

# The flip side of cheerleading

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Sport's progression has led to increased injuries; better training implored

By Anna Johnson  
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CHICAGO — Cheerleaders catapult in the air, climb human pyramids and catch their tumbling teammates as they fall to the ground.

They also make lots of visits to the emergency room.

Research indicates cheerleading injuries more than doubled from 1990 through 2002, while participation grew just 18 percent over the same period.

"Cheerleading is not what it used to be. It's no longer standing on the sidelines looking cute in a skirt," said Erin Brooks, a former cheerleader who teaches a safety course in Mississippi. "It's more body skills."

A study published Tuesday in the journal Pediatrics estimates 208,800 young people ages 5 to 18 were treated at U.S. hospitals for cheerleading-related injuries during the 13-year period. Most of the injuries were suffered by 12- to 17-year-olds; nearly 40 percent were leg, ankle and foot injuries.

Almost all the patients in the study were treated at emergency rooms and released. But because researchers used only ER numbers gathered by the Consumer Product Safety Commission, the true number of those injured is even greater, since many kids are treated at doctors' offices or by team trainers, researchers said.

The rise in injuries is probably because the stunts are increasingly difficult, the researchers said. Cheerleading has "evolved from a school-spirit activity into an activity demanding high levels of gymnastics skill and athleticism," the study said.

"It's not just standing on sidelines with pompoms going, 'Rah, rah, rah.' It uses gymnastics, and some stunts are certainly more dangerous than others," said Dr. Barry Boden, an orthopedic surgeon specializing in sports medicine at Rockville, Md. Boden was not involved in the study.

Toni Ross, owner of Extreme All Starzz Academy in Oswego, said cheerleading is much more dangerous than it once was.

"But a kid can play football and get injured just like a kid can get injured in cheerleading," she said.

Ross said "quantity and quality" are the reasons cheerleaders are getting hurt. More and more young girls want to cheer, she said, but the demands of being a cheerleader now are more difficult to meet. The sport has grown into an acrobatic combination of gymnastics, dance and pyramid building, she said. So young girls that want to excel in the sport need expert training in order to do so safely and successfully, Ross said.

Unfortunately, Ross said, many schools aren't providing it for them. Ross said schools will search high and low for the right football coach to teach a quarterback to throw a game-winning pass or sustain a crushing sack without getting hurt. Ross said they need to put the same time and energy into selecting the coach that will teach cheerleaders how to throw each other into the air and catch each other without breaking legs and knocking out each other's teeth.



Joel Wintermantle / Sun staff  
Naperville Central High School sophomore cheerleader Danielle Trikur, center, spots a teammate through a back handspring during practice Wednesday night at the school. A recent study indicated that cheerleading injuries have more than doubled from 1990 to 2002.

"They're putting coaches on the floor that don't know what they're doing," she said. "So of course they're going to get hurt."

Ross, whose extensive training as a cheerleading coach earned her recognition as one of the nation's 20 top cheerleading coaches of 2005, there have been just two major injuries at Extreme All Starzz in the past five years.

"It's training," she said. "It's all about the training."

Cheerleading is now an Illinois High School Association sanctioned sport, though. That, said Lisa Federwitz, Naperville Central High School's cheerleading coach, means coaches must attend rules meetings that cover safety regulations and outline which stunts are legal, and which stunts aren't.

For example, the IHSA only allows two-level pyramids, while colleges allow squads to climb as high as three levels.

And, said Federwitz, the stunts performed by her squad are progressive in nature.

"Just for safety aspects, you need to get one stunt and be able to perform it well before you can move on to another," she said.

That wasn't the way it always worked when she was a high school cheerleader in the late 1990s.

"We weren't trained," she said. "We kind of did our own thing. We would see a stunt and we would try to mirror it without having the background needed to perform it."

Consequently, the squads she cheered with would see girls experience "very significant injuries" at least twice a year.

"They didn't have as much training. So injuries were more common," Federwitz said. "Now that cheerleaders are considered athletes, there's more conditioning and training involved."

Consequently, there have been no emergency room visits by Central's squad since Federwitz became its coach two years ago.

"I don't think we have any more injuries than any other sport," she said.

However, cheerleading is not considered a sanctioned sport by some state high school athletic associations. As a result, coaches are not always trained, and some schools lack the proper facilities and equipment, said the study's lead author, Brenda Shields, an injury researcher at Columbus Children's Research Institute in Ohio.

Some cheerleaders "practice in hallways and practice on hard surfaces instead of mats," Shields said. "So when they fall off a pyramid or from in the air and they land on hard surfaces, the chances for injury are drastically increased."

The study recommends that coaches get professional safety training and that high schools and cheerleading associations adopt uniform safety procedures and also develop a national database for injuries.

That is something the Memphis, Tenn.-based American Association of Cheerleading Coaches and Advisors has been advocating for several years.

The association publishes a safety manual for cheerleaders and offers safety courses for coaches around the country, said the group's executive director, Jim Lord.

He said several factors, including the popularity of televised cheerleading competitions, have encouraged more cheerleaders and coaches to mimic difficult tumbling moves before they have the right training.

"It's not that the sport is dangerous, but it's people trying skills they shouldn't," Lord said. "Basket tosses are the most difficult skill you can do, but that doesn't mean you should do them."

*Sun staff writer Tim Waldorf contributed to this report.*