



Iowa High School Athletic Association
Iowa Cheerleading Coaches Association



Athlete Preparedness is KEY!

By Kenna Johnson, ICCA

Preps graduated to extensions, which graduated to single-legged stunts and tosses. Pop cradles elevated to single twist cradles, moving on to double twisting cradles. Back handsprings turn into back tucks and layouts. Living in a society where athletes are continually asked to push their bodies, sometimes too far, cheerleading is NOT a world exempt from this philosophy. Liberties became heel stretches and now chin straps. But how far can we push our kids? And how can we know they're physically – and often mentally – prepared to be pushed in such a manner?

If we, as coaches, are going to ask our kids to put their bodies under such enormous strain, we must first take on the task of conditioning them. Running (or cardiovascular exercise), strength training, and stretching are three essential areas coaches need to focus on. While running may not be a task your squads are totally hip on undertaking, try to make it a fun exercise. Mix up the workouts with relay races, scavenger hunts, and Indian runs. To fully condition, it is suggested to condition at least three days a week. While many of our squads are undertaking cheerleading every day, a cardiovascular workout can easily be incorporated to be a part of that daily workout.

"Cheerleaders don't lift weights; they lift other cheerleaders." While this is a very true statement, regular strength training is also helpful in giving the muscles the endurance needed for difficult tumbling passes and stunt sequences. While a weight room may be rather intimidating to both coaches and athletes alike, it does not require the constraints of a weight room. Simple exercises like push-ups, sit-ups, walking lunges, and squats can all be done anywhere your practices take place. Those same exercises can be done in partners. Again, it is important to mix up the exercises for the purpose of variety.

Stretching cannot be stressed enough!! Any coach who has had a kid with shin splints, a pulled hamstring, or a shoulder injury can attest to this. And certainly stretching is NOT just for flyers. The impact jumping puts on an athlete's body can certainly take its toll, so it's important to warm up the muscles, stretch the muscles, workout the muscles, then stretch again before the workout is complete. Even with an

injury, it can be helpful to continually stretch the muscles throughout the day to prevent tightness.

As the conditioning part of your program is established, so must the training of your athletes on various progressions. Tumblers must begin with basic tumbling skills, just like stunting must start with simple step-up drills. It is VITAL, however, that coaches know and understand the readiness of each individual athlete. As a coach, I'm certainly not going to ask a brand new cheerleader to do a basket toss on the first day of practice. Nor am I going to tell my tumblers to go ahead and attempt a back tuck, even though they're uncertain about their skills and never fully landed one.

In this society we certainly do push our athletes to do more year after year, and no matter what anyone says, the responsibility of the cheerleaders lies in the coach's hands. At state competition this past fall, I heard many rumblings from fellow coaches about the risk of double downs. In the duration of that day, I watched many squads ATTEMPT double downs – and VERY FEW squads actually SUCCEED at such a stunt. On top of that, many coaches also commented about how the double downs looked sloppy when not landed cleanly; the single twist would have been a cleaner option. While the look of the stunt has to be up to the individual coach, it is the SAFETY of the athletes that needs to be put first and foremost.

It is purely up to the cheerleading coach to know and understand the athletes on the squad. As you get to know your cheerleaders, you certainly also know how to "read" those kids' minds and judge their confidence level. Most of the time, that confidence level can be increased with proper training, mainly by following the stunt progression list that is made available by the National Federation and ICCA. It cannot be urged nearly enough that coaches scale back on the difficulty of their stunts (and routines) and focus more on the safety of the cheerleaders. After all, athlete preparedness is KEY to the SAFETY of each of our athletes!