

CHEERING A GREAT GAME!

by Donna McKay

Leading school spirit is the number one priority of cheerleaders. Unfortunately the skills needed to lead a crowd are not inherent to all cheerleaders, which is why these skills must be taught and practiced. How cheerleaders perform at games influences people's opinions about cheerleaders' skills, priorities, and the school's cheer program in general. It will be obvious to fans and administration if cheerleaders pride themselves on leading school spirit with enthusiasm as opposed to just attending games as fill time between competitions.

Cheerleaders need to arrive early enough to take care of pre-game needs so they're ready to cheer on time. Pre-game activities include stretching, preparing stunts, greeting visiting cheerleaders, putting chant signs near the cheer area, warming up the crowd, and cheering the team onto the field. This means all cheerleaders must be on time and focused on their game responsibilities, not off talking to friends.

During the game, organization and professionalism are keys to gaining respect from fans so they'll want to follow the cheerleaders' directions. Cheerleaders must be aware of what is happening in the game and cheer accordingly. They should not be talking to each other or people in the stands, playing with their hair, eating, drinking, or practicing cheers in front of the crowd during the game. If cheerleaders don't show an interest in the game, the fans won't show an interest in the cheerleaders. Cheerleaders should chant consistently throughout the game, avoid dead time, and work to keep the fans involved.

Cheerleaders must project confidence when cheering; they have to yell like they believe the fans will yell with them. Cheerleaders should use big, sharp motions to attract the crowd's attention. Strong, spirited voices, which clearly enunciate the words, are important to get fans to yell. Cheerleaders need to use chants which are easy, traditional, and popular. Also, 'answer back' and 'spell out' chants get fans to participate since cheerleaders are actually telling the crowd what to yell. Using signs and poms draws attention to the cheerleaders and helps them lead the crowd as well. Cheerleaders should always cheer with good sportsmanship and respect for their opponents by cheering for their team and not cheering against the other team.

To generate crowd participation, cheerleaders should get close to the fans and make eye contact with them. Cheerleaders need to spread out and cover the crowd, not stand tightly together right in front of one section. The main idea is to make everyone in the stands feel like they're important to the outcome of the game. When leading chants, it helps if cheerleaders ask the crowd to join in by yelling, "Let's hear it" or "Yell with us." Using chants which ask fans to stand, clap, or stomp their feet helps get the crowd involved. Repetition is very important for crowd involvement. Repeating a chant more than three times is necessary to give fans the chance to understand what to do plus time to respond; cheerleaders should not give up easily! Developing traditions, which are familiar, is a good way to get the crowd to participate, too. The school song is a tradition for most schools, so it could be played at key times during a game when the team needs support. Other traditions could be incorporated after scoring touchdowns, such as drum chants with the band or pushups by the cheerleaders for the number of points scored (which are counted out by the fans). Other cheerleaders, who are in the crowd, are a big help when trying to incorporate new ideas. They should be yelling, plus getting their friends to yell, so new ideas catch on. If the crowd begins an appropriate chant, the cheerleaders need to immediately join in and help them. Both groups ought to be working together to support the school's team. When finished with a chant, cheerleaders should compliment the crowd for participating by yelling, "Good job" or "Way to go." This will encourage fans to continue being involved.

Game situations and momentum can change instantly in athletic contests. To cheer intelligently, knowledge of the game is important. Key referee signals should be known by cheerleaders, which will allow them to respond quickly to situations. When crucial situations occur in games, such as needing a score or stopping a score to win, cheerleaders need to have a few easy chants ready and avoid long, fancy cheers and chants. At these times the cheerleaders' ability to be spontaneous and fuel crowd response is very important.

Timeouts should be used for crowd participation, not cheer performance. A big frustration for fans is when cheerleaders perform a cheer to show off stunts or because it's cute, but it doesn't involve the crowd. It's essential for cheerleaders to begin crowd involvement chants immediately after a timeout is called in order to keep crowd momentum going. As soon as one timeout is finished, it helps to have a chant ready for the next timeout. If

the tempo of the game changes cheerleaders can quickly change to another chant, but they're still prepared ahead of time. Fans don't want to wait for cheerleaders to decide what do. When this happens it means the crowd is watching cheerleaders talk at a time when cheerleaders should already be leading the crowd. Another mistake cheerleaders make during timeouts is to wait until they're all lined up or a stunt is put up before beginning the chant – again wasting crowd momentum. One or two cheerleaders should start the chant with other cheerleaders quickly joining in; stunts should be put up quickly and cleanly. A further misuse of timeouts occurs when cheerleaders do a short chant, finish, and then stand waiting for the game to resume. Since the players are still in the huddle, the crowd is watching the cheerleaders, who aren't doing anything! It's frustrating for fans when they want to yell and they aren't being led. It's important that cheerleaders continue cheering until the horn sounds and to use the entire timeout. If cheerleaders need to fill more time during the timeout, they could actually do two different crowd involvement chants. For example, cheerleaders could use poms to spell out the school's initials in an answer back chant then go immediately to a chant using those initials.

Crowd control is the responsibility of school administrators, but cheerleaders can assist with this task. Knowledgeable cheerleaders anticipate possible crowd control situations and are ready with popular crowd involvement chants to keep things positive and prevent problems. Appropriate chants to use in these situations include answer backs, crowd favorites, use of signs, and chants which use the school colors, mascot, or school name. The school song is great to use during times of inappropriate behavior since this song will automatically get people on their feet and involved.

Leading school spirit by using proper crowd involvement chants are keys to cheering successfully at games. These are also indications of professional, well-coached cheerleaders. When cheerleaders are doing their job and people are having fun, it's easy to have enthusiastic fans and tremendous school spirit.