

Los Angeles Times

10-13-2009

Cheerleaders take high-flying risks under untrained eyes

As stunts get more daring, injuries have multiplied -- prompting a new push for safety.

By Melissa Rohlin

Patty Phommanyvong, a cheerleader for Marshall High School in Los Angeles, was thrust into the air while performing a stunt at a football game two years ago. The next thing anyone knew, she was limp. Her heart had stopped beating.

Paramedics were called, but by the time they got her heart restarted, her brain had been deprived of oxygen for too long and she was in a coma. Experts say she may have been inadvertently struck in the chest on her descent from the stunt.

Confined to a nursing home, Phommanyvong, now 19, can't eat or speak. She communicates by blinking her eyes.

Her father, Say, a Laotian immigrant, said: "I didn't know that they were throwing her up in the air. That's for professionals. Why would the school allow that?"

Variations of Patty's story are all too familiar among cheerleaders. While her tragic circumstance wasn't because of anyone's mistake, there are many examples of even more experienced cheerleaders being seriously hurt in spectacular spills.

Jessica Smith of Sacramento City College broke her neck when she fell headfirst about 15 feet in 2006; Rechelle Sneath, a cheerleader for San Jose State, fell while practicing in 2004 and is paralyzed from the waist down. Yet daredevil stunts are routinely performed at youth, high school and college sporting events across the country.

And, according to experts and reporting by The Times, these stunts are often done without proper safety precautions or supervision.

"Right now, cheerleading is out of control," said Dr. Frederick Mueller, director of the National Center for Catastrophic Sports Injury Research at the University of North Carolina. "Kids are practicing all over the place without mats. They practice when they want to, do what they want to, and some coaches aren't certified and don't know what they're doing."

Statistics confirm the danger. Cheerleading injuries resulting in emergency room visits have increased almost sixfold since 1980, to nearly 30,000 in 2008, the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission reported.

The exact number of serious injuries isn't known because there is no formal reporting system, but annual statistics tracked by Mueller's organization offer a snapshot of the situation.

Over 26 years, disabilities or deaths caused by head or spine trauma are almost double for female high school cheerleaders than for female players of all sports combined: 73 "catastrophic injuries" -- including two deaths -- from fall 1982 to spring 2008. Gymnasts were second, with nine injuries.

Cheerleading advocates say the percentage of debilitating injuries is low considering the participation numbers, which, by some estimates, is at least 3 million nationwide -- more than 400,000 at the high school level. But several reports say cheerleading accounts for a disproportionate percentage of major injuries when compared with other activities.

In college, the NCAA insurance program reported that as recently as 2005, about 25% of what it spent on student-athlete injuries was related to cheerleading. Football, with nearly 10 times as many participants, accounted for 57% of the money spent.

After several highly publicized injuries in cheerleading, the NCAA mandated more safety measures. However, there is little consistency in rules and protocol among dozens of cheerleading organizations nationwide.

For example, in California, as in most states, high school cheerleading is not recognized as a sport. As a result, regulation is left to individual school districts.

Experts attribute cheerleading's danger to three things: inadequate safety measures, improper training and the competitiveness of the activity. One

television experiment showed that the sideline action might be more perilous than a powerful football tackle.

The Fox Sports show "Sport Science" examined a popular move called a basket toss, in which a "flyer" is launched into the air by her teammates. The UC Irvine cheer squad performed the move as scientists measured the speed and height reached by the woman. A crash dummy was then used to determine the effect of a fall. The impact was measured at 2,000 pounds, which was compared with the force of a hit by an NFL linebacker at 1,800 pounds.

Though many athletes throw a ball around, cheerleaders throw each other around. Even at youth levels -- there are teams for girls as young as 5 -- participants try to make their routines more spectacular than the next by adding spins, flips and twists regardless of the danger.

"Parents should attend practices and competitions," said Kristen Dostalík, cheer coach at Santiago High School in Corona. "They think they're signing their kids up for the cheerleading [that existed] when they were in high school, but it's changed."

As in the past, the activity still includes plenty of pompoms, megaphones and glitter. But today, routines also feature dynamic gymnastics and tumbling elements -- things that look easy on a video but are difficult for neophytes.

Los Angeles High counselor Julie Pelikhova, who took over the school's cheer squad two years ago when she was hired, is typical of many well-intentioned advisors who guide spirit squads across the Southland.

She is not paid for her time, has little cheerleading experience and agreed to take the position because the school required adult oversight.

"The girls learn from previous girls; I just supervise," Pelikhova said.

Asked if she worries when the girls attempt high-flying new tricks, Pelikhova said, laughing: "Of course. That's what emergency cards are for."

Former cheerleader Meagan Gibson, 19, said she and her teammates at Thousand Oaks High "pushed ourselves to do stunts we weren't ready to do"

under the watch of a teacher whom school officials had asked to be the squad's advisor.

The teacher, who has since been replaced by a more experienced coach, "had a great attitude. She was nice," recalled Marissa Poling, 18, another former member of the team, "but she didn't know what to do."

Locally, some school districts have adopted "spirit rules" from organizations such as the National Federation of State High School Assns., which recommends that coaches pass a safety course offered by the American Assn. of Cheerleading Coaches and Administrators. It's the same program the NCAA recommends for its college cheer coaches and advisors.

However, becoming AACCA-certified isn't difficult. A prospective advisor must attend a three-hour lecture, then score 70% or higher on an open-book test.

The AACCA certification process is in itself dangerous, said Kimberly Archie, director of the Irvine-based National Cheer Safety Foundation, because "it gives people a false sense of security that taking the class makes them qualified" to instruct.

Archie, who founded the organization after her daughter was injured cheerleading, said participants at all levels should be guided by toughened safety procedures.

As for coaches, she believes any whose team performs above-the-shoulder stunts should have a USA Gymnastics certification for tumbling, CPR and first-aid certifications, a background check and advanced cheerleading training.

Jim Lord, executive director of AACCA, thinks current safety measures are adequate.

"No amount of rules is going to protect someone if they're not following proper progressions," he said. "Rules are there to provide a framework, but a qualified coach is the most important thing."

Health and industry experts would like to see spring-loaded surfaces, mats and other safety equipment become mandatory for all competitions, game

performances and practices.

The holdup? That courts might view any mandate for safety equipment as an acknowledgment of danger, opening the door to liability claims.

"That's why there's so many football lawsuits," Archie said. Football's "advice to the cheer industry was not to get involved with safety equipment, because with that comes liability."

At a recent practice at Palisades Charter High School, cheerleader Tasha Harper, 17, was fortunate to walk away with nothing more than a "hurt booty" after leaping off a teammate's shoulders and crashing onto a tile floor -- while cushioned mats were piled in a corner a short distance away.

Asked why the mats weren't used, coach Latina Reffells said, "I don't want the girls to get used to stunting over mats because there aren't any mats at games."

Archie doesn't think the surface is the only problem.

"If a girl falls and hits her head from 10 feet high, she's going to sustain a catastrophic injury," she said. "There should be no above-the-shoulder stunting on sidelines."

That advice comes too late for Say Phommanyvong, who said he didn't know the statistics or the danger when his daughter became a cheerleader.

He thought cheerleaders danced, "carried pompoms and kicked their feet in the air."

Now he knows better.

The family has sued the Los Angeles Unified School District for negligence, claiming that a lack of proper medical equipment and immediate care contributed to Patty's condition. Insurance has covered most of the medical bills, but "we're struggling," the father said.

Say fled Laos in 1981, in the aftermath of civil war. He eventually settled in California, meeting his wife in an English class, and lives in Chinatown, where the couple works long hours for a clothing manufacturer.

Patty was popular in school, a success story. And her younger sister is now begging to try out for the cheer squad.

No chance, her father says: "I only have two daughters."

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