on the participants' experience. They take responsibility for helping to change stereotypes through example and education, however, it does not change how they feel about their sport. Participants felt that the more they continue to be dedicated to what they love to do, the more people will see competitive cheerleading as a sport.

Their Experience and Passing It On

This section does not fall under any one theme, rather it provides some context for the experience of the participants. The responses provide some perspective on how each participant conceptualized her competitive cheerleading experience within the greater context of her overall development.

The first section focuses on an expression that is often heard in “cheerleading

circles”: *Cheerleading is life*. I have always been struck by the weight of that statement and was interested in how the participants processed it.

Kerry agrees with this statement and describes how cheerleading extends beyond practice time. She also associates cheerleading with her identity:

I think that is a perfect description. Cheerleading isn't a sport where when practice is over your mind stops thinking about it or your body doesn't need to be worked. When out of practice, you need to keep your body in shape by stretching and exercising and if a stunt doesn't work in practice, you constantly think of ways to fix it outside of practice. When people ask me what I do or what I like, cheerleading is always what comes to mind. Aside from softball, it is all I do. I coach when I am not practicing so I associate cheerleading with part/most of who I am.

Marcy draws a strong distinction between cheerleading being something she enjoyed doing and cheerleading as part of her identity:

I enjoy cheerleading and it was an important part of my highschool career, but it is not and will not be my life. I have other enjoyments besides cheerleading. I would not say that it is a part of who I am, but it is a sport that I deeply enjoy.

The time involved and the significant role of cheerleading in her life played a large part in Beth's development:

Perfectly describes it. So much of my week is dedicated to practice. It is a priority over other things. Cheerleading made me who I am. I have been doing it so long, I've made so many friends and developed in so many ways.

Joanne credits her cheerleading experience with many of the qualities she now has. Due to the large amount of time that she spent involved in the sport, she felt that it, in a sense, became her life:

A lot of the qualities I now possess, I owe to cheerleading and most of my time was designated to it as well. This can allow it to overwhelm my life, therefore, becoming it.

Sheila does not identify cheerleading as her "life", however, she does include it as part of her identity. For her, cheerleading represents certain values and qualities:

I never considered it to be my life. I find that quite an extreme idea. Cheerleading did take up a lot of my time and it contributed to my high school experience but I believe a person's life is not concentrated upon

one aspect like cheerleading. There is much more to each individual. Cheerleading, however, is part of my identity. It represents enthusiasm, confidence, compatibility with team mates, competitiveness, pride, trust, spirit and strength.

All the participants spent at least a year coaching younger girls in the sport of cheerleading. Participants were asked why they chose to coach the sport.

Kerry values the ability to achieve what once seemed impossible and sees many of the qualities developed through cheerleading as being beneficial in other areas in life:

I wanted to coach because cheerleading teaches them how to set goals and achieve them. It also shows them that they can achieve these things that at one time may have seemed close to impossible. Determination and never giving up is what will get them far in cheerleading as well as outside of cheerleading.

Marcy believes it develops interpersonal and social skills as well as providing a productive use of one's time:

It forces the girls to work closely with different individuals. It helps them build their social skills. It gives them something to do so they won't get bored and fall into bad habits like drinking and smoking.

Beth feels that the team environment is a strong support system for young girls. It allows the athletes to develop unique skills that they may not have had the opportunity to develop otherwise. Coaching is also an opportunity to help inform and educate people in what competitive cheerleading is all about:

I think it is such an important age to be surrounded by people who have similar interests, goals, struggles and life events as you. This type of team gives you 25 sisters to help you through it. I knew what a huge impact it had on my life: the friends I made out of it, the dancing, tumbling and stunting. These are things that most people will never get a chance to experience and so branching it out to other people, getting more people involved and more people to know about it then maybe more people will start to take it seriously. I want to be a role model for young girls.

Joanne was deeply impacted by her cheerleading experience and wants others to have the same opportunity that she did. Coaching also gives her a sense of accomplishment and worth as she sees her athletes succeed:

Everything that I have talked about...it has all influenced my life. I mean I have been doing it for five years so it influenced my life and helped develop me into who I am. If I can encourage and show other girls the positive aspects of that, it is giving something back that I was given. And

plus I love my girls. I love watching them, when they learn something new, how proud they are and how happy they are when they see the pride in their coaches' faces. And I love when their parents come up to me and say "I am so glad that my daughter did this, it's the best thing she has ever done. She has a new outlook on life." I remember last year when []'s dad said to me, "This is the best thing she has ever done. I have seen such an improvement in her attitude, in her drive, in all those things". How can you not love what you do when you hear encouraging things like that? I like working with kids, working with my girls.

Sheila had a sense of pride and value as she coached younger athletes:

From training the Junior Squad, I became aware of the pride that coaches gain just by seeing their athletes perform to the best of their ability. Just knowing that a team was dependant on us coaches and trusted our abilities enough to perform without embarrassment made me feel unbelievably valued and proud.

Summary

The analysis of the data revealed seven themes: athleticism, team dynamics, unique aspects of competitive cheerleading, social skills developed, negative impacts of competitive cheerleading, involving male athletes and peer perception.

Participants felt that their competitive cheerleading experience strongly influenced their athletic development. Competitive cheerleading was identified as a demanding physical sport that required athletes to be in top physical condition. Training for competitive cheerleading was seen as equivalent to other highly competitive sports.

The team dynamics within the competitive cheerleading environment were seen as distinctive from other competitive sports. The structure, requirements and pressures of the sport result in the relationships between team mates being the central focus. Dependence, cooperation, and trust were identified as essential components. Participants used words such as “sisters” and “family” to describe the depth of the relationships formed in the team environment. The physical contact required for stunting was identified as a contributing factor to the closeness of the athletes. The individual is seen as essential to the collective team to the point where no one is replaceable. Despite a wide range of ages and personalities on the team, all participants felt this enriched their experience.

The unique aspects of competitive cheerleading expand on the team dynamics above. Competitive cheerleading incorporates a number of physical skills, and, therefore, requires a comprehensive type of training. The structure of the cheerleading season results in more time spent practicing than competing in comparison to other competitive sports. Such a structure may shift how a team evaluates its success. Time spent practicing together may be more significant than how a team does in competition.

Participants identified appearance as an important aspect of competitive cheerleading in that it achieves a unified presentation. The artistic merit of the sport was thought to undermine its athletic value.

Social skills were developed within the team environment by all participants. Some participants developed confidence, communication skills and cooperation. Others learned the value of working together, trust, dependence and friendship. One participant learned the value of others' strengths and weaknesses and how to combine these. Time management was a skill identified by almost all participants. Because cheerleading occupied a large amount of time, the athletes had to learn to prioritize and be responsible for their time.

Of the eleven potential "negative impacts of competitive cheerleading", only the weight of the flyer, stereotyping and injury/risk of injury were identified by participants as having a negative impact on their experience. Performance stress was discussed in the interviews as something that was often difficult but unavoidable. The physical strain of the sport and the resulting injuries were identified as having a negative impact, but were not seen as being unique to cheerleading. Many of the participants identified the pressure put on oneself to succeed as being stressful. Because there is such a strong reliance on each individual to contribute to the whole, lack of ability or success can be hard to deal with. None of the participants felt that there was any way to avoid these negative impacts. They were accepted as part of the sport.

The question of what it would be like to involve male athletes brought a number of responses. Generally, the participants felt that males were not necessary in order to be a successful team. It was anticipated the incorporating males would have a negative impact on team cohesiveness and the bonding between team mates.

Peer perception regarding the misconceptions surrounding cheerleading was thought to be rooted in a misunderstanding of the sport. Media, misconceptions of older generations and some cheerleaders today were thought to be the main culprits in the perpetuation of stereotypes. Participants felt that through educating others and working to dispel stereotypes themselves that they might eventually receive recognition of what they do. Interestingly, what other people thought did not have a significant impact on their experience as a competitive cheerleader.

The last section presented a context for these results. For most participants, cheerleading was not just an activity that they did; rather, it was part of their identity. Due to the large amount of time they dedicated to the sport, the effort they put forth, the skills that were developed and the relationships formed, their competitive cheerleading experience extended far beyond the gym. The things they learned and experienced had far reaching effects that will impact all areas of their lives. As a result, the participants desired to give others the opportunity to have these same experiences. Coaching younger athletes was their chance to give to others what they received through their competitive cheerleading experience.

Chapter #5

Discussion

Their Story

The purpose of this research is to seek a competitive cheerleader's interpretation of her sport involvement. Specifically, it asks "what is the impact of a competitive cheerleading experience on the development of female athletes?" The following is a discussion of the results and the implications these have on the development of athletes and future research.

This study sought to give female athletes a voice in order that they might describe their experience as a competitive cheerleader. It examined one sport, competitive cheerleading, and was interested in the sport's unique characteristics. This study was concerned with understanding the different factors which interact to influence the athlete. Five graduates of a competitive cheerleading program, with a mean of 4.4 years of cheer experience, participated in this research. Participants completed a questionnaire and shared their thoughts in a semi-structured interview.

The data was coded and divided based on common themes or ideas. Seven themes were found: athleticism, team dynamics, unique aspects of competitive cheerleading, social skills, negative impacts of competitive cheerleading, involving male athletes and peer perception. The findings indicate that participants feel competitive

cheerleading has a strong athletic component. The relationships that they formed with their team mates were central to their experience. There were a number of contributing factors to the development of relationships that may be unique to the competitive cheerleading experience such as physical closeness, time investment and stunting. Many social skills were developed within the team environment and were seen as applicable in other life situations. Injury and performance stress were noted as negative impacts, however, they were accepted as part of the sport. Participants did not feel that males would contribute to the experience, and expressed concern that males may inhibit the bonding between team mates. In general, participants felt that their sport was misunderstood and that the athletic merit was not acknowledged. Peer perception, however, did not have a significant impact on their experience.

The participants were very articulate as they shared their stories. They expressed a clear understanding of the deeper experiences of their competitive cheerleading career. Their answers recognized their inherent values as athletes, the systems within the sport environment, the interplay of different team dynamics and the meanings they attached to experiences. They were also able to extend their thinking beyond concrete experiences to theoretical situations. The participants shared from their hearts which produced stories that speak for themselves.

Implications

After five years of coaching competitive cheerleading and the better part of two

years researching this area, I had come to see myself as an “expert” on the subject of competitive cheerleading. I felt I knew the athletes and the sport inside and out. Preparing this research project and collecting the data, however, provided new insights and learning for me. As a result, I have changed some of my approaches to coaching and my understanding of the sport in general. For example, through this research I learned that the athletes place significant meaning and value in the relationships formed with team mates to a greater degree than I had previously realized. Facilitating and coordinating opportunities for relationship development has now become a priority in my coaching approach.

The following is a discussion of the implications of these data for those currently involved in competitive cheerleading as well as suggestions for future research in this area. My goal is to share my thoughts as a coach and researcher on this study as it compares to past research and what we might learn through the process of hearing the athletes’ stories.

Athleticism

Competitive cheerleading’s base skills require significant strength and power. Stunting and “power” tumbling (referring to multiple tumbling lines incorporating advance power skills) are quickly becoming the main components of a competitive cheerleading routine.

Participants in this study continually stressed the physical demand, and all-round training requirements of their sport. Having participated in a variety of sports, they felt it combined the skills of multiple sports and therefore, required multiple levels of training. Participants expressed frustration that competitive cheerleading is not considered a sport, nor is its athletic merit acknowledged by many. They understood the sport's appearance requirement and saw some value in it. An outstanding squad moves as one entity and a means of achieving such unification is through their physical appearance. Matching uniforms, hair, make-up and smiles are all ways that a team can achieve a unified look. There was much disagreement, however, with the conclusions of Eder and Parker (1987) who, in reference to cheerleaders, stated that:

An ideal candidate was someone who had a pleasant expression and a pleasant personality and who was always in a good mood.

Cheerleaders represent the general importance of attractiveness and appearance for female adolescents (p.208).

In rating the traits that were important for a competitive cheerleader, beauty received the lowest rating. In fact, all the traits referring to physical appearance or social standing received a rating of almost no importance. The athleticism of the sport, however, was central to participants.

Implications of Athleticism

As competitive cheerleading gains popularity and recognition, it may soon be labelled as a “sport”. The participants in this study recognized the athleticism required for what they do. This recognition may explain why cheerleaders “believe that their sport is appropriate for both sexes, regardless of how it is viewed by others” (Clifton & Gill, 1994, p.159). If “power and strength” are qualities of a masculine sport, this description may also explain why the “most female-typed” activity is quickly becoming popular among males. At the university level, half of the competitive cheerleaders are male (America Sports Data Inc., 1999).

Competitive cheerleading has already become the fastest growing high school sport for girls in North America (Times, 2000). It has become a sport that is open to all types of athletes regardless of body shape or popularity. In fact, it is quickly becoming a sport reserved for the most elite athletes as the skill requirement constantly is increasing. In Canada, cheer programs start for children as young as eight or nine years of age. In the United States, a child can be competing as young as five years of age. By beginning training at a young age, athletes can learn the skills required for Varsity and Collegiate squads.

Competitions have been changing dramatically over the last decade. New rules and regulations are constantly being added as squads push the limits of their physical abilities. Each year, stunts are more complicated, challenging and as a result, dangerous. For example, a few years ago, “double fulls” were not permitted as a dismount. Now,

they are common place and although “triple fulls” are illegal, many squads are practicing them in order to be ready for an anticipated change in regulations. Every year the tumbling becomes more advanced. Full-team tumbling, advanced skills and complicated tumbling lines are becoming common place.

In response to the increased popularity of competitive cheerleading, elite cheerleading squads called “All-Star Teams” have been created across the United States and Canada. These teams are run out of gymnastic facilities and draw the most skilled athletes from a geographical region. With their own set of rules and regulations, “All-Star Teams” set the bar higher for competitive cheerleading.

Coaches have a responsibility to keep up with the changing face of competitive cheerleading. As the skills become increasingly difficult, the athletes must be trained accordingly. Proper training techniques, skill development and progression are essential. Competitive cheerleading coaches must be equipped with the knowledge and skills to train athletes. Although some clinics and resources exist for training coaches, this is an area that deserves attention and further research.

Team Dynamics

Past studies have focussed on the athlete-coach relationship stating that it is the most influential relationship in the sport environment (eg. Givvin, 2001; Kenow & Williams, 1998; Price & Weiss, 2000; Vealey, Armstrong, Comar & Greenleaf, 1998).

Although I believe the coach has a very important role, I question whether it is the most significant and influential relationship in the competitive cheerleading experience. Instead, perhaps it is the relationship with team mates that is the main determinant of an athlete's experience.

Participants were very clear on the values they held as cheerleaders: cooperation, trust, team work, communication, dedication, strength, fitness, social skills, leadership, enthusiasm, friendship, responsibility, courage, discipline, and goal setting. Central to their experience, however, were the relationships they formed with their team mates. This was recognized by participants as foundational to the team's success.

Although there are numerous team dynamics that facilitate relationships, there were some that appeared multiple times in the data. The sport requires a high degree of trust, communication and cooperation due to the stunting involved. Athletes must be able to work together effectively in order to accomplish a common goal. Each individual is essential to the team which creates a high level of inter-dependence. Competitive cheerleading is a year round sport that demands a large training commitment. The time invested with team mates further allows relationships to grow. Working together to present a routine where no individual stands out reduces/eliminates competition within the team and focuses it on attaining a common goal. Last, the large number of athletes involved of different ages and personalities creates a diversified group where relationships are valued. As Marcy says, "I don't think I have ever bonded with so many girls who are so different, so quickly just because of the environment you are working

in.”

Although I knew relationships were formed on the team, I was not aware of the depth or the strength of these bonds. Neither did I realize that relationships were essential for athletic success. Without relationships, participants indicated that they would not be successful as a team. An individual’s athletic development depended on how connected they were to the team.

Implications of Team Dynamics

“Missing from the sports psychology literature are strategies that address team-as-a-whole and interactions of team members” (Zimmerman & Protinsky, 1993, p.161). When the team is approached with a systems epistemology, the athletes show less stress, more confidence and improved relationships with their team mates. In terms of athletic development, peak performance and team cohesion were equally affected (Zimmerman & Protinsky, 1993).

The findings of this study do support the idea of applying group work strategies (Gerber, 1998) or family therapy techniques (Zimmerman & Protinsky, 1993) within the sport setting. The literature suggests that teams form a natural group in which developmental needs can be addressed and nurtured through the application of these theoretical constructs. It is obvious, in this research, that the team forms a cohesive group and was even labelled as a “family” by some of the participants. The importance

of maintaining a healthy group environment, therefore, is essential. It is not about individuals in a group, it is a group of connected individuals.

The responsibility rests with the coach who occupies a central role in the group. “Many of the challenges one faces as a coach are similar to those faced by a worker with a group” (Gerber, 1998, p.45). This research supports a systems epistemology approach to sports rather than a linear one. Zimmerman and Protinsky (1993) suggest that there is a need to look beyond athletic development alone to the overall development of the athletes. Through the group dynamics of the team, participants identified development in a number of areas besides athletic. Increase in confidence, ability to work in a group, communication, dependence on others, conflict resolution and time management were just some skills they gained.

Due to the relational component of competitive cheerleading, it is almost impossible to focus on athletic development alone. Such an approach, I believe, would have a negative impact on athletic development. In order to advance in athletic skills, relationships need to be established and maintained. This requires skills to be taught and nurtured within the team environment. Only once your athletes are competent communicators, problem solvers and team players can they fully develop athletically.

Unique Aspects of Cheerleading

Past research has not looked at unique aspects of competitive cheerleading.

Typically, a competitive cheerleading team is larger than an average high school team and will include athletes from a wider age range. For example, my team averages 28 athletes in grades eight to twelve. Competitive cheerleading does not have an “off-season”, meaning that training occurs year round. As the participants indicated, competitive cheerleading incorporates a combination of skills and sports environments. Strength, power, agility, cardiovascular endurance and flexibility are essential skills. In addition, athletes work individually, in small groups and as a whole team. Stunting, however, is an aspect unique to cheerleading. No other sport has such a component.

Stunting is influential on a number of levels. First, stunting requires all members to be relatively equivalent athletically. As Kerry says, “you want others to be doing just as much as you are doing.” Athletes, therefore, have a pressure to match their team mates in their physical ability. Stunting requires clear communication among everyone involved. Stunts require intricate hand placement and movements, changes in weight distribution and the force of all members executing together at the correct time. One of the main reasons for stunts to fail is a lack of communication within a stunt group. Stunting involves bases lifting/throwing flyers into the air. This requires a high level of trust for all members. The bases must trust the flyer, the bases must trust each other and the flyer must trust her bases. A stunt group member literally places her physical safety into the care of the group.

Physical contact was brought up by one participant. Although the athletes joke about the “closeness” that they have with each other, all stunts do require direct physical

contact, often in “sensitive” areas. I had not considered the psychological impact of stunting for athletes. Focused group energy, high levels of trust, risk of serious injury and close physical proximity are elements of stunting that participants identified as unique aspects of competitive cheerleading. An interesting area of future research concerns the implications of stunting for athletes. For example, how do athletes perceive the element of physical closeness? Is this a source of stress for some athletes? How do athletes develop a level trust in their team mates that allows for them to risk their personal safety? What happens when inter-personal issues arise in the stunt group? Why do some stunt groups develop strong communication while others struggle? What are the characteristics of those athletes who are most successful in the stunting situation? Can those characteristics be taught and/or developed in other athletes?

Each year as I begin training new athletes, I am often shocked at how uncomfortable they are with stunting. Trust has not been established, and they still hold comfort barriers that will not allow them to work in physical proximity with others. Slowly, new athletes become accustomed to the “norms” within the team environment and begin to adopt the cheerleader “identity”. As Sheila said, that identity represents “enthusiasm, confidence, compatibility with team mates, competitiveness, pride, trust, spirit and strength.”

Coaches need to be sensitive to their athletes and consider the psychological impact of stunting. As a coach, I have seen the detrimental effect that personal and interpersonal problems can have on stunting. Athletes who have difficulty with physical

proximity, poor communication and interpersonal problems can put themselves and their team mates at risk of serious injury. Coaches must ensure that relationships between athletes are established and healthy before having them engage in skills that demand such high levels of trust and communication. As further research is done in this area, techniques for developing and maintaining a safe stunt environment may be developed.

Social Skills

The sport environment has been recognized as “an important setting for social and skill development in children” (Smith, Smoll & Christensen, 1996, p.4).

Communication, problem-solving, conflict resolution, cooperation, trust, leadership, initiative, confidence and time management are just some of the skills identified by participants as being developed in their sport environment.

It is the coach’s responsibility to help structure the team environment in such a way that these skills are developed in athletes. Unfortunately, the research indicates that most coaches are not prepared for this task,

Most athletes have their first sport experiences in programs staffed by volunteer coaches. Although many of these coaches are fairly well versed in the technical aspects of the sport, they rarely have had any formal training in creating a healthy psychological environment for youngsters. Moreover, through the mass media, these coaches are frequently exposed to college or professional coaches who

model aggressive behaviours and “winning is everything” philosophy that is highly inappropriate in a recreational and skill development context (Smith, Smoll & Christensen, 1996, p.29).

Proper training for coaches is essential in any sport. Having the athletic and technical skills to coach a sport is not enough when it comes to youth sports. Research has indicated that coaches who were rated as less empathetic, lacked praise as a motivational technique, were autocratic, and emphasized winning had “athletes who scored higher on the dimensions of negative self-concept, emotional/physical exhaustion, psychological withdrawal, and feelings of devaluation” (Vealey, Armstrong, Comar & Greenleaf, 1998, p.313).

There have, however, been advances made in equipping coaches. One such advancement is a “Coach Effectiveness Training” (CET) program that was created in order to help create a “healthy psychological environment for youngsters” (Smith & Smoll, 1997). It is based on five core principles. First, it focuses on the developmental model rather than the professional sports model. Second, it uses a “positive approach” to coaching where positive reinforcement is central. Third, it establishes “norms that emphasize athletes’ mutual obligations to help and support one another” (p.18). It involves athletes in the decision making surround team rules and uses positive reinforcement for compliance rather than punishment for non-compliance. Last, coaches are encouraged to obtain “behavioural feedback and to engage in self-monitoring to increase awareness of their own actions” (Smith & Smoll, 1997, p.18).

As I began coaching, I already had extensive experience in working with youth as well as a background in child and youth development. Knowledge of group work principles and the application of a systems approach to the team environment were foundational to my coaching style. As a result, my athletes have experienced a focus on the principles of group work within the structure of the team environment. The current study, therefore, could be compared to past studies that looked at the development of athletes who had coaches experienced with developmental philosophies and techniques (eg. Price & Weiss, 2000; Armstrong, Comar & Greenleaf, 1998). It was found that coaches who invoked group work principles, engaged in positive reinforcement and focused on overall development rather than athletic success had athletes who were more positive and satisfied with their sport experience as well as greater outcome effects. “The manner in which coaches structure the athletic situation, the goal priorities they establish, the attitudes and values they transmit, the behaviours in which they engage can markedly influence the effects of sport participation on children” (Smith, Smoll & Christensen, 1996).

The participants in the current study attributed a significant amount of their social development to the team environment. Communication, group participation, trust, dependence on others, cooperation, problem solving, confidence, leadership, patience, time management and goal setting were just some of the skills that were learned and developed through their competitive cheerleading experience. Marcy, for example, felt that the only place she could have learned many of the social skills she did was in the

team environment. The participants felt that the structure and safety of the team environment allowed them to be challenged in their development while allowing them a sense of acceptance if they failed. In addition, athletes felt that they could apply many of the skills they learned on the team to future situations. Marcy discusses how she had to learn to work with people she might not like and says *“I think that is a really good lesson to learn in life because you are going to have to work with people you don’t like and I think doing it in such a trustworthy and dependant environment really prepares you for what you are going to experience out in the work force.”*

Coaches need an understanding of the social development of their athletes and they must be equipped with skills to foster this development. This study supports past research in finding that social and interpersonal skills can be cultivated in the sports environment. It also supports the idea that coaches need to be equipped with the proper skills, through such means as the CET and other similar programs, in order to foster this development

Further research might be directed towards the social dynamics of all-girl sports teams. The participants in this study continually referred to the relationships formed with team mates and indicated this might not have been possible with males present. As males and females differ socially, it would be interesting to explore the relational differences between male, female and co-ed sports teams. Past research may have missed the importance of the athlete-to-athlete relationship due the prevalent focus on male participants.

Negative Impacts of Cheerleading

The current study revealed three negative impacts of the cheerleading experience: performance stress, injury and stereotyping. Physical appearance has been the main focus of past research on cheerleading. Past studies have found that athletes for whom thinness is a salient goal were found to have a higher tendency toward eating disorders than other athletes (eg. Borgen & Corbin, 1987; Lundholm & Littrell, 1986; Reel & Gill, 1996). As cheerleading involves athletes performing in tight fitting uniforms and incorporates difficult stunt and gymnastic manoeuvres, past studies have identified it as being a sport where thinness is a salient goal. There have been a number of studies that addressed the pressures associated with cheerleading and the development of eating disorders among athletes (eg. Borgen & Corbin 1987; Littrell, Damhorst & Littrell 1990; Lundholm & Littrell 1986; Reel & Gill, 1996; Taub & Blinde 1994). The findings of these studies, however, were inconclusive.

The current study suggests that thinness is not a salient goal for athletes. Body shape and beauty were rated as insignificant factors by participants. Although there was some reference to flyers needing to be relatively small, participants were more concerned with their athletic ability in executing their skills rather than their physical appearance and size. Performance stress, injury and stereotyping were, however, identified as having a negative impact.

Performance Stress

Performance stress was regarded as a pressure of the sport. A study was conducted on cheerleaders at competitions (Finkenberg, DiNucci, McCune & McCune, 1992). The physiological responses of athletes were measured and it was determined that they do experience physiological reactions to competition stress. It was found that too little or too much physiological response to competition stress had a negative impact on performance outcome.

The current research supports the finding that athletes experience competition stress. A number of the participants referred to the stress they experienced at competitions and in the practice setting. The main cause of the stress was the fear of letting the team down. Because each individual is essential to the team's success, failure by one person can impact everyone. As Kerry says, "*Cause everyone has to work together and if one person makes a little mistake it affects everyone*". The participants identified this stress as being an emotional pressure of the sport as well as the cause of potential problems. For example, Sheila states "*performance stress, however, can cause injury from not thinking clearly during stunting... it causes conflict between team mates*".

Interestingly, none of the participants felt that performance stress could be avoided. Performance stress was seen as being less significant as confidence is built. Sheila felt that "*performance stress is reduced by widespread confidence which increases a positive attitude*". Kerry felt that confidence was built through practice; however,

practice still carries the risk of failure. The participants felt that it was an individual experience. As Marcy says, *“It is all how people feel. It would be hard to get in the heads of 28 girls and quell their insecurities”*.

Performance stress may be an area where coaches should intervene with mediation techniques to help reduce the stress. Further research could be done in this area. Is there an optimal performance stress level? How can performance stress be mediated in order to reduce the risk of injury? Can athletes be taught how to deal with performance stress? Can coaches intervene to reduce the athlete’s fear of making a mistake? Can athletes be taught to identify and address performance stress before it has a negative impact on themselves or their team mates? Is there an optimal amount of practice that can be done to reduce performance stress?

Injury

In the present study, injury was identified as a pressure associated with competitive cheerleading. Participants rated injury as the most negative impact of their cheerleading experience. Due to the long season and demanding skills, most athletes experience some type of body stress and/or injury. All participants in this study had experienced at least one significant injury in their cheerleading career. Injuries have a two-fold impact on the athletes and the team. First, there is the physical pain of the injury itself. Second, the team is impacted by the lack or limited involvement of the injured athlete as they heal. The team is often frustrated by injuries, which can have an

emotionally negative impact on the injured member. The sense of “letting the team down” is a significant factor when injuries occur.

As a coach, I have had a number of concerns surrounding injuries. How does an injury impact the athlete(s) who “caused” the injury? For example, how does the base(s) react when they don’t catch flyer properly or a flyer who accidentally hurts her bases? More often than not, the person who caused the injury is more upset than the athlete who received it. Research into the emotional impact of injury on both the injured athlete and the one causing the injury is needed. Does injury cause athletes to be more or less cautious? Does fear of further injury impact their ability to stunt and perform safely? How should the athletes who cause an injury be dealt with?

Another concern I have is healing time. Most athletes will continue to participate while injured. Those who do limit their participation will often return to full participation before the time recommended by their doctor. Further research could be conducted on the adherence of athletes to medical recommendations surrounding injuries. What impact does the time of return have on their long term health? Are injuries increased due to the pressure to return to practice?

Consequently, it would appear to be important that all competitive cheerleading coaches have special stunt training, first aid, and access to adequate practice facilities. Teaching stunt progressions, perfecting the basics, instructing flyers in proper falling techniques and clear communication in execution and technique are just some of a coach’s responsibilities. Overuse injuries are also common due to the prolonged season

for competitive cheerleaders. Specialized training programs that take into account this prolonged season as well as the high physical demands of the sport need to be developed for coaches. This training is especially needed in Canada where competitive cheerleading is relatively new and many coaches have little or no experience in the sport.

Stereotyping

Stereotyping was also rated as having a negative impact on the cheerleading experience. Fighting the perceptions of others, especially their peers, was identified by participants as a pressure. Interestingly, it did not deter participants from their desire to participate. In fact, as one participant stated, "it makes me want to work harder". In general, participants felt that through more exposure to competitive cheerleading, the public would acknowledge it as a sport and dispel the stereotypes surrounding cheerleaders.

I have seen a change in attitude in the public's perception of competitive cheerleading over the past five years that I have been coaching. As the participants said, exposure to the sport is changing what people think of the athletes who participate. People are becoming more and more excited about competitive cheerleading and this is drawing a larger audience. All the participants felt that they were playing an active role in eliminating stereotypes by focussing on the athletic development of their sport. By staying clear of stereotyped activities such as "cheering" for other teams, they are changing the attitudes of many.

Involvement of Male Athletes

This research was conducted with participants from an all-girl competitive cheerleading squad. Although co-ed squads do exist, they are relatively new in Canada at the high school level.

The hypothetical idea of including male athletes in the team environment was proposed to participants. Overall, they were in agreement that males were not necessary for a successful team. Females were more than capable of having the physical strength to perform all the skills required. In fact, the presence of males was thought to have a damaging effect on team cohesiveness as the all-girl environment was seen as contributing to the relational bonding that occurred.

Males do contribute a strength factor that allows for more challenging stunts. This research, however, indicates that the presence of males would inhibit relationships between team mates. In addition, issues surrounding appropriate physical closeness arise. Stunt groups must be comfortable enough with each other to allow any area of the body to be touched. This is difficult enough in an all-girl environment. As a coach, I would be concerned for the psychological safety of my athletes when they allow the opposite sex to invade their personal space.

The presence of males increases the level of difficulty of the routine, which is

why co-ed teams are judged separately from all-girl squads. Perhaps the decision to have an all-girl or co-ed squad depends on the comfort level of the coach as well as the preferences of the athletes. Coaches of co-ed squads, however, do need further training in co-ed stunting and might benefit from relational training as well.

Peer Perception

As we have seen, cheerleading is identified as the most feminine sport and the most appropriate for females from a list of sports (Csizma, Wittig, Schurr, 1988). Cheerleading for females, therefore, is considered gender appropriate. It was found that girls who were associated with gender-appropriate sports (ie. those displaying feminine qualities) were viewed as more desirable friends and partners than those who were associated with less gender-appropriate sports (Suitor & Reavis, 1995).

These findings may explain why peer perception did not have a negative impact on participants in the present study. Although not always recognized for their athletic abilities, participants were generally viewed as taking part in an “appropriate” sport. Participants expressed a frustration that their athletic skills were not appreciated, but they had a clear sense of how their peers perceived them. With time and exposure, participants felt that others would come to understand what they do.

This accuracy in peer perception is supported in the literature. In Clifton and Gill’s (1994) study, the cheerleaders were correct in predicting how the non-cheerleading

sample would respond and identified that this population would view cheerleading as much more gender specific.

Another reason the participants may not have been significantly affected by misconceptions could be that they have a high personal confidence level. Females generally report lower levels of expectations for success in sports than males (Gill, 1992). This was not the case in a study on cheerleading that measured the confidence ability of male and female cheerleaders on different cheerleading tasks. It was found that the females had a higher confidence level than the males (Clifton & Gill, 1994). Perhaps cheerleaders do not question their ability nor depend on feedback from others to determine the validity of their endeavour. They are confident in what they are doing and are not influenced by peer misconceptions. Another possible explanation of these findings could be that males feel uncomfortable participating in a feminine-typed activity. It would be interesting to see if this is a consistent finding at the university level where it is more common to have males participating.

The findings of the current study indicate that media, older generations and certain cheerleaders today continue to perpetuate the misconceptions surrounding cheerleading. Through increased exposure, education and modelling, participants felt that attitudes towards competitive cheerleading will change.

Limitations of the Study

It is important to note certain factors that may have influenced the data. The current study involved a small number of participants from a specific sample group. The results cannot be generalized to other sports or other cheerleading teams. Further, the participants in this study have spent a significant number of years on a competitive cheerleading team. Different results may have occurred had participants been relatively new to the sport. Although there is no past research to indicate that amount of time in a sport may be a factor, I would anticipate that there is a change in attitude and perception of experience over time. There is a significant learning curve for new athletes. The first year is often spent just trying to keep up with experienced athletes. As the skill base is developed, attention and energy can be given to other areas and experiences.

Another significant limitation of this study is that participants came from an environment that I have structured. With an extensive background and experience in child and youth care, I anticipate that my team environment is rather unique. As a coach, my focus is on developing my athletes as people, not only athletically. How I structure the team environment reflects this goal. Athletes have numerous opportunities to develop social skills, are challenged mentally and encouraged to grow in all areas of life. As a result, participants in this study are sharing their experiences within a specific environment. Findings need to be considered within this context.

Future Research

The study of youth athletics is not a new idea nor is the focus on cheerleading. Approaching it from a fresh angle, however, opened up new areas of interest for further research. This study used female participants, which is relatively unique in the study of sports. The majority of studies have used male athletes and have generalized the results to females. Perhaps the importance of the athlete-to-athlete interpersonal relationships did not appear in past research because of the predominant focus on male athletes. Future research could address what may be a gender-specific aspect of competitive sports. How do male and female athletes differ in the values they hold? What types of sports environments do female athletes prefer? What type of coaching style is most effective in the female sport environment? Do females place greater importance on the athlete-to-athlete relationship than males?

Past studies have used observational and quantitative techniques while the present research took more of a qualitative approach and asked participants to share their stories. Further research needs to continue this approach that allows the participants to share their experiences rather than having researchers draw independent conclusions based on observations or other quantitative data. Misconceptions may occur when the athletes are not asked to speak for themselves and share their own perceptions.

Many studies have examined one sport and applied the findings to multiple sports. Rather than approaching a sport with the desire to generalize to all, there is value in

examining the uniqueness of a particular sport. This research looked solely at competitive cheerleading. I do not anticipate the findings of this research to apply to any other sport. I do not even think that they could be applied to all competitive cheerleading teams. This research is about the stories of five girls on a particular team at a particular time. It is hoped, however, that others can draw ideas from this research that they might modify and apply to their own team or to subsequent research projects in the area. This research has helped me significantly as a coach and perhaps other coaches might see the value of asking the athletes to talk about their personal experiences and the meaning that they make of them.

The results of the current research support the transition in sports from a linear approach to issues to more of a systems perspective. Participation on a sports team is not about athletic development alone, especially where children and youth are concerned. Athletics is one of the most “important settings for social and skill development in children” (Smith, Smoll, & Christensen, 1996). Future research needs to adopt this approach when examining the sport environment.

Summary and Conclusions

My research objective was to create a thick description of the competitive cheerleading experience from a female athlete’s perspective. I desired to generate a study that filled some of the gaps in past research by using female participants, qualitative research methods and the analysis of one sport. A case study approach using both quantitative and qualitative techniques for data collection was used in this study. Participants were five females who had been involved in competitive cheerleading for a

mean of 4.4 years. Each participant completed a questionnaire as well as an interview with the researcher. While a few questions were drawn from previous studies, the majority of questions used in this research were based on my observations and curiosities as a competitive cheerleading coach.

My analysis of the data involved a search for themes and constructs common to all participants. These were not predetermined. Rather they emerged from the grouped data. Using this method of analysis, the responses could be best understood in terms of seven themes: athleticism, team dynamics, unique aspects of competitive cheerleading, social skills, negative impacts of competitive cheerleading, involving male athletes and peer perceptions. Within each theme, there were key findings.

Participants felt that athleticism was the focus of their sport. They often trained longer and harder than other competitive teams despite their activity not officially being recognized as a sport. They credit their competitive cheerleading experience for much of their athletic development.

The team dynamics of competitive cheerleading set this sport apart from other competitive sports. The training schedule requires a large time commitment that also allows for the development of deep, meaningful relationships between athletes. Participants described their relationship with team mates as that of a “family” or of “sisters”. These bonds are created in a setting that brings together different personality types and age groups.

As well as team dynamics, there are other characteristics unique to competitive cheerleading. This sport incorporates a large number of skills as well as team environments. Athletes must train strength, cardiovascular, flexibility, coordination and

balance. They must work individually on skills such as tumbling, in small groups while stunting and as a whole team for dance and cheer. The individual identity of the athlete is minimized as the team strives to achieve a unified look. The individual, however, is seen as essential to the collective team to the point where no one is replaceable. Stunting requires athletes to work physically close, to have high levels of trust and dependence and to work in cooperation with others. The structure and length of the competition season may shift how a team evaluates their success. Time spent practicing together may be more significant than how a team does in competition.

A number of different social skills emerged and were developed in the structure and safety of the team environment. Trust, dependence, cooperation, communication, ability to work with others, leadership and time management were just some of the skills participants identified. The development of these skills, however, depends on the coach's ability to structure the team environment appropriately. Approaching the coach role with group work principles rather than a "win at all costs" attitude can contribute significantly to the social skill development of the athletes.

Negative impacts of competitive cheerleading as identified by participants in the interview were performance stress, injury and stereotyping. Performance stress was seen as an unavoidable element of the sport; however, it was identified as increasing the risk of injury. Injuries were an accepted part of the sport. As a coach, I am concerned about the psychological effect of injury on both the injured athlete as well as on the one causing the injury. I am also concerned about the long term consequences of injuries. Stereotyping was seen as decreasing as exposure to competitive cheerleading is increasing and people are becoming more informed as to the athletic component involved. Participants felt they were partially responsible for educating others and helping to eliminate stereotypes.

Participants felt that males would detract from the team cohesiveness and the relationships formed between athletes. They did not feel that males would contribute to the overall success of the team.

Peer perception did not have a significant impact on the participants' experiences. Participants felt that the more they dedicated themselves to what they love doing, the more people will see competitive cheerleading as a sport. Misconceptions were thought to be rooted in the portrayal of cheerleaders in the media, as well as the attitudes of past generations.

Competitive cheerleading is gaining popularity and acceptance across North America. It is a sport that has undergone an extreme transformation in the last three decades, emerging as something very different from its humble beginnings on a cold football field at the University of Minnesota in 1898. With this increase in popularity, however, those invested in the sport have a responsibility to the athletes. Youth athletics needs to maintain its focus on a developmental perspective regarding those involved. The goal is not to bring home a trophy. Rather, the goal needs to be that of developing healthy, happy and well-rounded individuals. Success comes out of these goals being met in an informed and effective manner.

Numerous areas of future research have been noted from this study. Although the focus of this study was competitive cheerleading, it is hoped that the results inspire others to explore similar issues in other areas of sport. The sport's environment is a proven area for developmental research. Individuals are brought together for a common purpose and

must work together towards a common goal. The opportunities for development and relationship within that environment are endless. Understanding one's athletes, their specific needs and the sport's unique characteristics contribute to the potential success of all involved.

For the participants in this study, their sports experience went far beyond their athletic development. It went beyond the competitions and trophies. It was a life changing experience that impacted who they were and who they were to become. Sheila summarises the experience,

I joined the cheerleading team for the simple enjoyment of performing. Now that I look back on my experience, performing with the team does not even compare to the dress rehearsals. I found a family – a group of individuals who I could turn to, who worked hard, who laughed, who cried and who depended upon this team as a means of surviving highschool physically, emotionally, and academically. I found a way to feel good about myself, as if I had contributed to a team that had a cause and a goal.

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Appendix A
Questionnaire

The Impact of a Competitive Cheerleading Experience on the Development of Female Athletes

The following questionnaire is intended to gain some insight into the experience of being a competitive cheerleader from the perspective of an athlete. Please answer each question to the best of your ability. If there are any questions which you would like to expand upon or questions which you feel should have been included and would like to discuss further, please identify these by writing, "Interview" in the margin.

1. How many years have you been involved in competitive cheerleading? _____

2. In what grade did you begin cheerleading? _____ Your age now: _____

3. Approximately how many hours per week do you participate as an athlete in competitive cheerleading (include training at home)? _____

As a coach (include preparation time)? _____

4. What other *physical* activities have you participated in over your cheerleading career (please indicate the number of hours per week you spend at each)?

5. What other school or extracurricular activities have you participated in over your cheerleading career (please indicate the number of hours per week you spend at each)?

The following questions refer to your future with cheerleading AFTER graduation. Please indicate on the scale from 1 (not likely) to 7 (very likely) how you feel about each of the following statements:

6. I will continue as a competitive cheerleader after graduation:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Reason: _____

7. I will continue coaching competitive cheerleading after graduation:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Reason: _____

8. I would recommend younger students to pursue competitive cheerleading as a sport:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Reason: _____

The following questions refer to the physical aspects of competitive cheerleading. Please rate each component on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much) with regards to how much your participation in competitive cheerleading affected each in a POSITIVE way (if any were negatively effected , please indicate this by circling “negative”).

9. Because of your competitive cheerleading experience, the following were affected:

i) Cardiovascular Endurance	Negative	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
ii) Strength	Negative	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
iii) Flexibility	Negative	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
iv) Nutritional Health	Negative	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
v) Life Style Choices	Negative	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

(eg. smoking, high-risk behaviour, alcohol/substance use)

10. How did competitive cheerleading affect your ability to *establish* fitness goals?

Negative	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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11. How did competitive cheerleading affect your ability to *achieve* fitness goals?

Negative	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
----------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---

12. Would you have met your fitness goals had you not been in competitive cheerleading?

Negative	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
----------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---

How? _____

The following questions refer to the social aspect of competitive cheerleading both within the team context and within the larger school/peer context. These questions require short answers. Please do not feel limited by space (also a reminder that you may indicate questions which you would like to discuss in an interview).

13. What type of social skills do you feel you gained from your competitive cheerleading experience?

14. What do you feel is unique about the environment of your sport which contributes to the development of these skills?

15. How did your competitive cheerleading experience contribute to or hinder your social life outside of the sport environment?

16. How would you describe your relationship with teammates?

17. Were there conflicts between you and other members? If so, what was the nature of them?

18. Would you include your teammates among your close friends? Explain.

19. "Cheerleading is my life" is a commonly heard phrase. How does this describe your experience?

20. Would you include competitive cheerleading as part of your identity as an individual? Explain.

21. Would friends outside of the team environment identify competitive cheerleading as being an important part of your life? Explain.

The following questions refer to your experiences of competitive cheerleading as a sport. Please rate the importance of each trait on a scale from 1 (not important) to 7 (very important). If you feel traits are missing, please indicate them at the end.

22. The following traits in competitive cheerleading are:

i) Cooperation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
ii) Trust	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
iii) Teamwork	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
iv) Communication	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
v) Dedication	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
vi) Competitiveness	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
vii) Aggression	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
viii) Physical Beauty	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
ix) Strength	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
x) Fitness	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
xi) Social Skills	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
xii) Leadership	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
xiii) Enthusiasm	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
xiv) Popularity	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
xv) Extroversion	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
xvi) Body Shape	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
xvii) Prestige	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
xviii) Friendship	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
xix) Responsibility	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
xx) Courage	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
xxi) Discipline	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
xxii) Goal Setting	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Other traits of competitive cheerleading: _____

23. Do you feel your peers/school/community understand and appreciate your sport? Explain.

24. Do you feel supported by your peers/school/community? Explain.

25. What do you feel are some common misconceptions regarding competitive cheerleading?

26. What do you feel contributes to misconceptions and/or how do you feel those misconceptions are being perpetuated/eliminated?

27. How did you view competitive cheerleading before you became involved?

28. Why did you want to become a competitive cheerleader?

The following questions refer to what I have labelled as the “dark side” of competitive cheerleading. These are those characteristics of the sport which may or may not have had a negative or harmful affect on you. Please indicate on a scale from 1 (very negative) to 7 (very positive) how each of the following characteristics affected you (please circle 4 if it had no impact on your experience).

29. The following are characteristics of competitive cheerleading which were:

i) Focus on body image	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
ii) Reliance on each individual	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
iii) Psychological stress of stunting	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
iv) Physical demands	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
v) Time commitment	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
vi) Weight of flyers	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
vii) Weight of bases	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
viii) Competitiveness	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
ix) Performance stress	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
x) Stereotyping	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
xi) Risk of injury or injury	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

30. What would you describe as the most physically, emotionally and/or psychologically harmful characteristics of competitive cheerleading?

31. Do you think these could be reduced/eliminated? If so, how?

These next questions refer to your experience coaching competitive cheerleading. Taking a coach perspective, please answer the following.

32. What are your three top priorities with regards to what you desire to see your athletes achieve?

1.

2.

3.

33. What value do you see in training these young athletes in the sport of competitive cheerleading?

34. What are some obstacles you anticipate in your coaching experience?

Thank you so much for taking the time to answer these questions. Below, space is provided for you to add any of your own thoughts with regards to your competitive cheerleading experience. Please take a moment to indicate which questions/areas you would like to cover in an interview session. If there are questions not on this questionnaire which you would like to discuss, please indicate these below.

Thank you so much!

Appendix B

Letter of Recruitment

May 29th, 2003

Letter of Recruitment

Dear

For the completion of my Masters of Arts in Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria, I am required to produce a thesis which involves conducting a research project. My five years of coaching competitive cheerleading have revealed a number of curiosities and concerns that I have regarding the impact of the competitive cheerleading experience on the overall development of my athletes. Upon conducting a thorough review of the literature surrounding the impact of the sports environment on the development of athletes, it became clear that competitive cheerleading was an area in which there was not a lot of research available. As a coach, I wish to be as responsible as possible in order to ensure that my athletes have a positive sport experience. Part of that responsibility involves being knowledgeable regarding the effect that the different characteristics of the sport and the environment have on the development of the athletes.

I am planning to conduct a research project entitled, "The Impact of a Competitive Cheerleading Experience on the Development of Female Athletes". I intend to do this by having willing participants complete a questionnaire which asks them to describe the impact of their competitive cheerleading experience in a number of areas. As the participants answer these questions, they will be asked to indicate which questions they would like to discuss further in an individual interview session with the researcher. This is an opportunity for athletes to explore their experiences with competitive cheerleading and to provide others with a unique perspective on the sport.

A new program was initiated this year for athletes interested in learning the principles and skills for coaching competitive cheerleading. This Coach In Training (CIT) program was open to grade twelve athletes and consisted of fifteen hours of theory, and forty hours of direct supervision. Because of the unique positioning of the CITs as both athlete and coach, I wish to use these individuals as participants in my study.

The participants that I am seeking for the study, therefore, will be grade twelve students of South Delta Secondary School who are members of the SDS Competitive Squad as well as involved in the Coach In Training program. In order to avoid the conflicting roles of being both a coach and researcher, the research will not be conducted until April at which time the competitive cheerleading season has ended. Participation is completely voluntary and all information gathered will remain anonymous and confidential. Participation in the study will involve completing a questionnaire taking 30-60 minutes, followed by an individual interview of 60-90 minutes in duration at a location of your choice.

If you are interested in participating or have further questions, please contact the researcher:

Amanda Steinberger
604-943-5804 or 604-314-3685
amandastarmoon@hotmail.com

or the researcher's supervisor:

Dr. Roy Ferguson
School of Child and Youth Care
250-721-7983
rferguso@uvic.ca

Thank you in advance for you time and consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Amanda Steinberger". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Amanda Steinberger

Appendix C

Letter to Parents

May 30th, 2003

Dear

Your daughter has been invited to participate in a study called "The Impact of a Competitive Cheerleading Experience on the Development of Female Athletes" that is being conducted by Amanda Steinberger. Amanda Steinberger is a graduate student in the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria and is under the supervision of Dr. Roy V. Ferguson who is a professor in the school of Child and Youth Care.

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a degree in Masters of Arts. The purpose of this research project is to create a description of a competitive cheerleading experience from the athletes' perspective. The objective is to articulate how the athletes' experiences as competitive cheerleaders influenced their development in a number of areas including sociological, psychological, and physical. It is hoped that this research will also reveal unique characteristics of competitive cheerleading that influence the development and experience of athletes.

Your daughter's participation will include the completion of a questionnaire followed by an interview of 60-90 minutes. All data will be collected by the researcher and will remain confidential. Your daughter's identity will be concealed throughout this process and the data collected will be used for the purposes of this research project only. Mr. Collings, the school principal, is aware of and supportive of this research. In addition, this research project has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Victoria.

All efforts possible will be made to make this a positive and enjoyable experience for your daughter. Her contribution to this research is greatly appreciated and valued. If you have any questions or concerns at this time or at any point during the research project, I would be happy to answer them. You may contact me at 604-943-5804 (home) or 604-314-3685 (cell) or by email at amandastarmoon@hotmail.com. In addition, my supervisor is also available at 250-721-7983 or by email at rferguso@uvic.ca.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Amanda Steinberger". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Amanda Steinberger

Appendix D
Consent Form

Consent Form

The Impact of A Competitive Cheerleading Experience on the Development of Female Athletes

You are being invited to participate in a study called "The Impact of A Competitive Cheerleading Experience on the Development of female Athletes" that is being conducted by Amanda Steinberger. Amanda is a graduate student in the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria and you may contact her if you have further questions by phone at 604-943-5804 (home) or 604-314-3685 (cell) or email her at amandastarmoon@hotmail.com

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a degree in Masters of Arts. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Roy V. Ferguson who is a professor in the School of Child and Youth Care. You may contact my supervisor at 250-721-7983 or by email at rferguso@uvic.ca.

The purpose of this research project is to create a description of the competitive cheerleading experience from the athletes' perspective. The objective is to articulate how the athletes' experiences as competitive cheerleaders influenced their development in a number of areas including sociological, psychological, and physical. It is hoped that this research will also reveal unique characteristics of competitive cheerleading which influence the development and experience of athletes. This is one of the first studies to examine the unique characteristics of competitive cheerleading.

Research of this type is important because understanding athletes' experience provides those concerned with their care the opportunity to better meet their needs and more effectively enhance their development. This study is important as it fills some of the gaps in past research and may also reveal unique qualities of competitive cheerleading that are of particular interest for future study.

You are being asked to participate in this study because of your involvement in the Coach In Training (CIT) program. In order to be a CIT, you had to be a senior student, have a minimum of three years cheerleading experience, leadership skills as well as advanced social skills. Being part of this program also meant that you would have extensive theoretical and practical coaching experience. These are all important qualities that will contribute to the richness of the data collected for this research.

If you agree to participate in this research, your participation will include answering a questionnaire that will take approximately 30-60 minutes to complete. The purpose of the questionnaire is to allow you to comment on multiple areas of the competitive cheerleading experience and to pick the area(s) that you would like to discuss in the interview. This will be followed by an interview of 60-90 minutes. The interview will further explore questions you identified on the questionnaire. Upon the completion of the questionnaire and interview, you will be contacted to review the write-up of the researcher. In order to ensure that you are being represented clearly and accurately, you will be asked to approve any documentation produced by the researcher. Once you agree that your thoughts have been correctly articulated, participation in this study will be complete. Participation will occur at a location convenient to you. You will be given a week to complete the questionnaire at your convenience. Interviews can be scheduled at the your home or anywhere else that you feel comfortable.

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you as it involves a total time commitment of approximately 90 - 180 minutes over three different intervals.

There are some potential risks to you by participating in this research and they include the possibility of emotional discomfort. As you are required to reflect over your three to five years of cheerleading experience, there is the risk that uncomfortable memories may occur. These memories may be directly related to your cheerleading experience or simply associated with a

difficult event occurring during your life. This reflective process may bring up unresolved issues or issues which you are not comfortable discussing.

To prevent or deal with these risks the following steps will be taken. You are only required to talk about what you are comfortable discussing. If there are painful memories or issues that you are not ready to address, then you are free to refuse to comment on them. You also have the option of dropping out of the study at any time. If the process makes you uncomfortable, you may simply cease participation. If you continue to participate, however, all efforts will be made to help you deal with past issues. The researcher will assist you in seeking help from a counselor, if that is your wish.

The potential benefits of your participation in this research include giving you a greater sense of understanding and fulfillment in regards to your sport. The knowledge gained from this study also has the potential of improving the sport environment for future athletes. This reflective process will also contribute to your own coaching ability as you gain a fuller understanding of the competitive cheerleading experience from an athlete's perspective.

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw, you will be asked, at the time of withdrawal, if the researcher has permission to use your data in the analysis. You will have no further obligation to participate and only the data collected up to that point would be used. If you agree, the researcher will produce a document which states that you give the researcher permission to use your data for the purpose of this research only, which will be signed by both the researcher and yourself. If you do not agree to allow your data to be used then the researcher will destroy it.

The researcher may have a relationship to potential participants as a coach. To help prevent this relationship from influencing your decision to participate, the researcher will wait until the cheerleading season is over and she is no longer in a coaching position before conducting research. In order to assure that you are continuing to give your consent to participate in this research, I will remind you that your participation is voluntary and that you may withdraw from the study at any time when you receive the initial questionnaire and again at the start of the interview.

In terms of protecting your anonymity, your identity will be concealed throughout this process. Pseudonyms will be used in all reporting of the data and any identifying characteristics will be removed from the narratives. Because of the limited pool from which participant selections are made, complete anonymity cannot be guaranteed, as the criteria for being a participant ARE very specific. It would be impossible, however, to determine which narratives belonged to which participants.

Confidentiality of the data will be protected by having your data kept in a locked drawer in the researcher's office. The only person having access to the data will be the researcher.

Data from this study will be disposed of at the completion of the thesis defense by shredding the hard copy of the data and deleting electronic computer files.

The results of this study will first be presented to you for approval. Once you agree that you have been clearly and accurately represented, they will be put into thesis form. It is anticipated that the researcher may modify her thesis in order to present it as an article for publication.

In addition to being able to contact the researcher and her supervisor at the above phone numbers, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Associate Vice-President, Research at the University of Victoria (250-472-4362).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researcher.

<i>Name of Participant</i>	<i>Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>
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A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.

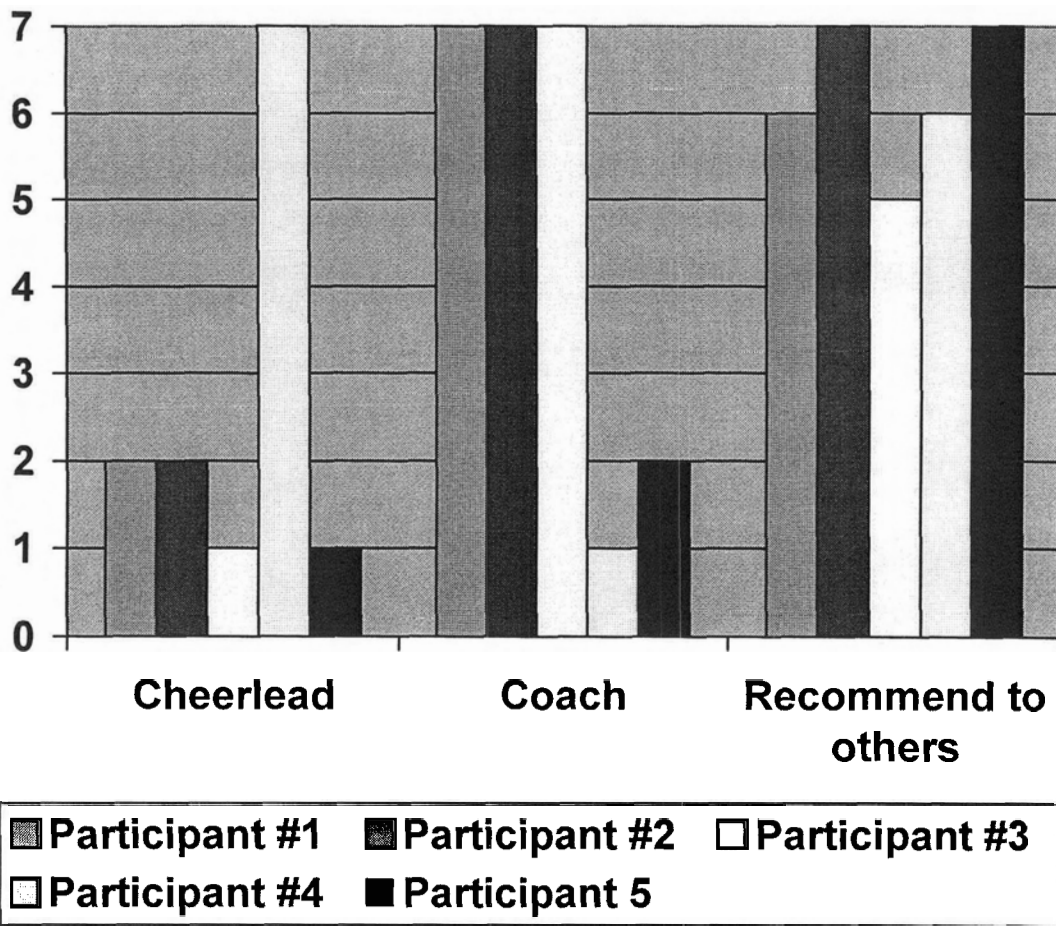
Appendix E

Table I: The Impact of the Competitive Cheerleading Experience on Participants'

Involvement in Cheerleading after Graduation

Table I

The Impact of the Competitive Cheerleading Experience on Participants' Involvement in Cheerleading after Graduation

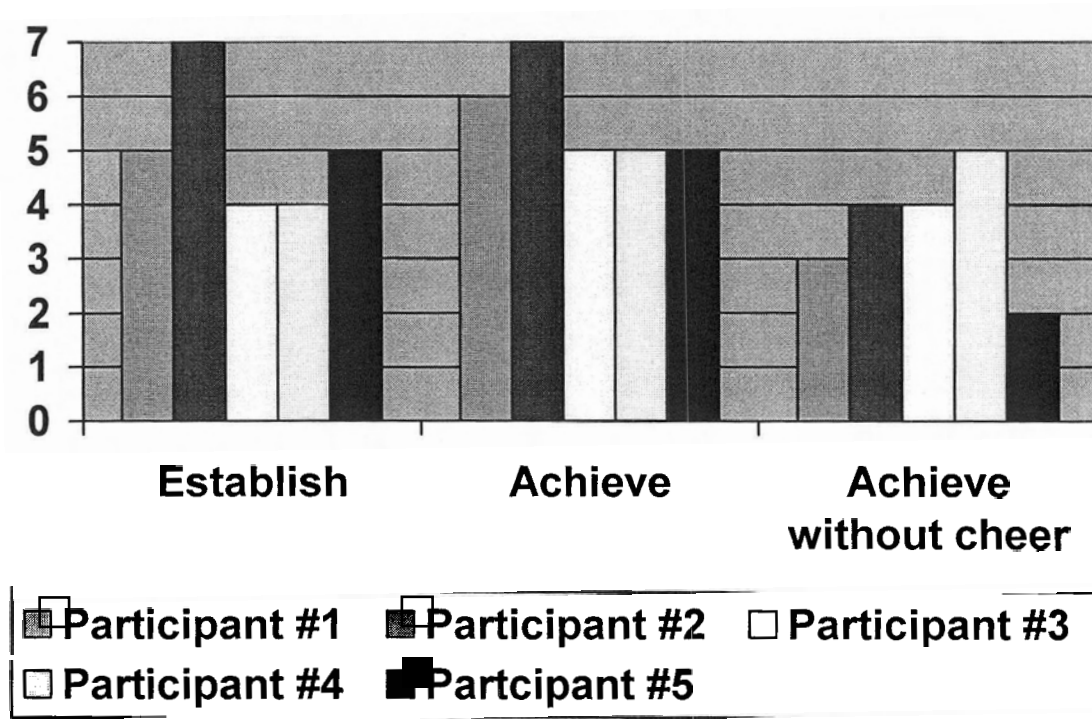


Appendix F

Table II: The Impact of the Competitive Cheerleading Experience on the Development, Achievement and Maintenance of Fitness Goals

Table II

The Impact of the Competitive Cheerleading Experience on the Development, Achievement and Maintenance of Fitness Goals

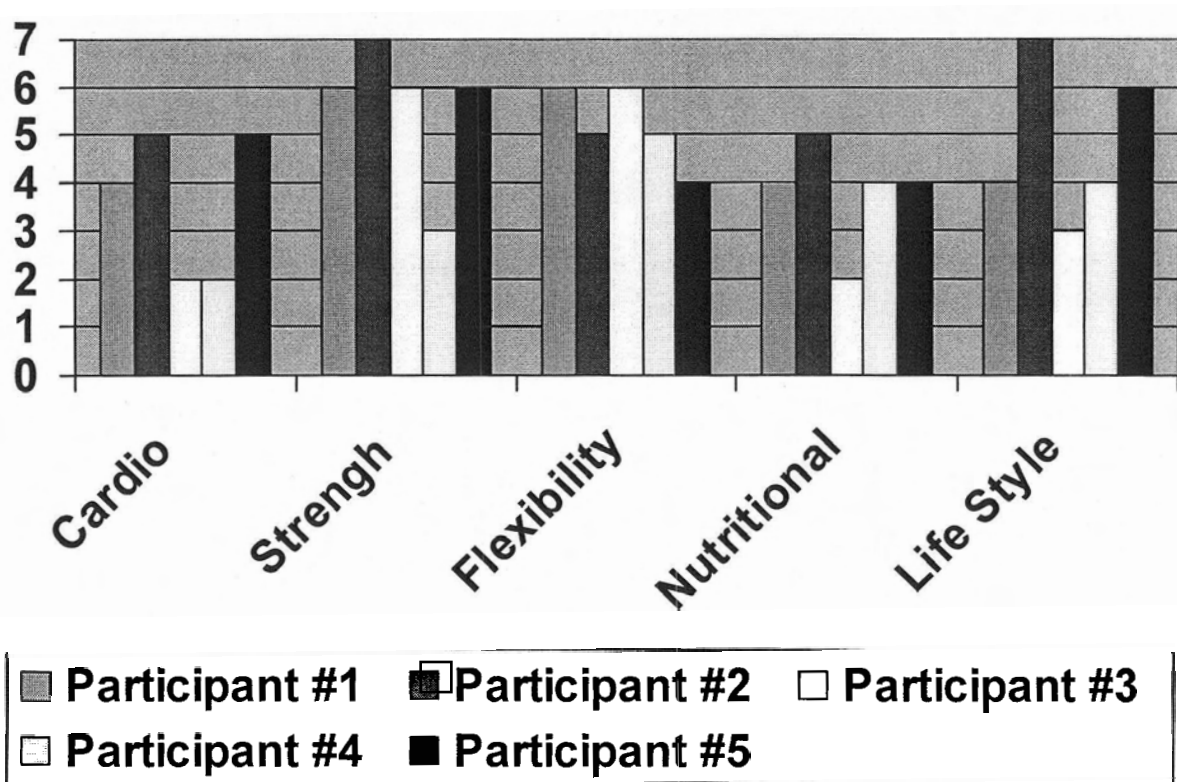


Appendix G

Table III: The Impact of the Competitive Cheerleading Experience on Physical Development

Table III

*The Impact of the Competitive Cheerleading Experience on
Physical Development*

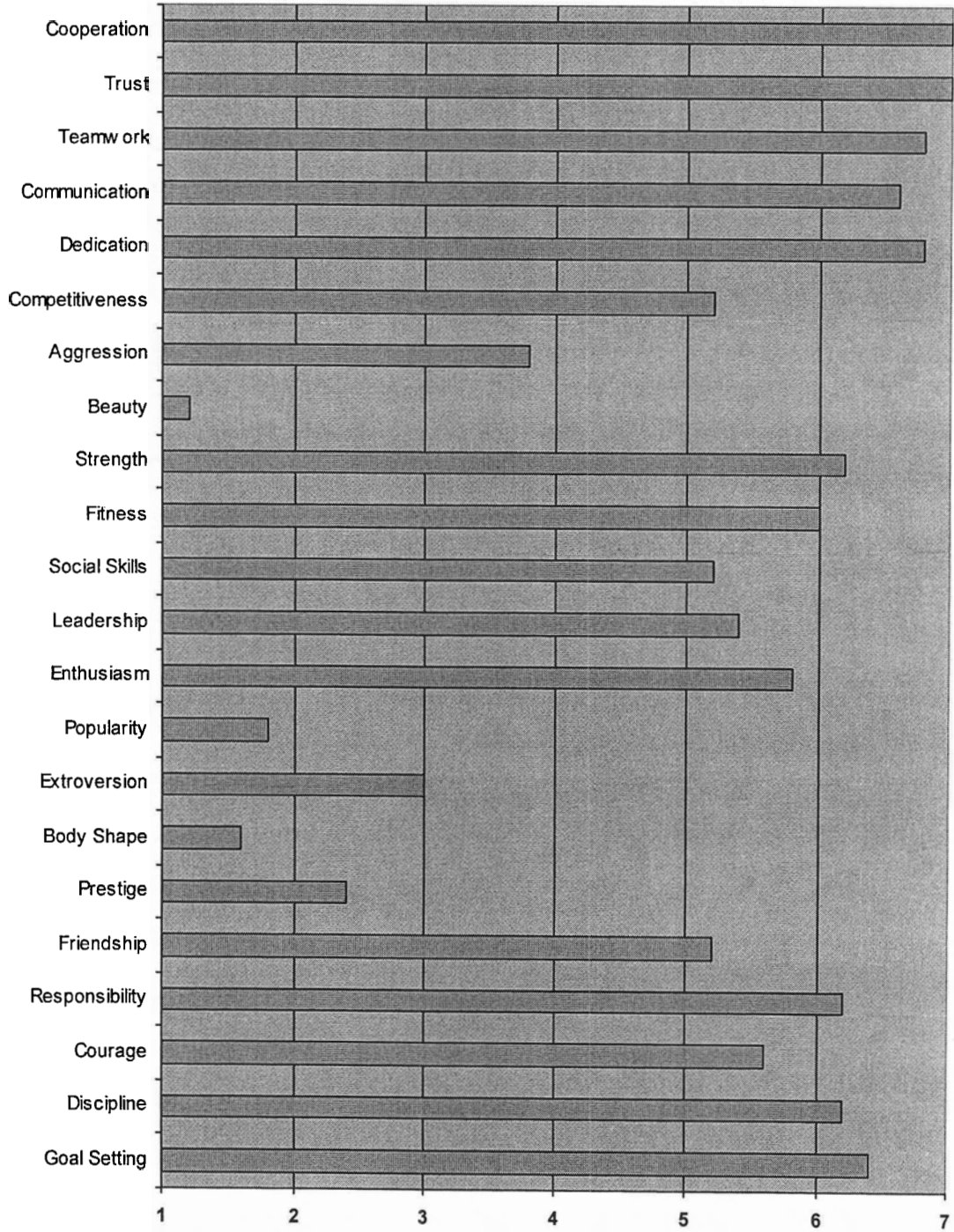


Appendix H

Table IV: Traits that are Significant to the Competitive Cheerleading Experience

Table IV

Traits that are Significant to the Competitive Cheerleading Experience



Appendix I

Table V: The Impact of Characteristics associated with Competitive Cheerleading

Table V

***The Impact of Characteristics Associated with Competitive
Cheerleading***

(note that a value of 4 means the characteristic had a neutral impact, values less than 4 indicate a negative impact and values greater than 4 indicate a positive impact)

