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Not All Cheerleaders Are Flexible

 Standing backstage, I really begin to feel the butterflies in my stomach. I have never been on a stage this big before in my life. As I climb the rickety stairs, holding my best friend’s sweaty hand, I have now committed myself to something I would possibly later regret. There is no turning back as I get to my first position on the mat. I look down and see a green mat beneath my feet. *That’s weird…mats are usually blue*. I hear the crowd screaming and ringing cowbells; I look up to a wall of lights shining in my face. I literally cannot see anything or anyone past the end of the mat, but I know my mom and coaches are standing at the foot of the stage, praying for my teammates and I to hit a perfect routine. My nerves reach their height, as I stand in my beginning position, ready to start the most painful two minutes and thirty seconds of my life. I didn’t really know exactly how painful those next few minutes would be.

 My bases grab my right foot, and I push off of their shoulders as they extend me over their heads. As I kick my leg up to meet my hand waiting for it above my head, I feel a snap in my left hamstring. Time stops. A shooting pain is running up and down my leg, and the rest of my body goes numb. All I can feel is this excruciating pain in the back of my leg. The smile on my face is plastered on there; from far away, I look like a normal flyer that is just not that flexible. But if you could have looked into my eyes at that moment, you could see the pain, the emptiness, and mostly the panic that was taking over my brain. I wasn’t necessarily worried about the fact that I had just injured myself in the middle of a competition; I was worried about how I was going to make it through the rest of the routine. I knew, sooner or later, I would regret agreeing to be a flyer in replacement for my injured teammate.

 Back in October of the previous year, one of my teammates had managed to break her ankle pretty badly. Not only was she in a hard cast and on crutches for a few months, she also had to do physical therapy for a long period of time. It was obvious that she wasn’t coming back to finish out our competitive season. For weeks after that, our coaches tried to pull different flyers up from Junior Varsity and even younger girls from the recreational program to try and fill in for our injured teammate. Nothing was working; none of them had the strength and endurance to perform a Varsity level routine. Plan B was to rearrange stunt groups to see if we could put another person in the air. That’s when my best friend, Tricia, decided to give the coaches her own personal opinion. “Laura used to fly on her all star team…maybe she could help us out.” I started screaming at her in my head. *Tricia! You don’t even know what you’re talking about! I haven’t been a flyer since I was in fourth grade! Wait…I’M NOT EVEN FLEXIBLE!* It’s true; while everyone thinks that to be a decent cheerleader, you have to be flexible, they’re extremely wrong. Only flyers really have to be flexible, and since I have been a base since fifth grade, there was no chance of me ever regaining my previous flexibility. But, they still made me go up in the air, and I decided to essentially take one for the team. I am not the only cheerleader in history to ever do this for their team, either. Self-sacrifice is essentially part of the sport. Competitive cheerleading is a special sport; a competitive cheerleader has so much dedication to her (or his) team that they will forgo their personal preferences, needs, and skills to help their team out. I sacrificed not only my preferred position as a base, but later literally sacrificed a body part for my team. So, I was given the flyer spot. I could see the desperation in Coach Shaff’s eyes. She literally needed me to fly; this was the only way our routine would work without making huge changes to the entire format of the routine.

 So here I am, five months later, in Atlanta competing for a nationally acknowledged championship title. I managed to make it through most of the season without damaging myself, but as we drew nearer to nationals, I could feel my left hamstring start to flare up. Before I know it, our charter bus is pulling into our hotel in Atlanta on a cool February Friday morning. We have time to get our belongings off the bus and into our assigned hotel rooms. I hang out in the hotel lobby, waiting for my mom to arrive from the Atlanta airport (she can’t ride on busses for long periods of time, so she chose to fly down). Every time I try to sit in a straddle or a split, my leg forbids me by sending sharp, shooting pains up through my muscle. I begin to get frustrated. Finally, my mom arrives safely and my mind is temporarily distracted from the constantly growing pain in the back of my leg. Our team and parent chaperones pile on the bus to go downtown to the World Congress Center. We make ourselves familiar with the area, just in case we somehow get lost. Then, our team gets a special opportunity to practice in the warm-up room and then run the routine on a stage just like the one we would compete on for the next two days. As we are running through our routine on the practice stage, I do my stunt at the beginning of the routine. *Bad idea*, I think to myself. My leg refuses to let me stay in the air; I fall out of my stunt, praying on the way down that my bases will catch me. Our assistant coach (and head coach’s daughter) storms over after our run-through to yell at me for not going full-out during our only practice time. I argue with her for a few minutes about needing to rest my leg for tomorrow. I go to bed later that night, ignoring the fact that my injured leg was getting worse by the minute.

I wake up Saturday morning and my leg feels slightly sore. It’s not anything out of the ordinary; I’ve been sore for the past six months straight from being stretched. My first thought of the morning: IcyHot. “Mom, can you put IcyHot on my leg for me?” She bends over to apply the topical cream, and I hear her quietly gasp. I ask her what’s wrong; so many things start running through my head. Could I have a huge cut? Could there be a big spider on the floor? I had no idea. “Laura…did you do your heelstretch at practice last night?” I answer as if there is only one obvious answer to this question. “Well I tried to, but my leg just hurt too much.” She quickly explains how there is a strange group of four perfectly circular bruises in a cube-like formation. She then applies the IcyHot and I wrap my leg tightly in pre-wrap and athletic tape, as if it was going to stop it from hurting. Well, once again, I was wrong. I head downstairs to meet my team in the lobby of the hotel, not knowing what awaits me at the convention center downtown.

 Before I know it, we’re on the very last warm up mat. After coach Bethany has made me aware of her death stare (she’s still not happy with me from last night), I proceed to have a perfectly fine warm up. I decided not to do my heelstretch again because I’m not worried about it. It’s the first skill of the routine, and after that, it’s smooth sailing. We move from the warm-up area to our designated performance stage. We’re waiting for our opponent to finish their routine, just so we can one-up them. Tricia walks up to me. “Laura. I know you’re in pain. But I know you can get through this. This is what we’ve been working for. You’ll be great,” she says. Usually it’s pretty much all I need to get me pumped up, but at this point I’m feeling the nerves starting to take over. Our team is announced; we run on stage and the crowd goes wild. A lot of people have heard about CV and skipped watching other teams to come and watch us. *This is it,* I think to myself. *Two minutes and thirty seconds. I can do this.* My bases grab my right foot and thrust me into the air, just like every other time we’ve put up the stunt. This time, it’s different. I kick my leg up for a heelstretch, and I can feel my hamstring snap. A sharp, searing pain shoots through my entire body. I start to shake. *Oh my god…I just tore my hamstring. I have to finish this routine.* I complete my tumbling pass and jumps like there is nothing wrong, but internally I am screaming in pain. There are tears running down my face at this point. But I’m still smiling. I complete the stunt sequence without dropping my flyer. *Halfway done, you can do this!* I say to myself. Luckily for me, I just get to stand behind the pyramid as an extra spotter with Tricia. She sees my tear-streaked face and immediately asks me what’s wrong. “If I don’t get up after the routine, make sure I get off the stage.” That’s all I can tell her at this point.

 We move on to the dance section of the routine, and I’m doing all right. But then, one of my moves is to kick my leg up, in the exact same way that I had to earlier in the routine when doing my heelstretch. *You can’t just not kick your leg. Just freaking do it, your hamstring is already dead, what’s gonna happen now?* Being mean to myself was my only motivation. But I was wrong again. I kick my leg up and feel another pop. I snapped another muscle fiber. I almost collapse. But the smile never comes off my face during that routine. That’s one thing you learn when you’re a competitive cheerleader is composure. The only thought in my head the entire routine: *Breathe. You’re almost done.* I finish my routine. *Thank God. It’s over.* Another dose of shooting pains run up my leg, and that’s enough for me. I collapse onto the floor in my end of the routine pose, and immediately start screaming from the sheer pain of my injury, but no one can hear me over the announcer and background music. When the team gets up to get off of the stage, I can hear the crowd cheering for the perfect routine we just hit. But I wasn’t really worried about that. The fact that I’m done with my routine hasn’t even hit me yet; I just wanted off the stage. As I told Tricia to do, she came over to my broken body (after I had unsuccessfully tried to drag myself offstage) and picked me up, carried me offstage, and placed me in the arms of her dad, who took me to the EMT in the next arena.

 My leg has been rendered pretty much useless; I can’t even walk. The four bruises my mom was talking about earlier? They have now all combined, forming one large, grapefruit-sized bruise on the back of my leg. It is every color possible: blue, purple, yellow, green, black. When Tricia carried me offstage, I could only think one thing. *I always knew I could count on you.* I telepathically pushed my thanks into her head.

To make a seemingly endless story shorter, the EMT hooked me up with some awesome painkillers, and gave me enough to last an entire third world country for a few months. I still sucked it up and competed the next day in finals. That was probably the worst idea possible, but I wouldn’t have it any other way. Yes, you read that right; I took some of those awesome painkillers, wrapped my leg up, and competed all over again. I also dealt with the pain all over again, but that comes with the stupid act I pulled. It’s common for cheerleaders to do that; to continuously compete on an injury is normal. According to Doctor Frederick O. Mueller, cheerleading injuries with visits to the emergency room have increased every year, starting at 4,954 visits in 1980 to 26,786 visits in 2007. Cheerleading related injuries are on the rise, because of both the athletic demand of the sport and the willingness for cheerleaders to compete with an injury.

The entire bus ride back to PA was absolutely miserable. I had to keep interchanging between heating and icing my leg, and take medicine every 4-6 hours to dull the pain (it never completely went away). But, I pushed through the competition, the bus ride, and most importantly the pain. Lesson number two of competitive cheerleading, none other than perseverance. Disclaimer: while I am not (at all) condoning playing a sport/competing on a seriously injured body part continuously, I’m simply saying that had I convinced myself that I was not needed for finals, my team would have been without a flyer, base, or tumbler. My third and most important lesson I’ve learned from this experience: taking one for the team. While I only mean this figuratively, like sacrificing your Saturday plans to attend practice, I also literally had one of my limbs taken for the team’s sake of needing a flyer. My reality check during this experience? Well, while experiencing this different world of “flying”, I broke the stereotype that not all cheerleaders are flexible. Most certainly not myself.

Source:

Historical: Cheerleading Injuries and Safety

http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2775356/