Cheerleading: A Tradition of Change

When one ponders the concept of “cheerleading”, a variety of stereotypes may come into his or her mind. It may be seen as a frivolous activity performed only to gain attention, or an opportunity for young ladies to flaunt themselves in revealing uniforms. The fact of the matter is, many assumptions like these were actually true at one point in time, however it is important to understand that cheerleading has been continually changing since it first began. Few other sports possess such an intricate timeline showing drastic changes as a result of changes in society. According to author and Washington State University assistant professor Pamela Bettis, “You can learn a lot about American society through cheerleading” (“New Book…”).

As I approach this topic for research, I plan to study cheerleading’s beginnings that many people may be unfamiliar with, as well as the transition it went through to become a predominantly female activity. I will also explain the contributions of Lawrence Herkimer and cheerleading’s double image. Furthermore I would like to address the influence of the protestant ethic on cheerleading as it started to become a competitive sport in itself, and why the south pioneered this change. Lastly I will look at the current state of cheerleading at the college level. Throughout this essay I will show
how the ever-changing nature of cheerleading reflects changes in society, as well as how
cheerleading is an example of the protestant ethic, like many other sports in this day and
age.

THE BEGINNINGS OF CHEERLEADING

The initial inklings of cheerleading developed from a pep club at Princeton
University in the 1870’s, but it wasn’t until 1884 that a man named Thomas Peebler
gathered six men on the sidelines to perform the first organized yell (History). A man
named Johnny Campbell is viewed as the first actual cheerleader, and he began this
tradition at the University of Minnesota. There is conflicting evidence as to who
Minnesota’s opponent was, but at a football game he became known as a yell leader or
yell marshal with this cheer:

“Rah Rah Rah!
Ski-U-Mah  Hoo-Rah
Hoo-Rah!
Varsity!
Minn-e-so-tah!” (“Spirit”, 1)

In 1899 Johnny and five of his friends formed the first cheerleading squad, which was
composed of all males, and cheerleading would continue to be a male dominated activity
for about the next twenty years. According to a review of a book by Pamela Bettis,
“Hoisting a big megaphone to exhort one’s classmates to victory was a sign of high
status” (“New Book…”). Several presidents such as Dwight Eisenhower and Franklin D.
Roosevelt got some leadership training as cheerleaders, but it wouldn’t be long before
females would try their hand at this sideline activity.
FEMALES TAKE OVER THE SIDELINES

Cheerleading was initially seen as a masculine upper class activity at prestigious universities in the east, but soon females would become involved. An article from the Journal of Sport History states:

“A major transition in the history of cheerleading occurred in the 1920’s when young women at the nation’s state-supported coeducational colleges expanded their participation in previously male-dominated campus organizations, including the cheering squad” (Jellison, 243).

Minnesota was seen as a pioneer for co-ed cheerleading squads at this time when they started to use some minor tumbling and stunts in their cheers in order to spur even greater crowd excitement. High schools would also begin to model their athletic programs after colleges and develop cheerleading squads of their own (Jellison, 243). In the early 1940’s, World War II allowed females to become the dominant participants in cheerleading, and it lost its status as a male activity (“New Book…”). This reversal in the roles of males and females reinforces the idea that cheerleading was not established as a serious sport in these times. It could exist with only men, only women, or both, so it hadn’t developed the tradition that many other sports of that time period required. At this point it was a flexible and fun activity that supported other teams, but was not yet a sport in itself.

HERKIMER’S CONTRIBUTIONS AND THE DUAL IMAGE

Lawrence Herkimer was the man that brought athleticism and structure to cheerleading. To many he is known as the inventor of the “Herkie” jump in cheerleading, but his contributions go much further than that. In 1949 this Dallas native held the first ever cheerleading camp at Sam Houston State University and started up a company called the National Cheerleaders Association. According the NCA website,
“The timing of our company's beginning was perfect. The post-WWII years were ones of prosperity and stability for America. Baby Boomers filled the schools and popularized extracurricular activities” (NSG). In his first camp with 52 girls in attendance, Herkimer presented motions and gymnastics as the most effective way to lead a crowd. At this point in time, cheerleading was dominated by females.

In the beginning, those who were cheerleaders were popular college boys, but by the 1970’s practically all cheerleaders were female and the most widespread evidence of this was in public secondary schools. Lawrence Herkimer was developing a successful company that would soon teach cheerleading camps all over the nation and eventually the world. Cheerleading was well on its way to having an athletic image, but the development of a high-profile professional cheerleading squad would counter this image in the minds of Americans. This squad is the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders, and the fact that all they did was dance paired with their provocative image would create a major cheerleader stereotype. After watching these “professional” cheerleaders, one may question the legitimacy and athleticism of the activity, and accidentally lump school teams in the same category. As Katherine Jellison states, there is a “dual image” of cheerleading being presented to American society, but college and high school teams would continue to push through the stereotypes and appeal to Americans’ value of athleticism with the development of competitive cheerleading.

**COMPETITIVE CHEERLEADING AND THE PROTESTANT ETHIC**

If cheerleading was going to be seen as an actual sport, it would have to appeal to what American’s saw as essential in other sports; athleticism and competition. Cheerleading would have to have a purpose rather than something done for fun and
recreation. First of all, to become athletic, cheerleading would borrow many concepts of a sport that was already established, gymnastics. Gymnastics is also something that both males and females participate in, and would be part of the reason why males would be drawn into the sport once again. In addition to athleticism, it would require a unique element that can grab the attention of a large audience, and this element is known as stunting. Creating tall pyramids and throwing girls high into the air would be another reason why males would be summoned back to the sport. As for the aspect of competition, this would begin in 1978 when CBS would broadcast the International Cheerleading Federation Collegiate Cheerleading Championships for the first time (“History”). Throughout the 70’s and 80’s numerous cheerleading companies would pop up that would not only educate cheerleaders through cheer camps, but also hold competitions. The Universal Cheerleaders Association is among these, and in 1983 their first competition was shown on ESPN and they continue to be shown today.

The whole concept of turning cheerleading into a competitive sport shows the protestant ethic in action. The protestant ethic is a very American concept that can be seen throughout other sports as well. It clearly corresponds to cheerleading because America has taken an activity that was once something very frivolous that didn’t have many individual goals or standards, and they have made it an organized and competitive sport. This process has occurred with other sports when people feel the need to not just do them for fun, but to productively practice and perfect them. Cheerleading stands out because this concept hasn’t taken shape until fairly recently compared to other sports. The epitome of this protestant ethic is the concept of the All-Star squad. These are teams that began popping up everywhere in the 1980’s, which are strictly competitive and not
associated with school teams (“Spirit”). Children as young as first grade can pay to be on these teams and get cheerleading training from knowledgeable coaches. Rather than just learning how to be a cheerleader, all-star squads would develop a serious competitive nature. Due to the development of all-star teams, as well as organizations that put on camps and competitions, cheerleading has developed standards and expectations. While the first cheers were heard along the east and in Minnesota, the south was the area that brought cheerleading to a higher level.

**THE SOUTHERN CHEER TRADITION**

Ask any cheerleader and they will tell you that the heart of athletic cheerleading lies in the southern United States. When one watches the College Nationals on ESPN, what teams are continually ranked in the top ten? Kentucky, LSU, Alabama, Tennessee, and the list goes on. The reason behind this is the locations of what have become two of the biggest cheerleading organizations in the world. As previously stated, the National Cheerleaders Association was started up in Dallas, and their first camps took place in the south. Also the Universal Cheerleaders Association is located in Memphis. People in and around these areas fed off of the exciting material shown at summer camps, and it was a trend that stuck. There are numerous high school and college teams that are amazing in all divisions of cheerleading due to the easy access to instruction and qualified coaches. Though these associations hold camps nationwide, and in some cases even worldwide, squads that do well competitively tend to continue the tradition. To better explain this, I will describe cheerleading at the college level.

After learning about the back and forth history of cheerleading, it is interesting to know where it has finally come to today. In order to best describe today’s cheerleading, I
would like to focus on the squad at the University of Kentucky. Kentucky has been
named national champions an unprecedented 13 times in their history of competition at
UCA nationals. Don’t think that this is because they have very little competition,
because each year there are so many amazing big name schools that could very well take
the title. Cheerleading has gone from random students volunteering to lead chants to the
University of Kentucky and many other schools offering full tuition scholarships for their
members. How does cheerleading in the south remain so successful? There are schools
such as Kentucky that continually do well, and they therefore continue to recruit and
attract the best cheerleaders in the country. Then you end up with schools like Kentucky,
Morehead State, and Louisville that have amazing records at Nationals that go unbroken
for years at a time. This also influences the high school cheerleaders in surrounding areas
and the colleges and high schools continue to feed off of one another’s abilities.

Both males and females are equally phenomenal gymnasts at the college level, but
their roles in stunting are very specific. The guys are extremely strong and have the
ability to throw the girls to death defying heights as they (the girls) perform multiple flips
and spins. Keep in mind that the average height of a UK cheerleader is only about five
feet tall. Perhaps the most amazing thing about the Kentucky cheerleaders is that they
make all of their skills look incredibly easy. Watch them on ESPN sometime and you
can see one guy holding two girls above his head and he is actually smiling while he does
it. These cheerleaders show true finesse with the most difficult choreography and
represent what cheerleading has become today. It is a team sport where the athletes
practice and compete, but still maintain the tradition of supporting other teams.
CONCLUSION

Cheerleading has continually undergone change since its humble beginnings in 1884. It began as a sport that only men were involved in, but as World War II began, it was up to the women to take over. Then a man named Lawrence Herkimer made numerous contributions to the cheerleading world, the most important being his introduction of cheerleading camps to the United States. While cheerleading was trying to progress toward a more athletic image, it had to counteract the concept of the professional cheerleader that was just starting up in the 1970’s. Soon more cheerleading companies were starting up throughout the United States, and competitive cheerleading began. This idea of making a competition out of something that was once so frivolous and unorganized shows the protestant ethic coming to life in the cheerleading scene.

The roots of competitive success in cheerleading exist in the south, and there are numerous collegiate and high school teams that reflect this. Currently males and females are practically equals in this sport as far as participation, and this shows how far cheerleading has come. One can read a timeline of cheerleading practically like a timeline of events in our country. Cheerleading has risen to the athleticism and competitive spirit that our society values, and without it our culture wouldn’t be the same. In the words of Katherine Jellison, “Whether praised or damned, the cheerleader remains a prominent icon in our culture” (Jellison, 2).