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What it's Really Like to Be a Cheerleader

by **Rebecca Mitchell** from **Cheer Squad**



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Cheerleading is one of Australia's fastest growing sports. It's also one of the most misunderstood. I spent a training session with a cheer squad to get to the bottom - and the top! - of the popular past time.

It's no secret cheerleaders exist under a pretty severe stereotype. They giggle too much, date footy players, have impeccable hair and talk in abbreviations, which is like, totes obvi. They're "sexy and cute and popular to boot", right?

Wrong. (Except for the impeccable hair part, that seems to be true.)

As I arrived at the Macquarie University Warriors' cheer practice, I was blown away by the athletic spectacle.

Atop a bouncy, blue floor stood a sparkly-dressed posse of post-teens warming up with a few casual human pyramids and high kicks.

They welcomed me in with open arms and promptly scared the s**t out of me because cheer practice is like mid-air dance practice with a few extra broken fibulas.

Seriously. See for yourself... (Disclaimer: No actual broken bones. I promise.)

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Despite embarrassing myself and proving the true extent of my incoordination, I had an absolute ball with this talented bunch of kiddults. (To confirm, they are all adults. They just possess the mind-blowing bendy-ness of a person whose bones haven't fully set.)

At the end of practice, I had a little chat to the coach and captains about cheerleading in Australia, and you may be surprised to learn a few interesting facts about the evolving sport.

1. The lingo

Base: A person at the base of the pyramid.

Flyer: The person on top of the pyramid who gets thrown into the air.

Tik-tok: When the flyer switches from one foot to another, and the base switches hands.

Basket: Throwing someone in the air and catching them.

High V: Putting your arms in the air in a V-formation. (Must be executed with purpose, ladies and gents.)

Thigh stand: Exactly like it sounds. Standing on someone's thighs.

2. Cheerleading is an actual sport

A lot of people think cheerleading is a bunch of girls jumping up and down on the sidelines of a football game, but competitive cheerleading is actually one of Australia's fastest-growing sports.

More than 52,000 cheerleaders - both female and male! - compete in over 18 different competitions in Oz. According to the Executive Director of the Australian All Stars Cheerleading Federation, Stephen James, Australia has the third largest competitive cheerleading cohort in the world outside of the US.

You might say cheerleading is Australia's greatest undiscovered past time!

As the Warriors co-captain, Josh, explains: "A big misconception [occurs] when you say 'I'm a cheerleader', a lot of people say 'what do you cheer for?'"

Now, let us get one thing straight: After throwing human adults in the air and managing not to drop them - you better believe cheerleaders have earned the right to cheer for themselves.

3. It's an extreme sport

I'm not kidding. Cheerleading is terrifying.

You have to do flips and tumbles and catch other people falling from the heavens like spinning missiles. This kind of activity may explain the prevalence of rather awkward injuries in the sport.

Warriors co-captain Kira revealed one of her worst injuries was breaking her foot in two places. (Bonus points: She was also icing a sore wrist as I spoke to her.)

Meanwhile, Josh once fractured *both* of his ankles at the same time.

"It's more of a contact sport than people think it is," Josh elaborated. "I mean, you've got people flying at you at different speeds from different heights, so injuries are bound to happen."

However, Josh assures us that with the right training this kind of thing shouldn't happen... very often.

4. There's no 'Spirit Stick' - but there are superstitions

For everyone who has seen *Bring It On* (and if you're reading this story, that's most likely you!) you'll remember Kirsten Dunst's character is plagued by a curse that befell her after she dropped the almighty "spirit stick".

Well, there's no spirit stick for the Warriors, but everyone has their pre-comp

rituals.

"Mine's really embarrassing," Josh starts. "I can't take the floor without kissing my boyfriend three times. We cheer together, and ever since we started cheering together if I don't do it I freak out."

That's definitely a good way to kill the nerves, but others keep it a bit more simple. For Kira it's just a matter of making sure her shoelaces are tied tight. My mother would be so proud!

5. Cheer Squads aren't like Swift Squads

While Taylor Swift's squad has been likened to a pack of Amazonian Mean Girls, the Macquarie University cheer squad seem to be more like a loving extended family.

Most people think cheer squads are a hotbed of criticism and bitchyness. But, like any team sport, cheerleading is actually built on foundations of camaraderie and trust. After all, your squad will be there to catch you when you fall. Literally.

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