In this day and age we can flip to a cheerleading competition on ESPN, or even check out a high school or college sporting event, and we see cheerleaders performing stunts that we thought were reserved for the circus. They toss one another high into the air, build pyramids, and perform elite level gymnastics skills which become more advanced each year due to the competitive nature of most squads. While it may be easy to view many of the cheerleaders’ tricks as irresponsible or dangerous, the statistics show that cheerleading is becoming an athletic activity complete with safety standards, certified coaches, and age-specific regulations.

Cheerleaders can also receive full and partial scholarships to cheer in college, especially at schools with competitive programs. However, leading the crowd at games and competitions is only part of a cheerleader’s responsibility. Modern cheerleading is a unique athletic endeavor with many different facets that the typical sports fan may be unaware of. While the physical risks can be serious, so are the efforts to make it a safe activity that can continue to exist in schools and universities across the country.
With these efforts being made, why is it that high schools and universities continue to place bans on stunting and tumbling in their cheerleading programs? Usually this can be due to misinformation and lack of research, but many schools will witness one incident within their program and decide to call it quits. A prime example occurred in 2002 when the University of Nebraska athletic department decided to eliminate stunting from their cheerleading program due to an individual injury not even related to stunting. This is unfortunate, as the University of Nebraska is a high profile university who may influence other athletic programs who question the safety of their cheer programs. Nebraska’s team was once highly competitive and nationally ranked, so it is quite a step down for members of the team who are particularly interested in the athletic side of this activity.

The American Association of Cheerleading Coaches and Advisors (AACCA) is the organization that has the responsibility of creating safety guidelines for cheerleading squads at both the high school and collegiate levels. In response to Nebraska’s ban on stunting, Jim Lord, Executive Director of AACCA states that, “While we respect the right of the university to make decisions with regard to their programs, we feel it important to correct misleading information regarding cheerleading injuries and misrepresentation of statistics that did not include any numbers for comparison or reference”. The AACCA is involved with a variety of aspects of cheerleading safety such as continually reviewing their “Cheerleading Safety Manual” and also certifies coaches through a coaching safety program.
According to a 1993 statistic from American Sports Data, Inc., when participation was at 3.3 million, emergency room visits were less than one half of one percent of participants. Those who observe cheerleading from an uninformed standpoint will immediately see danger or a high level of risk in the skills performed, and may make uneducated judgments. They are failing to realize that those cheerleaders may have a safety certified coach who makes sure they practice in a safe facility with adequate matting. They also may not know that the cheerleaders were trained in stunt safety at a Universal Cheerleaders Association summer camp.

There are dozens of cheerleading related organizations across the country that provide summer camps and clinics for cheerleading squads. The Universal Cheerleaders Association is one of the largest, and they also place an emphasis on safety, as well as progressing through the proper techniques before moving to advanced skills. These camps also provide an environment in which coaches can learn from UCA staff members as well as other coaches who bring their teams to a particular camp. The UCA also holds competitions, which are governed by AACCA guidelines in order to ensure that squads are performing skills that are appropriate to their age level. Many people are not aware that certain skills are allowed only at the college level and are illegal if performed by a high school squad. Coaches are advised to report squads who are not abiding by these guidelines.
The differences between high school and college cheer teams do go beyond the difficulty of skills performed. When people hear that cheerleaders can actually get scholarships to cheer in college, they begin to see cheerleading as a legitimate way to further one’s education. Varsity.com provides a list of 295 colleges and universities that provide scholarships for cheerleaders. Some colleges, such as the University of Kentucky, will offer full tuition scholarships for anyone who makes their team. Keep in mind that this is no easy task since many of the people that come to the tryout have already been recruited due to their outstanding abilities in all areas of cheerleading. Cheerleading scouts (a.k.a. college coaches) will attend high profile high school competitions and actively pursue those who may contribute to their school’s program.

In this day and age, college cheerleaders are a valuable asset to both the athletic departments, and the colleges themselves. As high profile members of the college community, it is crucial that cheerleaders serve as a positive example, and uphold the
standards of the college, both morally and academically. The University of Kentucky website states, “On the UK campus, UK cheerleaders are recognized as some of the finest athletes in the University’s sports programs, as intelligent and outgoing students in the classroom, and as public relations ambassadors of the University of Kentucky and the entire Commonwealth of Kentucky”.

On a college cheerleading squad, there are many behind the scenes responsibilities and duties that the average spectator is probably unaware of. The cheerleading squad at Louisiana State University is a prime example of the typical structure of a college cheerleading program. According to their website, their season begins in the summer with a UCA cheerleading camp, and throughout the school year they practice three to four times a week. On top of that, they have weightlifting sessions two to three times a week. LSU is obviously a very large school, but even a small school like Monmouth College abides by the same practice and strength training commitments for their cheerleading program, and furthermore the MC cheerleaders must complete weekly study hours in the library. The LSU squad cheers at almost all of the colleges sporting events from football to gymnastics, and they make various public appearances, performing tasks for the athletic department and the college as a whole.

Interacting with the community is usually quite important to the overall strength and backing of a college cheerleading program. For instance at Monmouth College, the squad offers their time and expertise by holding cheer camps for area high schools, junior
highs, and even the local YMCA. They also judge area cheerleading tryouts, and many local coaches are willing to do the same in return when it is time for college tryouts. These community connections are particularly useful when the squad begins fundraising to attend national competition, because they are aware of the team’s goals and have had successful interactions with them. Public appearances and performances are also crucial to get an organization's name out in the open, and to create awareness of fundraising efforts.

In addition to the responsibilities of a college cheerleader, many teams choose to participate in national competitions. There are two major competitions held each year by different cheerleading associations. The Universal Cheerleaders Association holds their national championships in January in Orlando, Florida, while the National Cheerleaders Association nationals are in March in Daytona Beach. Both of these competitions have numerous divisions to suit the large number of squads in attendance. Teams are placed in the appropriate division depending on the size of the school, much like in other college sports. The divisions are then narrowed down even further depending on if they are all-girl or co-ed. Squads must first submit a videotape highlighting their skills (both technical and crowd leading) in order to even have a chance to attend the competition. Should they be invited, they will then typically go through preliminaries, semi-finals, and finals before a champion is announced.

UNC Charlotte (left) competes at NCA Nationals in Daytona Beach while Kentucky (right) competes at UCA nationals in Orlando.
In the past twenty years, cheerleading has evolved from a sideline activity to a competitive sport at all levels. Even in high school, efforts are continuously made to educate and certify cheer coaches in order to make it a safe activity, even when some skills appear to be daring or dangerous to the untrained eye. Camps and competitions are held by a variety of cheerleading organizations and these environments allow for the sharing of new ideas, and an opportunity to raise the level of difficulty and originality for the skills that are performed.

The transition to college cheerleading is particularly enticing for students due to the vast amount of scholarships available at colleges and universities. Many college squads are also involved in competitions, however the schedule of a college cheerleader can be much busier due to intense game day situations and frequent practices and weight training sessions. The selection process to even become a college cheerleader is rigorous, as coaches not only look for athletic ability, but also the potential to set a positive example and serve as an ambassador for the college. Throughout all of a cheerleader’s duties, they must still hold academics as top priority and maintain a high enough grade point average to remain eligible. Cheerleading is definitely not what it used to be; skills to perfect, grades to maintain, sports to support, and always seeking respect as a legitimate athletic venture.

Kentucky cheerleaders: supporting their team while maintaining the status of the most successful cheerleading squad in the nation.