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Cheerleaders: The Busiest Athletes on Campus

The Pitt cheerleading team finds themselves in the Trees Hall gymnastics room, practicing for nationals on their day off. Everyone is tired from the recent cheerleading exhaustion. The musty, sweaty smell of the overused gymnastics room is beginning to become more and more prominent. The team is cranky that they had to wake up so early for a practice. “Why can’t we just do it in the afternoon,” everyone whines. This team is quite obviously not a group of morning people, so it’s very apparent that no one wants to warm up their skills. Zara Wroblewski, the team captain, tries to get the team motivated to start warming up while the coaches stand huddled in a corner far away and discuss what they want the team to accomplish at practice today. But the team is just not having it. No one is mentally present in Trees Hall. Eventually, Zara gets the team going, slowly but surely. “Let’s warm up standing tumbling first,” she says. The team lines up across the mat and throws some of the ugliest handsprings they’ve ever done, just to demonstrate exactly how pointless this practice will be. Standing tucks, toetouch tucks, handspring handspring tucks. They slowly work their way up in skill level, but not in technique. Then a water break is called, and the team slides back into its dormant state. It’ll take another ten minutes to get them moving again. The complete exhaustion one’s body feels after cheering multiple basketball games and wrestling matches in a week is so hard to describe. There’s one word that really fits the feeling, and that’s weak. “Weak” is the last think a cheerleader can be when he/she is at practice. So who gets blamed for the lack of team energy? The captain, of course.

Zara, a junior, has always been a cheerleading fanatic (to say the least). She is the captain of the all-girl team here, and has a strong personal opinion about the sport of cheerleading. Having cheered since second grade, she knows the activity has always been underrated and almost laughed at. Maybe the fact that cheerleading in the past has been considered a “laughable activity” is what has made Zara so nervous. As she sits in the William Pitt Union cafeteria talking about cheerleading, she seems anxious. She can confuse the average person whenever she’s talking. She often contradicts herself and then proceeds to reverse her answer. Basically, Zara is not an easy person to talk to. Being a captain can cause many people anxiety. At Pitt, it can be one demanding job. Coach Nuzzo, while coaching the cheerleading team, also coaches the dance team, runs the mascot rotation program, works in the Pitt ticket office, and runs her own company (Elite Cheerleading, Inc.). The woman pretty much never sleeps. Being official captain under a coach as scatterbrained as she can be one hefty task. Previous captains have quit, transferred, or had multiple mental breakdowns throughout the semester. To not only have the stress of being a normal collegiate cheerleader, she also has the stress of reporting to the coach. That can be a mental breakdown in itself.

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Cheerleading: when most people outside of its world see this word, they automatically think pom poms, short skirts, and perkiness overkill. But what they don’t know is what goes on “behind-the-scenes”, if you will. Being a cheerleader, captain or not, can be rough sometimes. First, the sheer amount of skill and technique needed to be considered “good” in the sport is astounding. To be able to do the flips and to put up all of the stunts requires extreme amounts of muscle and body control. No one recognizes this. Everyone thinks cheerleaders are just girls and guys who stand on the sidelines at games with pom poms and a megaphone, shouting annoying cheers until people’s ears are ringing with “Pittsburgh Panthers, Go Go!” But does anyone in the arena watch the media timeouts at basketball games? The cheerleaders literally take over the entire floor. Stunts, pyramids, tumbling, jumping, dancing, clapping, smiling; all happening in a minute and forty-five seconds. Does anyone appreciate those few seconds of a glimpse into the real cheerleading? Probably not. Granted, most people who do go to football or basketball games go to watch the football or basketball team, but no matter how much of a fan they say they are, no one is a bigger fan of college sports than the collegiate cheerleader.

Being a fan of college sports doesn’t get someone very far when they’re trying to get their activity recognized as a collegiate sport. Zara gets especially excited to talk about the possibility of the NCAA and scholarships. She says if anything, cheerleaders should be getting scholarships to go to college and cheer as well as other sports participants. “As cheerleaders we spend as much time with our sport as other athletes, along with cheering for other sports; I would agree that in order to get a scholarship, one must meet certain requirements in skill level”. The cheer team at Pitt practices two or three nights a week, while also cheering for men’s and women’s basketball, football in the fall, and sometimes the occasional wrestling match. They also work scoring tables at gymnastics meets. The NCAA requires that sports teams can only keep activity at 20 hours a week so the participants have time to do work and have a social aspect to their lives. Yes, the NCAA doesn’t count lifting and workouts, which can count for a significant amount of time. But cheerleaders do that, too. At Pitt, the cheerleaders don’t have a regular workout plan, so recently, they started going to the gym together two to three evenings a week and running, doing abs, and lifting. Since cheerleading is not recognized by the NCAA as a sport, more often than not, cheerleaders put in more hours at the gym training and practicing than any other actual sports team, even more so than teams that are active in just one season. There is no off-season for cheerleading; it’s a year-round sport. Obviously, being an ambassador for the university isn’t as easy as it looks.

While the NCAA doesn’t directly offer scholarships to hopeful collegiate cheerleaders, schools directly offer some financial assistance most of the time. There are many factors that play into those. He/she must be of significance on the squad, and must also be in good academic standing. Most of the time, they need to maintain a certain GPA or their scholarship is taken away from them. More and more schools are offering help in the areas of textbooks, meal plans, and tuition expenses, as cheerleading becomes a more competitive and athletically demanding sport. At Pitt, the cheerleaders enjoy some benefits of being student athletes, like receiving free Nike sponsored clothing and shoes, two free tickets to every home football game for friends and family to use, and a designated athletic trainer to diagnose and help with injuries. But, they do not receive free tutoring, preferred scheduling, or use of the athletes shuttle around campus and Oakland. Some “real athletes” even have preferred housing! The cheerleaders do not receive any of these perks. “Unlike other athletes who get recruited to come to schools, we have to get accepted somewhere first. We don’t get free one-on-one tutoring outside of TA office hours. Our school schedule isn’t built around our practice schedule. It’s hard,” Zara says. They have to schedule classes themselves, sometimes being forced into night classes, and that means missing practice, which could mean being replaced in different time outs, pyramids, and stunt groups.

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Everyone knows that the Pitt men’s basketball team is not doing so hot this season. Sitting right on the court sideline, watching the team get beat week after week is a heart-wrenching and saddening event to watch on repeat. The game progresses, the clock runs down to the ending buzzer, and the nervous butterflies start to flutter in everyone’s stomachs as they realize that there is yet another defeat in the very near future. But, this is the life of a cheerleader. College sports fans must take the bad times with the good. Cheerleaders, realizing that, try to encourage the fans to see this as well. Even when the team is down by 35 points with 2 minutes left on the clock, the cheerleaders will still be up during timeouts, doing cheers and chants to get the crowd pumped and realize that it is not the end of the world if we don’t go to the NCAA tournament this year; there’s always next year! With the last home game of the season ending with a victory (finally), this past Wednesday night was a happy evening for both the cheerleading and basketball teams. The cheerleading team can finally cross one more activity off their to-do list, and start focusing for the next obstacle: nationals. The student body will not have anything to cheer for anymore. They had a tough time supporting the team in the team’s rough patch anyway, and the size and force of the Oakland Zoo was slowly dwindling. It’s been the cheerleaders’ job to initiate the energy that was desperately needed in that arena to get the team back on their feet. The most we could do is support the team and cheer them on until the end of time; that is a cheerleader’s job, after all.