

Cheerleading: Where Does Your Gym Fit In?

By Jim Lord and Chris Calvert

Recognized as one of the fastest growing athletic activities, cheerleading has come into its own over the last 10 years. And, whether it's assisting local school cheerleading squads with their skills or creating your own competitive cheerleading team, cheerleading classes should be an integral part of your gym's business plan.

What is your facility's plan to take advantage of this growing activity?

At the very least, your gym should offer cheerleading classes to both local squads and to individuals hoping to make those teams. As most school squads have their selection process between the months of March through mid May, you can expect a dramatic increase in cheer tumbling class participation during this pre try-out period. There are two big hurdles to overcome during this time.

1) Convince the participants (and the parents) to begin class instruction early enough so that the student may be allowed to progress safely, increasing stamina along with skill retention.

2) Convince students to continue in your program following the selection of school squad members, whether or not they succeeded in making the school cheer team. As every coach has had a prospective cheer student (and parent) come into the gym and request that the student be able to perform a round off, back handspring for a tryout in two weeks time, or less, perspective gym cheer programs must address how to support a cheer program while maintaining appropriate and safe skill progressions. The solution to this problem is educational publicity, working through the local schools and school cheerleading coaches to educate both participants and parents as to proper progressions and skill retention. If the school coach can recommend gymnastics classes early in the season and on a continuing basis, both the gymnastics facility and the student will fare better.

And, after the school tryouts are complete, the savvy gym owner may wish to offer class discounts as an incentive to those participants who did not meet the requirements of school cheer team membership so that their training may continue unabated. And, by compiling a list of students who were successful in achieving their goal of squad membership, the gym owner has a ready-made mailing list of participants to contact again in January so as to get a head start on the cheerleading tryout season and, as the cheerleader matures, a ready-made list of possible assistant coaches.

Another service that you can offer to the local schools is specific skill target classes for their squads, whether the class is for tumbling, partner stunting or choreography. Keep in mind, however, from a liability standpoint, that if the squad practice is set by the school cheer coach, the school coach needs to attend the classes given at your facility as if the class were being held at the educational center represented.

In areas where squads are competitive, you may also have the opportunity to rent out your facility for practice performance sessions. Make sure, however, that your facility is equipped with a 42 x 42 unassisted (non-spring) floor mat.

In some states, school cheerleaders are restricted from competing as a school at either the

state or the national level. Again, with the nature of modern cheerleading, competition has become a natural extension of the athleticism that has developed. Many cheerleaders, faced with the no compete rule, are looking for a competitive outlet - your gym may be the place that provides it! There now exists many local, regional and national level competitions for non-school cheerleading squads, known in the industry as "all star" squads.

So you are interested, but wonder, "If I build it, will they come?" Realizing that you are now providing more than gymnastics instruction, you must ensure that you provide an instructor/coach who is knowledgeable in cheerleading, not just gymnastics. To protect your students and your facility, cheer coaches should be certified by the American Association of Cheerleading Coaches and Advisors (AACCA*). Cheerleading has its own techniques and they often go against the methods found in traditional tumbling and even acrosport. Jim Lord and Chris Calvert (authors of this article) will be presenting sessions at the USA Gymnastics National Congress that will help you understand general cheerleading requirements, skill progressions, stunt transitions and cheerleading choreography.

Additionally, cheerleading squads traditionally attend a summer (away) camp where both the team and the coach learn the latest stunts and transitions. Team participants also work on basic techniques to improve the squad's abilities. These camps not only teach technique but camp will also help to instill a sense of "team" that is very important to the squads success in working together. Some camps are now including adventure-recreational style games and challenges in addition to the basic, intermediate and advanced skill training.

For more information on cheerleading camps and local, regional or national competitions, point your web browser to "www.uca.com" or call 800-CHEER-UCA. For additional safety information, go to "www.aacca.org" or call 800-533-6583.

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