

Cheerleading: A Reflection of Changing Gender Norms in Sport

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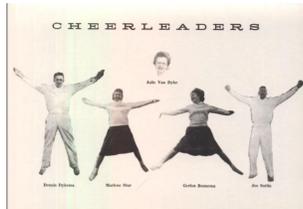
Introduction: A Brief History of Cheer

- Cheerleading emerged in the late 1800s following the Civil War
 - 1890s: designated Yell Leaders emerge
 - "Yell Leaders were charismatic, highly visible, solo performers who emerged because of their popularity, personality, or perceived leadership abilities"¹
- 1920s and 30s: women begin to infiltrate cheer
 - Since cheerleading was defined as a masculine activity, objections to girls' participation were expressed in terms of gender appropriate behavior.
- 1940s and 50s: women became cheerleaders in large numbers
 - "It is likely that the mid 1940s war-time mobilization of male college students offered additional opportunities for women to serve as cheerleaders."²
 - Led to a gradual feminization of cheer following the war in the 1950s
 - As female cheerleaders became the norm, the sporting world needed a justification for female acceptance in this previously masculine domain. This led to the assumption that "Girls... could lead a crowd to cheer because they were attractive. Boys, it was assumed could lead a cheer because they were aggressive and athletic."³
- 1970s: more than 500,000 cheerleaders from grade school through college; 95% female



The image to the left was found in Northwestern Junior College and Academy's 1945 The Horseshoe. Captioned: "Seldom is there thanks given to the cheerleaders for coming out for all the games, out-of-town as well as home games. Without the cheerleaders the cheering section would be a miniature mob scene. So to all the cheerleaders of 1945 we say thank you."⁴

The image to the right was found in Northwestern College's 1960 De Klompen year book.⁵



Cheerleading as a Reflection of Ideal Masculinity

- Most scholars believe that the origins of cheer come from the military. Following the Civil War, many young male veterans enrolled at colleges and universities. It is believed that some of these Civil War veterans brought the tradition of cheer to their universities.
- The first cheerleaders were no ordinary men, they were the best image of the ideal man that their college campuses had to offer.
 - "For several decades, most college cheer squads consisted solely of men who *captained* the school's other teams (baseball, hockey, track, and so on). Gradually, however, mere lettermen began to infiltrate."⁴
 - According to an article in Yale Daily news about cheerleading at Yale, from the years 1912-1921, male cheerleaders were perceived as "respected role models of manliness and success."⁵
 - One former ivy league yell leader during this time was quoted saying, "the reputation of having been a valiant 'cheer-leader' is one of the most valuable things a boy can take away from college. As a title to promotion in professional or public life, it ranks hardly second to that of having been a quarter back."⁶
- Stanford University took cheerleading to a new level when they began offering courses in cheerleading for the young men. The program included courses in bleacher psychology, correct use of the voice, and development of stage presence. The classes were intended for sophomores planning to audition for yell leader the following year.
 - This program at Stanford shows the social weight and value that cheerleading held for men in athletic culture at that time.
- At cheerleading's inception and continuing until roughly the 1930s and 40s with the beginning of world war II, female cheerleaders were quite controversial. Arguments for why women were not acceptable cheerleaders include, but were not limited to:
 - their voices were too shrill
 - women did not know the subtleties of sports well enough to lead cheers
 - fear that women would be unable to control rowdy crowds successfully
 - an overall belief that men's athletic prowess was more entertaining
- Some schools banned women from participating in Cheer
 - Bishop James E. Cassidy prohibited any girl cheerleaders in catholic high schools in his diocese because they were "clad mostly in the garb of tight-ropes, trapeze performers or bareback riders."⁷ He believed that female cheerleaders would distract students from achieving their best spiritually and mentally.



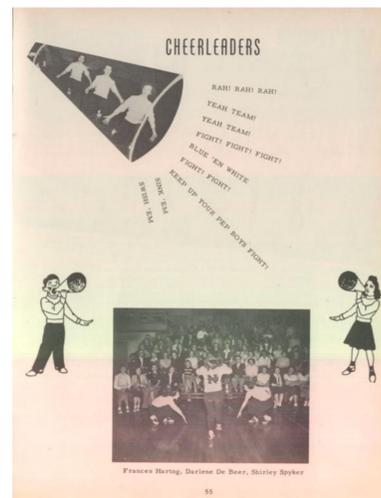
Princeton University's 1931-32 Cheerleading Squad.²⁴

Cheerleading as a Reflection of Ideal Femininity

- Traditionally, the sporting world has been dominated by males; yet, women have always been interested in entering and participating in the sporting world.
 - Although, "society generally, as well as female physical educators at the time believed competitive sport was not in the best interest of women physically or psychologically."⁸
- By the 1920s, favor had turned towards women participating in sports and cheerleading became coeducational at many colleges and universities across the country.
 - The so-called New Woman had more freedom to participate in life outside the home so that they could be better wives and mothers within the home.
 - This concept was significant for collegiate athletics because as it became increasingly acceptable for women to work outside the home, a woman's education became more acceptable. Because of this, more and more women began to enroll at colleges and universities and be interested in collegiate sports.
- While women could participate in the activity of cheer in the 1920s, the transition of cheer being a masculine activity to a being a feminine one did not occur until the 1940s. Because of World War II, women in this time period began to have increasing access to spaces previously only acceptable for men.
- By the 1950s, cheerleading had changed from representing normative masculinity to representing ideal femininity. "Cheerleaders were expected to be pretty, to possess appealing figures, to play a secondary role to males, and were not to be taken too seriously."⁹ This is when the stereotype of the cheerleader as the hot bimbo emerged.
- Cheerleading gave women social power and standing in a similar way that it used to give men social power and standing. However, Cheerleading may have made female cheerleaders as popular as the male jocks, but they were expected to play a supporting role, while the jocks stole the show on the court.
 - A New York Times Article titled "Girl Cheerleaders Get an Assist for Success of Recent Oakwood Basketball Teams" from March 23, 1953 helps to illustrate this point. The Oakwood men's basketball team had just won a game and the coach was interviewed and asked about the team's success. Although the reporters tried to keep him talking about the basketball team, this is known because the reporter mentions it several times throughout the article, Coach Butterfield continued to revert to conversation regarding the women's cheer squad. When asked about his team's success, Coach Butterfield noted the men's work, but stated, "it's the girls who give the squad the finishing touch."¹⁰ He credited the cheer squad for the team's success and claimed the squad was what set them apart from other ball teams. While it is clear from this article and the emphasis the coach put on the value of the cheer squad in the team's success that feminine cheer squads were admired by players, coaches, and fans, their role was a supporting one. It was still the men's basketball coach who was interviewed and still the men's team who got press attention even if the cheer squad was acknowledged for the role they played.
- According to sociologists Natalie Adams and Pamela Bettis, "cheerleading represents a liberating shift in normative femininity while simultaneously perpetuating a norm that does not threaten dominant social values and expectations about the role of girls and women."¹¹ In other words, cheerleading on one hand came to give women and girls the freedom to be active and to cultivate their athletic abilities in an area of athletics that they were fully accepted. On the other hand, they only have that freedom because their position as supportive cheerleader to active player on the field/court did not threaten long held beliefs that sports are masculine.



Top left photo titled "Our Cheerleaders" found in the Northwestern College 1955 De Klompen Yearbook.²⁶



Images above and to bottom left found in Northwestern Junior College and Academy 1950 De Klompen.²⁶

Cheerleading, Femininity, and Race

- While the shift from cheerleading as masculine to feminine occurred across racial lines, the experiences of black women in cheer have been different for two main reasons:
 - 1) ideals of femininity have been applied differently to white and black women
 - 2) the black community has historically responded differently to black women in athletics than the white community has responded to white women in athletics
- According to historian Susan Cahn, a study done in 1939 concluded that 25% of black colleges objected to intercollegiate women's sport. This was a stark contrast to the 83% of predominantly white institutions that objected to women's varsity athletics
- Ruth Arnett, YWCA secretary of girls work "rejected curbs on competition and dismissed undue worry about 'tomboyish athletes.'"¹² She believed "a 'real man' desired the vital, vigorous 'real woman'...employing a concept of womanhood that embraced strength, self-reliance, and a competitive spirit"¹³
- Black women also saw their femininity differently than white women.
 - Black women in sport was a success for the race, not a threat to black men's masculinity. However, "while black communities understood the athletic success of African American women to be a measure of black cultural achievement, it held a very different meaning when interpreted through the lens of white America's prevailing racial and sexual beliefs."¹⁴
 - When compared to the ideal pure, 'civilized' white women, black women were seen as primitive and passionate. Black women were also often "represented in the dominant culture as masculine females lacking in feminine grace, delicacy, and refinement."¹⁵
- These cultural sentiments are shown in a study from 2015 conducted with cheerleaders at Spelman College, a historically black women's college. Sociologist Chelsea Mary Elise Johnson interviewed six African American cheerleaders at Spelman and asked them about their experience as a cheerleader. Previous research had critiqued cheerleading for its gendered division of labor and its dismissal of women's athleticism, but this research had never been centered on the experiences of African American women.
 - She found that "For black women, sexual piety has been a means to accomplishing both racial uplift and class mobility."¹⁶
 - However, "it also enforces and reproduces restrictive notions of femininity on black women who are burdened with the responsibility to represent the race."¹⁷
- One way that some black women have attempted to reclaim, repurpose, and redefine sexuality for black women is through hip-hop feminism. Hip-hop reclaims feminism for people of color and repurposes hip-hop for women's self-expression.
 - However, the styles utilized by blacks and whites has been different.
 - Black cheerleaders tend to have a more sexualized and dance-like performance culture informed by hip-hop culture.
 - According to Johnson, "Moorhouse Cheerleaders' use of hip-hop styles and music, despite their sexualized nature, might be a form of self-valuation and not solely intended to please the heterosexual male viewer."¹⁸ In other words, it is possible that for black women, the sexualized nature of hip-hop dance is empowering instead of degrading. While this sexualized form of cheer may seem objectifying to an outsider looking in, it is a way for many black cheerleaders to reclaim their sexuality.
- Another issue with assuming that the experience of a black female cheerleader would be the same as a white female cheerleader is that one is assuming that the relationship between white males and white females is the same as the relationship between black males and black females.
 - According to Johnson, "Not only do black women and white women tend to have qualitatively different relationships to power and resources in the United States, but also HBCU cheerleaders and white cheerleaders operate within different cultural context."¹⁹
 - White female cheerleaders embody cultural ideals of feminism by playing supporting roles on the court and objectifying themselves for white men. However, black females often do not feel the pressure to objectify themselves for black men in the same way because it is a different power dynamic.
 - One might think that the power dynamic looks like this: White men – black men – white women – black women, when really it looks like this: white men – white women – black men and black women.
 - While black men might receive a few privileges because of their gender, the power gap between black men and black women is much less than that between white men and everyone else.
 - Because of the systematic oppression that African American men and women endured, they tend to work together in order to further their race.
 - "From a womanist perspective, cheerleading can embody collaborative engagement with black men to uplift the race by celebrating black masculinity alongside black women's strength."²⁰ Therefore, many black female cheerleaders Do not experience the gendered division of sport as marginalizing.
- Yet, the experiences of Moorhouse cheerleaders and other black cheerleaders have not been entirely positive. Johnson found that many "Moorhouse cheerleaders fear that their cheerleading performances will damage their reputation off the court, as they will likely be employed or educated at predominantly white institutions in the future."²¹ While for many black women this style of cheer is empowering, to many white people it is perceived as excessively sexual. Consequently, black female cheerleaders at historically black colleges and universities are aware that when they leave their institution and enter the workforce, their employers will likely be white and their experience as a cheerleader may hinder their reputation as an employee. These black women are aware that their cultural context is different and that is why their experiences as cheerleaders are different; most white people are not because privilege allows them to be ignorant.

Conclusion

- While female athletes have much more freedom to participate in athletics, cheerleading remains a feminized activity and continues to reflect a supporting role to masculine athletics.
 - "The presence of attractive, admiring women validates the display of masculinity and machismo on the playing field."²² In other words, not much has changed.
 - Women's participation in contact sports is only acceptable if they are completely feminized, but they are "welcomed unconditionally as spectators and cheerleaders for men's games."
- I believe female athletes and cheerleaders will achieve equality only when activities like cheer are not masculine or feminine.
 - For women to be fully accepted in American athletic culture, the idea of feminine or masculine sports and activities need to dissolve; leaving room for only ungendered sports and activities; places where men and women are equally welcome and equally participate.

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