From the Sidelines to the Mat: My Life Thus Far as a Cheerleader

INTRODUCTION

We are hard to miss. We are in the movies and we have the prettiest hair, flawless skin, and not to mention, our boyfriend is always coincidentally the quarterback of the football team. We are seen as the most popular girls around and anyone would be lucky to be with us. We are on TV, with a smile that draws all eyes. We are at the games, jumping up and down and yelling as our large bow flops around. We are cheerleaders. But the image that is presented by our society and media is inaccurate. We are hard-working athletes that have just as much determination and drive as the next. Cheerleaders are ridiculed and scarcely taken seriously because of this image we have received, but it is not who we are. Through the years, cheerleading has progressed and has taken action, trying to gain equal rights and opportunities and be recognized as a sport. Through my personal experience and research, my goal is to address the evolution of cheerleading, and bring to the reader’s attention as to why we deserve recognition, and most importantly, make one
understand why they should be concerned with cheerleading and how it has shaped our generation and world around them.

BACKGROUND

I was in fourth grade when I fell in love. I would spend hours outside with my neighbor in her front yard practicing our cheers and jumps and making up our own cheers to show our team at practice. I have always been told I was a natural-born leader, and sideline cheerleading allowed me to feed this craving I had to control people. Saying that cheerleading has shaped me throughout the years is an understatement. Cheerleading has an image that is not so desired placed on it and as a cheerleader; I have made it my goal to show others that cheerleaders do not all follow this image that we have received. Cheerleading has been a huge part of my life through the last ten years. Cheerleading has made me a more confident person and made lifelong friends and I have learned lifelong lessons. Cheerleading has been one of the main parts of my life since I was ten years old and it is something I will carry with me through the rest of my life.

THE HISTORY
When some think of cheerleaders, images like the Dallas Cowboy cheerleaders (Image 1), or of a cheerleader from their favorite movie or TV program, but the original cheerleaders were in the 1880’s, when Princeton had an all-male pep club that led the crowd in cheers at football games ("History of Cheerleading"). At one of the games in 1898, one of these “yell leaders”, as they were called, picked up a megaphone to lead the crowd in cheers, and this was the birth of cheerleading. It seems strange to imagine in our society today a group of men yelling, “go team” for football teams. Women did not dominate cheerleading until the 1940’s when all the males left to fight in World War II ("History of Cheerleading"). In 1948, there was the introduction of the all-famous pom-poms (Image 2),
that are so easily associated with cheerleaders and cheer clinics[1] became very popular where individuals could come and learn from the best. Both pom-poms and cheer clinics are still present in cheerleading. In 1974, a new era of cheerleading was created with the formation of the UCA (Universal Cheerleading Association) (“History of Cheerleading”). This is the modern body that rules cheerleading today. The UCA has a set of rules and regulations that cheerleading teams must follow. In 1990, all-star cheerleading was introduced (“History of Cheerleading”) and spread across America like wildfire, which included cheer routines to music and teams not associated with schools. This is the style of cheerleading featured in movies such as Bring It On. In 2004 and every year since, the first Worlds competition was held. Worlds consists of teams across America as well as international teams competing at the highest levels against other selected teams. Cheerleading Worlds is broadcasted on ESPN each year, also. Today, at select competitions, teams will compete against each other in hopes to receive a full-paid bid to Worlds. Cheerleading started at Princeton with all-male teams at games has now spread
to four other continents with people of all different ages, races, genders, and backgrounds coming together.

**SIDELINE CHEER**

I cheered for my school’s football and basketball teams from fourth grade through tenth grade, when I made the Varsity team (Image 3)

![Image 3](Image3.png)

**Image 3** - A teammate and I my sophomore year cheerleading as one of two sophomores. I loved cheer, even if at this point, all it consisted of was clapping our hands and jumping around when our team scored, with the occasional stunt when there was time. Cheering under the bright stadium lights was breathtaking. Little did I know, I was going to find a new light to perform under that would show me so much more about myself and that which made me who I am today.

**ALL-STAR CHEERLEADING**
My sophomore year, I started pushing my limits at cheer. Learning new and more difficult things, I wanted to continue with this after my Varsity year. I knew that if I committed to this all-star program, I would be giving up cheerleading at the games, and wouldn’t be able to cheer my senior year, and possibly give up such a secure social position in high school. But I didn’t care, I wanted to learn more and joined a outside cheerleading club program that I am still currently in and have been with for four years. This was a whole new world to me. Our uniforms were long-sleeved with an open stomach and back and a short skirt and both pieces were covered in rhinestones, my ribbon was traded for a large bow that seemed like it could be seen from space, the track and mats that I was used to practicing on were now a blue mat with springs underneath, no more practicing or performing outside, we were now surrounded by mirrors and audiences, we were not cheering for others, now others were cheering for us. All-star cheerleading has more tumbling[3], more difficult stunts, and the teams are given two minutes and thirty seconds to exhibit all of the required sections. All-star cheerleading and sideline cheerleading are two separate worlds that I am lucky to have been a part of both. Sideline cheerleading for me consisted of practicing a couple of hours, twice a week after school, and our big moment was game day on Friday. The stunts were safe and simple and we memorized cheers to encourage the team. In all-star cheerleading, we practice almost everyday. The practices are long and hard and we spend a lot of time working out and training our bodies. We have multiple competitions and during the height of our season, we have a competition almost every weekend and travel across the country. We are not cheering for a team, but usually have a huge arena and audience cheering for us instead (Image 4).
I can’t imagine the type of person I would be without cheerleading today. Currently, I am a student at Michigan State University, taking fifteen credit hours, and working twenty hours a week. On top of that, I am still doing all-star cheerleading, which consists of eight hours of practice a week and competitions across the country on the weekends. Cheerleading has taught me how to efficiently manage my time. With very little time, I have to take advantage of every second to be productive. Cheerleading has taught me how important teamwork is (Image 5).
Image 5 - Teammates and I with our first place banner and full paid bid to a competition in Virginia Beach

Even if a teammate and I don’t get along, I have to look past it and work with them, which applicable in school and life. With the stunts we do, it takes the effort of all people underneath it. For our stunts to hit with good technique and timing with the other groups on stage, we have to all work together. Cheerleading has become my passion. I believe it is important to feel passionate about something in life, because when one progresses, it seems like there is no better feeling. I have given up a lot for cheerleading, because I would like to think of myself as a dedicated athlete. In high school, I missed many activities and dances, because I would be at a competition that weekend. I have given up some friendships because it is very time demanding, but I have learned that my teammates are the best friends I could ask for and they have became my second family. I have learned the value of respect with others and how when I respect others, it is returned, and even when it’s not returned, to keep my chin up and be the bigger person. Some of the things I can do today seemed impossible for me five years, and most people say it is impossible for them - so to be able to what some think of as possible makes me feel special. My teammates and I always joke about how cheerleading is just a group of people trying to defy gravity
and looking cute doing it. People praise me as a person, but I believe if it weren’t for
cheerleading, I would not be this person today, it has given me drive and is not only a way
to stay active, but exists as an escape for me to be myself and not think about anything but
the task at hand.

OTHERS

I spoke with teammates about what cheerleading has done for them in their lives
and what it means to them. Senior, Selena Nieves (Image 6) states:

Image 6 - Senior and teammate, Selena Nieves

Cheer has given me new opportunities in life that I probably would not have
experienced without it. I have made a handful of friends that I consider some of my
best friends. Without cheer I would not have met these amazing people, because unlike a normal high school team, there are people from all over the state.

The bonds that are created through cheer are lifelong and strong. We trust each other with our lives and safety every week. Junior, Marissa Frent (Image 7) states:

Image 7 - Junior and teammate, Marissa Frent

[Cheerleading] has changed me in a way to become more confident in myself. You can’t go on stage with the dark room and spotlights directly on you if you are trying to be shy. It’s all about trying to sell your routine to the judges. If we all went on stage with no confidence in our team and ourselves, the routine would look like a mess.

In our society, I believe that confidence is something that kids in our generation struggle with, since there are so many ways to put others down, but with cheer, it teaches us to be
confident in everything we do. Lastly, junior Jessica Vigo (Image 8)

Image 8 - Junior and teammate, Jessica Vigo

speaks of what life values she has learned from cheerleading, “Through cheerleading I learned that nothing comes easy. You have to work for what you want. Also that you can not depend on anybody but yourself, if you want something you have to give it your all.” Through speaking with my teammates, it is clear that it is not only myself that sees the values outside of cheerleading that are more than just a physical activity to keep us busy on the weekend.

MY COMMUNITY

Cheerleading has made a big impact on my community and hasn’t really received the attention it deserves. In my cheerleading program, my coaches value the community
around us and we are always looking to give back. My coach, Carla Colbeck states that she believes that giving back to the community, “Develops good athlete character, and athletes with good character will work harder. It also gives them discipline and responsibility outside of the gym.” For the last eleven years, we have held a toy drive for Toys For Tots and held events to help bring in toys, we have made sandwiches for the homeless, and as mentioned before, it is creating not only athletes, but better people for our society. We are taught values that are constantly applied throughout our daily life. In my opinion, cheerleaders are overlooked and underestimated in society and are just seen by the image that the media produces, when in reality, we can be great inspirations. In our cheerleading program, we have children from the ages of five to nineteen in the same gym, and these kids look at the older cheerleaders and watch in wonders and hope to be these kids one day. We are mentors and living examples of what hard work and dedication can do.

**ISSUES AND PROBLEMS**

**IS CHEERLEADING A SPORT?**

Cheerleaders constantly do the unimaginable for some; we work just as hard as other athletes, but are told that what we have been living for is not reliable. We constantly
risk our lives and put it in the hands of one to three other people (Image 9).  

**Image 9** - Co-ed stunting at practice

We push physical and mental barriers each day we are in the gym training. We do all this hard work for what? To be ridiculed? People will recognize us athletes, but we are athletes without a sport. In two minutes and thirty seconds, we complete a routine that consists of standing tumbling[4], elite stunts[5], quantity stunting[6], running tumbling[7], basket tosses[8], a pyramid[9], jumps, and a dance, and we do all of this in sync and while smiling. To complete this, our athletes must be strong and have sustainable endurance. To master each skill to the best of its ability, each athlete needs to know how to work and utilize each muscle. If an athlete tries a skill that they are not ready for, the consequences will be seen. It takes hours in the gym and a certain progression pattern to train the muscles needed. It also is important to feel as if one’s body is ready for the skill as well, because cheerleading is just as much as a mental activity as it is a physical activity (Image 10)
What does it take to make us realized as a sport? Our appearance should not determine us, but rather what we do. The best athletes make it look easy.

**STEREOTYPES**

Cheerleaders perform in short uniforms, with their hair perfected, and drastic makeup, but this does not take away from their brains. Due to committing a large amount of time to cheerleading, we are forced to manage our time effectively. Cheerleading scholarships are very scarce, but college cheerleaders are not. This being said, cheerleaders are not being recruited and being paid to go to school so they can cheer like other sports, so they must be academically proficient as well as have the skills needed to cheer at their desired college. Sideline cheerleading is the more recognized form of cheerleading where the athletes have their pom-poms and yell, but in all-star cheerleading, we constantly are demanding more from our bodies and are a form of cheerleading that in my opinion, is more difficult and athletic, but less noticed. Male cheerleaders are still a big part of cheerleading (especially all-star cheerleading). These guys are strong. Other athletes lift weights, and these guys lift people, yet they are all assumed to be gay. The
original male pep squad in the 1880’s did not face this problem, yet it is a huge issue with our sport today. Many guys that have so much talent will quit because of the ridicule they receive, or will altogether hide the fact that they are cheerleaders. It saddens me when I learn about a cheerleader in our industry that has committed suicide for being bullied just for being who they are.

SOLUTIONS

The issues that cheerleaders see are everyday interactions. As cheerleaders, we have to lead by example in order to prove others wrong. We must keep doing what we love and remember why we do it and not let others’ words and opinions bring us down. I can express my opinion on why I believe cheerleading is a sport, and I can go against the believed stereotypes cheerleaders carry, but I cannot reach into someone’s mind directly and make them believe me. So instead, I work hard in school, to show others that we’re not all dumb. I inform others about what I do every week for 8+ hours a week and what that really entails. I let them know about the bruises and battle scars I’ve received, but shrug like they’re nothing, because we are warriors. I tell them about diverse group of people I cheer with, and how even though we are all different, we still come together as a family for the love of the sport. There are groups out there that are bringing it to the Supreme Court, trying to rule cheerleading as a sport. We have been ruled out numerous times, but we cannot give up. If we show others that cheerleaders are not what their preconceived ideas
were, then we will slowly eliminate these ideas and show them why we deserve the respect we ask for.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, cheerleading has not only shaped me as a person, but it has become who I am. Cheerleading has progressed over the years, and it is still new compared to other sports, it can only grow more from here. If anything, I wish that the reader now has a new outlook on cheerleaders, and a newfound respect for our sport. The people that are displayed in the movies are not who we are, we are people who love our sport just as much as the next athlete. I hope one day this is recognized and others see it the way I do, and I will continue to set a good example for cheerleaders across the world and hopefully others will begin to recognize what we do and why we do it. Until then, all I have is my word, but I will continue to speak out and never give up.

[1] Cheer clinics are venues held by experts in cheerleading where cheerleaders can come to perfect their skills and learn new skills

[2] Stunting is a vital part of cheerleading, which consists of a base(s) and one flyer. The bases are the ones who put the flyer in the air, in tosses, pyramids, or elite stunts

[3] Tumbling is similar to the gymnastics event floor. Different levels of cheer require more difficult and advanced passes. Tumbling can be done in a running pass or standing
[4] Acrobatic section of cheerleading routines where individuals start from standing position

[5] Stunting section of cheerleading with the hardest stunts and maximum difficulty for their level

[6] Stunting section of the routine that aims to get as many stunts in the air at one time, this usually means the flyer is on only one or two people, compared to the usual four

[7] Tumbling section in the routine in which the tumbling starts from running first

[8] A stunt where the bases have a special grip and the flyer loads in and is thrown and has certain tricks and sequences to hit

[9] Stunting section where multiple groups are up and are supporting each other and using each other to complete maximum difficulty
Works Cited

Colbeck, Carla. Personal interview. 17 Feb 2014.

Frent, Marissa. Personal interview. 17 Feb. 2014.


Vigo, Jessica E. Personal interview. 17 Feb. 2014.