

Philosophy Paper:
A Cheerleading Coach's Philosophy

Sherri McGerty

KIN 855

Dr. Marty Ewing

26 September 2010

Introduction

Athletics has always been a big part of my life as well as a part of my family. From a few years of age I was a competitive dancer, and I played soccer on recreation and travelling leagues. Once it was time to leave the co-ed division, I decided to focus on competitive dancing for the next two years. As luck would have it, when I reached high school, they did not offer competitive dance or soccer at my school. This is where I began cheerleading, and have not given it up since! Cheerleading is a sport that encompasses the fall, winter, and usually with gymnastics and conditioning, the spring season as well. I was on the varsity cheer team throughout my four years of high school and was pretty ecstatic that I received the female athlete of the year award when I graduated. Cheer is not widely recognized as a sport, even though it is sanctioned by the Michigan High School Athletic Association. My family has a number of college football players, so though I do not play, I have a love for football too!

After a year into college, I needed to put in hours working with youth for my education degree. I thought helping out my former coaches would be a great idea. It just so happened that my coaches were ready to resign. Coaching was not in my plan at nineteen, but I am so happy it fell into my lap! I worked as the Junior Varsity coach for a year and then became the head coach at Clintondale High School in Clinton Township, Michigan. I coached at Clintondale High School from 2003 to 2009, and earned a Macomb Area Conference Coach of the Year award my final year in 2009. During my tenure, my teams had made two state finals appearances and earned All-State Academic Team awards through the state coaches association. In the summer of 2009, I took a co-head coach position at Warren Mott High School with a friend. This is my second year at Warren Mott High School.

Coaching has been the most rewarding and enjoyable part of my life! I enjoy being part of shaping athletes into responsible adults while they are having fun participating in a physical activity. The lessons learned through athletics are priceless. I also learn a great deal from my athletes on a daily basis. They inspire me to continually be a role-model and keep a positive attitude.

Role of Sport

The role of sport varies with age level and experience. The functions of sports are for: enjoyment, education of life skills, education of sport, value of health, entertainment, and business.

For youth, the roles of sport are simple. First and foremost, sports are for enjoyment. Young children need to find an activity that they enjoy and find fun. This in turn helps the second role, which is for its health value. We want to instill in kids that athletics are good for our bodies. When they enjoy the activity, the health aspects follow. Children also start to learn life lessons in cooperation and hard work. It can be very beneficial for children to learn this at a young age. Next, the role is to learn the specific aspects of the sport. Each sport has different skills within it. This will give children the opportunity to develop motor skills and find an activity they are good at, and it also helps them learn to practice to improve upon one's skill set. Finally, sports are entertainment for children. If children find something they enjoy, they may also seek out a way to be a spectator of the sport in professional or other arenas. Last on the list is winning. Winning is not important in youth sports, other than learning how to lose and how to win respectfully.

In high school, the roles of the sport are exactly the same. Adolescents gain the same things from sports that youth do, but at a higher level. I still believe sports are intended for youth to have fun while gaining the benefits of physical activity. What is the point of participating if it is not fun? The skill sets advance as well as the emphasis on winning can be increased from unimportant to winning as a goal, but the roles are in the same order. Students at this age understand the game much better and can handle more competitive environments.

In the college arena, the roles change immensely. First the role is for the entertainment of others. Athletics in college promote schools, which makes business a close second. Education of life lessons comes next in this sequence. There is an interesting dynamic that can be learned from college teams full of talented athletes. This is a very different dynamic from high school sports. Winning is much more important in the college arena than in youth or high school sports. Athletes have skills that are well developed and they are very competitive in nature. They are a driving force in the role of winning. Finally, the lesser important roles of college athletics include the fitness aspect, fine tuning and developing more advanced sport specific skills, and having fun. While I am sure most college athletes enjoy their sport, it is not the main role.

Safety and Progression

The safety of athletes is priority at all time. Safety is the first consideration in all decisions. I believe that proper safety equipment be used at all times and I follow the state and national safety guidelines for proper attire and skills taught and performed.

Safety rules are put in place for reason. Athletes need their hair pulled up and out of their face by a hair piece without metal. Athletes need to manage their nail length and not wear jewelry of any kind during cheerleading events. Athletic cheer shoes need to be worn with the

proper attire. All of these rules are set forth to ensure the safety of the athletes while performing skills. Failure to enforce these rules is unsafe and illegal. There are also specific skills that are illegal to perform within competition. This also means to me, that they are not to be taught, practiced, or even performed in special events such as homecoming. It is also an unethical decision to let athletes perform such skills—it is sending a message that safety rules are unimportant.

Cheerleading injuries have taken spotlight in recent years, and more and more regulations are being created. Michigan is one of the only states that have their own format of competitive cheerleading for middle and high school, and their own rules and regulations. That, in it of itself, is what holds most states and organizations, such as the National Collegiate Athletic Association, from being able to make cheer a sanctioned sport. “The Women’s Sports Foundation has narrowed the field down of what is considered a sport to these elements that are commonly agreed upon to define a sport: it must be a physical activity which involves propelling a mass through space or overcoming the resistance of mass, teams competing against or with an opponent is required, it must be governed by rules that explicitly define the time, space, and purpose of the contest and the conditions under which a winner is declared and, acknowledgement that the primary purpose of the competition is a comparison of the relative skills of the participants.” (American Association of Cheer Coaches and Advisors, 2010).

As a coach who has been certified by the American Association of Cheer Coaches Association for cheerleading safety, I follow all of the guidelines set forth for proper progression of skills. The mastery of fundamental skills and good technique is the basis for gaining more advanced skills in all aspects of cheerleading. Drills and conditioning are created for each team and individual at their current capabilities to take them to the next level.

I also prepare athletes to learn techniques in cheer to prevent injuries. Part of proper progression is teaching flyers how to fall correctly and hold their bodies to keep their head and neck safe. They have to practice coming down in undesirable positions correctly and safely so they do not injure themselves or their bases and back spot. Bases are taught how to properly catch a flyer's core and legs in a safe manner, even if a flyer is coming down incorrectly. Back spots learn that they must keep their eyes on their flyer's head and neck at all times. Their priority is to keep her head and neck safe. Again, back spots also learn how to catch their flyer safely in all types of situations. When it comes to tumbling, athletes learn body awareness. Athletes need control of their body on the ground and upside down

Safety rules and regulations are constantly updated. It is a priority to continue to attend rules meetings, coaching conferences, and receive as much training as I can to continue to better my coaching knowledge and abilities. I have taken Coaches Advancement Program courses through the Michigan High School Athletic Association and hold a beginning certificate. Continuing education is a must. A coach can never stop learning.

The Student-Athlete

Athletes are students first. It is important to place emphasis on time management and prioritizing school work into an athlete's day. Practice schedules and work load need to be considerate of student-athletes. I believe in quality practices, not quantity. In return, I expect athletes and coaches to be reliable members of the team and working to their full potential while at practice. In order to accomplish our goals, members must schedule their other commitments outside of the practice schedule.

As an educator and coach, I am here to support my athletes on an academic level too. I will be an active participant in teaching time-management and prioritizing skills and lessons to my athletes.

Success and Winning

Success comes from feeling accomplished. “Success is peace of mind which is a direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you did your best to become the best that you are capable of becoming.” (Wooden, 2004, pg. 83). Team and individual goal setting is a fundamental process on my team. We must understand our goals as a team, and work towards our ultimate goal by setting small ones along the way. Children of all ages can rarely see the merit of working towards one goal for months without re-evaluating their progress along the way.

I believe in setting goals together. I have coached teams who wanted to go to state finals, and I have coached teams who wanted to compete to improve their skills regardless of their league finish. Success can be defined differently from team to team. It is important to collaborate and be honest about what we want to achieve as a team and how hard we are willing to work for it.

Setting reasonable goals is extremely important. I want kids to push themselves to achieve great things; however keeping their individual and team skills sets in perspective is a major consideration in goal setting. I am honest about the amount of work and improvement a team must make to achieve their goals. With cheerleading, it often requires a number of team members to acquire a new tumbling skill. With any level cheer team, we understand the amount of mental preparation that goes into performing these skills. For both physical and/or psychological reasons, sometimes it will not be possible to acquire the set skill. Coaches are

trained to identify athletes that may struggle with the mental aspects of performing gymnastic skills without a spotter as well as assess an athlete's physical strength and abilities to perform the same skill. We set reasonable and attainable goals considering these factors when it comes to tumbling.

Success comes from focusing on the performance and outcomes of our team. This is the only performance that we can control. I do not believe in wishing a poor performance on others in order to see our team at the top. I believe true satisfaction comes from winning when everyone was at their best. I believe in hard work and showing improvement from our efforts. If we are able to continually improve our personal scores, we are successful.

Success does not equate directly to winning. In youth cheerleading, there should not be any emphasis on winning. The goal for youth and teams early in development should concentrate solely on development of fundamental cheer skills and enjoyment of athletic activity. This is the opportunity for children to find an activity they enjoy.

In intermediate level teams, the focus can shift towards improving scores and higher skills on the competitive floor. This is the beginning of learning what is expected in a competitive environment and start to develop a drive to improve as individuals and as a team. An advanced team can definitely place emphasis on winning and on improving scores throughout the season. The athletes are experienced and have well developed and advanced skills. They are mentally prepared for the competitive nature and are geared towards working at the ultimate goal of their team.

In the college or professional arena, winning is a dominant role in programs. Teams and coaches are expected to end with winning seasons. Professionals are paid to perform and excel.

Equity

All children have the right to choose whether or not to participate in sports. Coaches may guide, but not coerce kids into participation. Children can choose the intensity in which they are involved and can play a variety of sports if they choose to do so. (Martens & Seefeldt, 1979).

Children and athletes of all genders, races, ethnicities, and abilities have the right to participate in sports. All children will be given the same opportunities to play and seek the competitive mat. During competitive season, however, males are prohibited to compete in post-season tournaments by the Michigan High School Athletic Association. Competitive cheer is classified as a girl's sport.

Each child is given the opportunity to develop their skills in the capacity that they would like. While some skills are required for the competitive rounds, sideline season is a great opportunity to participate in cheerleading without having to compete.

In cheerleading, we welcome coaches of all different backgrounds, races, and ethnicities. Coaches, especially gymnastics coaches for adolescents and adults, tend to be male due to the upper body strength that is necessary to spot inexperienced tumblers. It is understood that all coaches will hold a respectable, positive, and professional relationship with all of their athletes and parents. It is inappropriate for coaches to share intimate details of their personal lives with their athletes. We understand that family and religious morals should be left up to individual families to promote and guide their children.

Cutting Players

Competitive cheerleading is a sport in which certain rounds of competition require the team on the floor to perform the exact same skills. Round two, specifically in the Michigan High

School Athletic Association competition format, involves a team putting up to sixteen athletes on the floor to showcase the most elite skills the team can perform in unison. There is a precision drill and a choice of five skills from the three categories: tumbling, jumps, and flexibility. At least one skill must be performed from each category. The score sheet reflects point values that increase in direct correlation to the increasing level of difficulty. The score sheet also includes a multiplying factor that corresponds to the number of athletes a team puts on the floor.

With this idea in mind, coaches decide on the skills appropriate for their team to perform in this round. I believe that the expectations of a team early in development, such as a junior high or freshman level team, will have athletes performing all one-point level skills in their routine. One-point level tumbling skills include: round-offs, near arm cartwheels, and far arm cartwheels. The next team in sequence should expect athletes to perform at a minimum four one-point level skills and one one-point two level skill. One-point two level tumbling skills include: back handsprings, back walkovers, front handsprings, and front walkovers. An advanced level team, such as a varsity team, should expect athletes to perform at least two one point two level skills at minimum, but should continue to work for a one point four skill, such as a standing back tuck or aerial cartwheel.

It is inherent in our sport that tumbling skills are a necessity to possess to make an advanced team. Tumbling requirements are most often the “cutting” aspect of cheer teams. The requirements for each team are always communicated in the tryout packets, at the tryout meeting, during the tryout introduction, and at tryouts.

Cutting is a necessary part of cheerleading because we do not have a “second string.” With budget issues, we generally have a player limit dictated by the school. When an athlete makes a competitive cheer team, it is because we believe their skill set will allow them to

compete in at least one of three rounds of competition with the specific team. I do not believe in taking athletes if they will not see the competition floor. I would rather give them the opportunity to develop on a lower level team and gain more experience by actually performing.

When tryouts are complete, each athlete is called at random, and individually to talk to the coach of the team(s) they have tried out for. I will discuss with each athlete why they have or have not made the team. This will give the athletes an opportunity to ask other questions, and to discuss options that the athlete might have. Would they accept a position on a lower level team? If not, are they interested in joining gymnastics classes and conditioning with our team to prepare for the next tryout? Can I assist to get the athlete involved in a non-competitive cheer team, if cheering is the athlete's interest?

Pay-To-Play and Finances

Pay-to-play activities are on the rise in our nation (Brady & Glier, 2004). School budgets are struggling and athletic teams are on the chopping block. As a coach, we are put right in the middle of the situation. I understand the burden of an extra amount of money to be paid out that will not go into a child's individual athletic account to be used towards their specific sport needs. Families who have multiple children and children who play multiple sports might have a difficult time coming up with the extra money just to participate. However, I feel that classroom needs in a school are still the priority. Athletic departments are in charge of equipment, school issued uniforms, transportation, stadiums, and athletic fields. Teams of all sizes can cost a great deal of money. Remember that not all athletic contests bring in revenue for the athletic department, but most still require payment for security, officials, and clean-up. I would much rather have cheer teams, than be cut due to budget constraints.

I believe a reasonable amount under one hundred dollars is appropriate to pay for cheerleading, but I feel the need for families to have a maximum payment for multiple children participating within the school. There should also be an opportunity for families to waive the fees along the same lines as they would for free and reduced lunch costs.

Cheerleading is an expensive sport, even without pay-to-play. Teams are required to have matching cheer shoes, bows, socks, briefs, and bodysuits. The total cost of these items is about one hundred twenty-five dollars. Our teams are enrolled in gymnastics classes that generally cost fifteen dollars per week.

It is always my goal to give athletes and their families the upfront costs prior to tryouts so that the requirements are clear. I hold a pre-season meeting and welcome any parents or guardians to help run fundraisers to cut or reduce costs. I believe as a team of coaches, parents, and athletes, we can work together to raise money and cut costs.

Because pay to play is a district decision, we still follow the guidelines set forth by the Michigan High School Athletic Association for pay-to-play, "All of the conditions of being a team member apply as if the fee did not exist — and that includes playing time." (Brady & Glier, 2004).

Ethics

As coaches, the most important lessons come from our personal set of morals and ethics and how we share these with our athletes. There are not degrees to which you do this; a person acts with integrity or they do not. (Sabock & Sabock, 2005, pg. 69). I believe a coach's role is to be a role model and teacher above the many roles a coach possesses. I believe that the safety and well-being of the athletes are the number one priority.

Each sport comes with a set of rules and regulations—when we can begin practicing with athletes, a specific set of guidelines for our sport, and our own school rules. I am a rule follower; always have and always will be. Why would I teach my athletes that bending rules for personal or team gains is acceptable? I am well aware that many area cheer teams begin practicing for competitive season earlier than they should, but because many teams do this does that make it right? No, it does not.

I act under the same principles that I expect from my athletes. Being an adult does not change anything. If I want my athletes to make responsible and healthy decisions, I will do the same. It is quite hypocritical to discuss expectations but not follow them simply because I am “in charge.” Children of all ages can see like any adult that actions speak much louder than words. They will take note of how we handle difficult or challenging situations. If our star athlete is hurt and goes to the doctor’s office and comes back claiming she is cleared to play, but does not have her doctor’s note clearing her, do I let her go into the competition? Of course not! This is a safety issue, illegal action, and unethical call. Rules dictate that a doctor must clear an athlete to return to play. Athletes need to see the big picture of athletics and the lessons learned through our eyes and our actions.

Our actions during competitions are visible to others. I find it important to show that my behavior towards other coaches, officials, athletes, and fans are warm and sincere. It is unnecessary and vulgar to make a scene with an official or judge about scoring. There is a proper, respectful way of approaching to ask for clarification at the end of the meet. It is inappropriate to engage in negative conversations about other teams and their performances. I model this behavior and expect it from athletes and our fans. We are there to positively support all involved and have the attitude—may the best win today.

My actions and ethics come from that of a professional educator. I believe in acting upon those morals in a strong, honest way. The idea is that “character is caught rather than taught.” (Sabock & Sabock, 2005, pg. 74). I feel the most important part of coaching is passing on the ability and message of worth in becoming a healthy, moral, and good citizen. The teamwork and lessons learned through athletics can really give students a cutting edge in their adult lives. They are cooperative and have experience in handling dilemmas in a positive and professional manner. At the end of the day those are the positive memories and attributes that are with athletes for a lifetime.

Sportsmanship

Sportsmanship is the foundation of cheerleading. “The primary purpose of a cheerleader is to support athletic programs and lead the crowd before and during games. Cheerleaders play an instrumental role in raising, leading and maintaining school spirit in and around their communities. In short, they are leaders in building general morale at their school!” (Universal Cheerleading Association). I still take great pride in the founding principles of cheerleading. Our athletes have dual jobs, even when we are in competitive season. I expect athletes to be representatives and supporters of their classmates, their school, and their community. They should be ambassadors of school spirit and pride.

Being involved and feeling tied to a group is important. It helps athletes to take pride in their school and enjoy the variety of experiences it offers. Being involved also promotes tolerance. Every team or organization shares common beliefs or common goals. Respecting the differences of others and supporting groups to which you do not belong is a mature concept.

Though its initial purpose did not include competition, cheerleading has developed athletically in the past twenty years into the sport it is today. Sportsmanship is not something that is only expected from athletes, but the coaches, parents, and fans of our teams. We foster a positive, but competitive environment “that is based on mutual respect rather than a win-at-all-costs attitude.” (American Youth Soccer Organization, 2009). Teams will learn to win and lose respectfully—understanding what it feels like to be on both ends of the spectrum. Good sportsmanship builds good character.

References

- American Association of Cheer Coaches and Advisors. (2010). Cheer as a Sport. Retrieved September 20, 2010 from <http://www.aacca.org/>
- American Youth Soccer Organization. (2009). Six Philosophies. Retrieved September 23, 2010, from http://www.soccer.org/AboutAYSO/ayso_philosophies.aspx
- Brady, E. & Glier, R. (2004). To play sports, many U.S. students must pay. Retrieved September 23, 2010, from http://www.usatoday.com/sports/preps/2004-07-29-pay-to-play_x.htm
- Cheerleading Training Center of Michigan. (2010). About Us. Retrieved September 22, 2010, from <http://www.ctcofmi.com/index.php?componentName=textBody&scid=30380>
- Fairfield Youth Cheerleading - (Fairfield, OH) - powered by LeagueLineup.com. (n.d.). Retrieved September 22, 2010, from <http://www.leaguelineup.com/handouts.asp?cmenuid=17&url=fyca&sid=758224529>
- Florida High School Athletic Association. (2010). About FHSAA. Retrieved September 19, 2010, from <http://www.fhsaa.org/about/>
- Lake Shore Public Schools (2010). Athletic_Handbook_Revision_10-11.pdf. (n.d.). Retrieved September 19, 2010, from http://www.lakeshoreschools.org/docs/Athletic_Handbook_Revision_10-11.pdf
- Martens, R., & Seefeldt, V. (1979). *The Bill of Rights of Young Athletes Guidelines for children's sports*. Reston, VA: American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance.
- Michigan High School Athletic Association. (2010). Library—Philosophy of Sports. Retrieved September 19, 2010, from <http://www.mhsaa.com/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=xBH->

[iIRgsbc%3d&tabid=948](#)

National Collegiate Athletic Association (2010). Who we are. Retrieved September 24, 2010

from <http://www.ncaa.org/wps/wcm/connect/public/ncaa/about+the+ncaa>

Ohio High School Athletic Association (2010). Mission & Commitment Statements. Retrieved

September 20, 2010, from <http://www.ohsaa.org/general/about/Mission.htm>

Palm Harbor Little League. (n.d.). Philosophy of Coaching. Retrieved from

<http://eteamz.active.com/phll/files/PhilosophyCoachingPHLL.pdf>

Sabock, R.J. & Sabock, M.D. (2005). Coaching: A realistic perspective. Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. pp. 1-17.

Universal Cheerleaders Association (2010). Where America Cheers: Home, History and

Philosophy. Retrieved September 20, 2010, from

<http://uca.varsity.com/HistoryAndPhilosophy.aspx>

United States All-Star Federation. (2008). I promise program. Retrieved September 20, 2010,

from <http://usasf.net/programs/promise/>

Wooden, John. (2004). *They call me Coach*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.