

Behind the smiles

on the MOVE

Cheerleading may look like all fun and games, but cheerleaders take a serious approach to their role.

If you want to know just how serious cheerleaders are, especially when it comes to dedication to their craft, try and tell any one of them that cheerleading isn't a sport.

"You get a lot of animosity from us on that one. People say, 'Oh, you're just there to support your guys and that's all you're supposed to do,'" said Courtney Brockler, 16, a member of the Bishop Kearney High School varsity cheerleading team. "But we put as much into it as any other sport."

"People don't realize how hard it is until they try it," said Becky Deppen, 17, who cheers for Aquinas Institute's varsity. "They don't see us at the three-hour practices."

Becky added that cheerleaders have trouble gaining respect even when it comes to the scheduling of those practices.

"We get the shaft," Becky said. "We have to wait until every other team is done with the gym."

But without a doubt, Paula DiGuardi feels that cheerleading should be viewed



Above, Bishop Kearney cheerleader Cristin Strauss cheers on the BK boys basketball squad during a sectional basketball game Feb. 25 at Kearney. At left, cheerleaders perform during intermission.

with the same respect as every other team sport.

"I think a sport is anything you have to work at to win, be physically fit and work at as a team. In my school, people don't realize how hard it is to have 21 people doing the exact same thing at the exact same time," said Paula, 17, who captains the Bishop Kearney varsity squad that captured its fifth consecutive Section 5 championship in early February.

"It's just like basketball games. You go out there to win; it's a team sport," said Katie Campe, 17, an Aquinas cheerleader.

Courtney, Becky and other cheerleaders interviewed said that cheerleaders must face the challenges not only of long practices, but also of pressure-packed cheerleading competitions; risk of injury; and the constant

drive to present precise choreography.

Mary Ann Walker, varsity cheerleading coach at Kearney, said that some of the common perceptions of cheerleaders are a holdover from the 1970s, when she cheered at the former Cardinal Mooney High School.

"Back then, cheerleading was basically stomping your feet and clapping your hands. Now it's more technical," Walker noted.

And more competitive as well. There are now several cheerleading competitions held throughout the year, and both Kearney and Aquinas have fared well at two of their biggest meets. Along with BK's sectional success, AQ captured its second straight Greater Rochester Cheerleading Invitational title this winter.

Walker noted that cheerleading competitions began growing in stature in the mid- to late-1970s, as women's sports in general expanded at the high-school level.

To execute successful cheers at the big invitationals, Courtney said, cheerleaders must maintain grace under extreme pressure.

"We're hysterical out there; all these emotions are going through us. You have one minute to get everything right that you've practiced for four months. You don't really get a second chance," Courtney remarked.

But a cheerleader's adrenaline rush usually quiets such nervousness once a cheer begins, Becky said.

"Something inside you explodes. It's so exciting," remarked Becky, a parishioner at St. Mary's Church in Rochester. "You have so much drive, it doesn't feel like pressure."

A high performance level is required not only at competitions, but literally every time cheerleaders take the floor, Paula said. Throughout the year, she explained, teams are judged by opposing coaches at athletic events and must obtain a high enough rating simply to qualify for sectionals. Few spectators, she added, are aware of this fact.

"Guy friends try to make us laugh and get our attention," Paula said.

However, "We can't just blow it off and be like someone in the stands cheering," said Katie, from Our Mother of Sorrows Church in Greece.

Paula said that cheerleaders are judged on such factors as sportsmanship; jumps; stunts; tumbling; arm precision; enthusiasm; and overall appearance.

Courtney noted that whereas other sports teams have their "star" players, cheerleading teams must appear as a singular unit with equal contributions from each member. Paula pointed out, for example, that the Bishop Kearney cheerleaders all braid their hair the same way.

"There's no one person that's better than the other, or recognized more," Courtney commented. She and Paula are parishioners at St. Cecilia's Church in Irondequoit.

But even with all this attention to detail, Becky said that a cheerleader's basic responsibility will always remain the same: to keep the team and fans motivated. She added that this role is especially crucial when the football, soccer or basketball team is losing.

"You're there to get the crowd riled up when the team can't do that," Becky said.

Cheerleaders are required to act upbeat, Paula said, even when they might be plagued by injury or illness. A victim of back problems in recent years, she added that cheerleaders are as prone to injury as many other athletes.

"When there's girls up in the air, they can fall at any time," Paula said. She explained that this risk runs high during mounts, when cheerleaders balance themselves precariously on teammates' hands and shoulders.

These athletic challenges, Walker said, have attracted a different type of girl to the sport than during her cheerleading days — when, she said, "The big thing was to be a cheerleader so you could be the most popular."

Katie remarked that when she began cheerleading nine years ago, it never even occurred to her that cheerleading is perceived by many as a status symbol.

"When I was 8 years old, I didn't know what a popular crowd was," Katie said.

Paula — who has been cheerleading since fifth grade — said that she began cheering for her parish CYO basketball team simply because "a bunch of us girls decided to do it together." However, she said she remained involved in the sport because "I like the challenge; I like the competition." (CYO cheerleading, in the same way as high schools, offers competitive meets in addition to cheering at games.)

Becky said that peers who have gotten into cheerleading for popularity didn't last too long once they discovered the work involved.

"The ones who really know what it is to cheer, they stick with it until they're seniors," Becky said.

Becky was referring to seniors in high school — although for her, she could go on cheering until she's a senior citizen.

"I tell people I want to be an 80-year-old cheerleader," Becky remarked.

She is so enthused about cheerleading, in fact, that Becky even sports a tattoo of a megaphone on her leg. "I'm full of energy and full of spirit. I love my school and love to be involved with my teams," Becky emphasized.

Katie agreed, saying, "I love people. I love being around people, smiling and making them happy."

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