Is Cheerleading a Sport? A Visual Representation

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Abstract

Sports have been around for centuries and are a big part of our American lives. Although we acknowledge the originals as sports, i.e. American football, baseball, basketball and ice hockey, what about newer activities making their way into our culture today? This body of work examines college sports and how cheerleading does and does not fit into that category. It is comprised of six pairs of photographs that show how cheerleading compares and is contrasted with different college athletics. My hope is that by showing this argument in a visual manner, more individuals can formulate a decision on the question: Is cheerleading a sport?

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I would like to thank my parents for all their support over the last four years in everything I have accomplished. If it weren’t for them, I may not have been involved athletically at Ball State.

Finally, I would like to thank my coaches and teammates for an amazing four years in college athletics. Without their encouragement, support, friendship and models for my photographs, this experience would not have had the same impact on me. I have found lifelong friends I will never forget.
Artist Statement

During the last eight years, I have been caught in the middle of a debate, coming to a head in the summer of 2010. With the emergence of competitive cheerleading into our culture, one question has arose: is cheerleading considered a sport? I have suffered through the long hours of practice in preparation for the national competition, persevered through winning and losing seasons, created bonds with teammates and coaches and been the victim of numerous injuries and surgeries from participating in cheerleading for so long. So why is this athletic engagement considered a sport by some and not by others? How can the participants suffer through grueling practices like other “sports” but not be named one? Why has this become such a big ordeal now?

“Title IX is a law passed in 1972 that requires gender equity for boys and girls in every education program that receives federal funding” (History of Title IX). Most individuals have heard of Title IX in accordance with sports in high school and college settings. Title IX requires all agencies receiving federal funding to provide equal opportunities in athletics based on gender. Evaluation of equal treatment consists of these ten stipulations (Title IX):

1. Whether the selection of sports and levels of competition effectively accommodate the interests and abilities of members of both sexes
2. The provision of equipment and supplies;
3. Scheduling of games and practice time;
4. Travel and per diem allowance;
5. Opportunity to receive coaching and academic tutoring on mathematics only;
6. Assignment and compensation of coaches and tutors;
7. Provision of locker rooms, practice and competitive facilities;
8. Provision of medical and training facilities and services;
9. Provision of housing and dining facilities and services;
10. Publicity.

The recent stir of this controversy started at Quinnipiac University in Connecticut.

"Several (women’s) volleyball players and their coach had sued Quinnipiac University after it announced in March, 2009 that it would eliminate the team for budgetary reasons and replace it with a competitive cheer squad" (Federal Court Rules: Cheerleading Not a Sport). By replacing cheerleading as a sport instead of volleyball, the equal opportunities required in Title IX would be fulfilled. However, Underhill, the judge that resided over the case, decided cheerleading cannot be considered a collegiate sport to fulfill Title IX requirements due to it being “too underdeveloped and disorganized” (Macedo).

Others do not support the Judge’s decision at all. Some believe that “the adults who run college sports need to show some common sense and recognize a fast-growing, legitimate women’s sport right in front of their eyes. They need to count cheerleading as a sport” (Gregory). The cheerleading being fought over today is not the same as what most individuals envision when they hear the word. It’s not just yelling, but competing against schools around the nation, tumbling as well as collegiate gymnasts, training as hard and as long as basketball players, and weight lifting as often as football players. Cheerleaders encompass aspects of every sport into their activity such as strength, balance, poise, dedication and hard work.
At many universities, cheerleading fulfills requirements set forth in Title IX. Cheerleading accommodates for both sexes by allowing both to participate on their co-ed squad. Squads have their own set practice times and locations scheduled through the athletic department at the university. Like other sports, the cheerleading season runs year round. The time of year sets the practice schedule. Ball State cheerleading, for example, practices anywhere from one day a week during the summer to seven days a week during Christmas break to prepare for the national competition. These practices can range anywhere from three to five or more hours.

Cheerleaders also have their own locker rooms and paid coaches. One or more student trainers are designated as the cheerleading trainers. They also have access to medical and training facilities. Cheerleaders are often required to attend the athletic study hours each week in the libraries of the universities; these are the same study hours all other athletes participating in sports that season must attend. Finally, there are numerous schools around the nation that provide partial and full scholarships for tuition if individuals participate in their cheerleading program. Funding for these scholarships is filtered through the school’s athletic department like all other athletic scholarships.

My photographic portion of this work is meant to show the similarities and differences between cheerleading and sports based on their athletic performances. I photographed the six cheerleading shots to compare with six sports photos, as designated by Title IX, shot by Professor John Huffer. By looking at these photos, everyone should be able to make their own decision about the new famous question: Is cheerleading a sport?
Pair 1: Team

The idea of team unity is depicted here through the use of team huddles before both a cheerleading performance and a women’s soccer game. Comparing it to soccer, cheerleading is a team activity, only able to be performed on a competitive scale with a group of individuals.

Pair 2: Throw

These two photos illustrate the idea of a throw in both cheerleading and football. In cheerleading, a basket toss is a group stunt where one individual is thrown into the air to flip and then caught again by the rest of the group. This skill is demonstrated at both games and competitions. In football, a pass of the football is a way to move the ball to score points in hopes of winning a game. Although the activities are different in the object thrown, the end result in the competitive setting is the same: gaining points to win.

Pair 3: Dance

A gymnast’s floor routine and a cheerleader’s competition routines are very similar. Although a floor routine is one minute and thirty seconds long whereas a cheerleading routine is two minutes and thirty seconds long, both are comprised of similar parts. This pair of photos shows the dance portion that both routines require. In a cheerleading routine, there is a specified length of music used for the dance portion of the routine. For gymnasts, their routine is comprised of dancing and skills between their tumbling passes.

Pair 4: Team Spirit

I attempted to capture the spirit of team support through the use of these two photographs. The photos depict cheering on the women’s basketball team. For both, team support is one of the two main requirements of the team. Cheerleaders participate in
competitions, but their main activity is cheering at the football and basketball games. Basketball players are on the team to play in games but on the sidelines, it is their duty to encourage and cheer on their teammates working hard on the court.

**Pair 5: Jumps**

This pair shows how cheerleading can be compared with the track and field sport of high jump. While high jump is an individual activity, it requires the agility to jump as high as possible in the correct form to clear the bar. Jumping in a cheerleading routine is done by the squad together. It requires the team to be in unison, jumping as high as possible and in correct form.

**Pair 6: Standing Tumbling**

Tumbling is the most common link between cheerleading and gymnastics. Both encompass tumbling with a running start as well as tumbling done while standing in place. I attempted to capture the standing tumbling aspect of both cheerleading and gymnastics in these photographs. Again, the cheerleaders are required to do this tumbling in unison whereas the gymnast is performing solo. I captured standing back tucks performed by cheerleaders during their nationals routine performance. John Huffer captured a standing tumbling pass on the beam at a gymnastics meet.
Works Cited


