How Do They Do It?

Year After Year The Cheer Team Is The Best In RI With A Simple, But Not Easy, Formula For Success

'Everybody knows what they're signing up for'

By Eric White

The Magic Word **Advisor**

There's one constant in life - change. Conditions change. Dates change. Class and team rosters change. And let's not forget about the weather. However, when it comes to the West Warwick High School Cheerleading Team there's one thing that stays the same - the result.

Simply put: the squad wins ... year after year.

And often comes the question from opposing coaches: "How do you do it?"

The answer is simple but not easy. Culture, dedication, a feeder program, support from the school, and practice, practice, practice.

"It starts with having a great program at Deering," says high school head coach Taylor Gargano, who graduated from WWHS in 2012. "We build the talent. We build the culture. We get them in the routine of being on a team, being structured, being disciplined. So by the time they come to ninth grade they've already got a lot of skills that it takes to be successful."

And at the helm of that middle school squad is Ariana Witherspoon, a 2014 grad and assistant coach for the high school team. The middle school squad has won four consecutive state titles and seven overall since she has been at the helm since 2014.

Members of the WWHS Cheerleading Team hold their trophies high after winning the state's Co-Ed Division and Overall State Championship at Rhode Island College in March.

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One of the running jokes thrown out by other coaches and competitors is this: “What, do you make them in a lab?” Gargano said jokingly.

The answer to that would be no, but while there is no scientific formula for making champions there has to be chemistry.

Said Gargano: “We focus on building a bond between the team, so it becomes more of a family. It becomes less about skill and more about doing it for the love of the sport, respect of the sport, love of each other, love of the seniors.”

The team actually has two seasons per academic year. The first is Game Day season, which starts in late October/early November. During that season, the competitions focus on routines performed at sporting events, such as sideline cheers, band dances, and crowd cheers.

Then there is the competition cheer season which runs from February through March. Those routines are what most laypeople think of when they think about competition cheerleading. They are indoors, with music and routines featuring what Witherspoon calls “elite skills” which include jumps, tumbling, and stunts all choreographed in a two-and-a-half-minute routine. Teams are scored on a rubric that measures difficulty, technique, and execution.

“It is two minutes and thirty seconds and that’s it,” said Gargano. “You have one chance to do it. The mental strength that it takes to perform one time is just crazy. A lot of our training is on being mentally strong.”

And with the training comes fatigue and injuries. Bloody noses, shin splints, strains, sprains, and the occasional dislocated shoulder are not uncommon. But the pressure, especially during competition season, is high.

“In competition season ... if you’re hurt, unless it’s major, major, major ... all of us know we’ve just got to push through. You’ve got to push for the person next to you. You’ve got to push for your coaches, push for yourself,” said Senior Captain Maya Messina, who has been cheering for six years and doing gymnastics for about 12 years. “Pushing through that pain is just, in the end, is worth everything.”

Junior Captain MacKenzie Carreira, who has been cheering for 11 years, added: “If you get taken out of the routine because you’re hurt everything has to be changed or someone has to get thrown into your spot. Just [the absence of] one person makes the equation of the routine not work.”

In the end, however, it’s all worth it.

“Every single practice leads up to our name being called for states and for regionals,” said Messina.

And the rewards are for individuals as well. Messina won the individual title this past competition season followed by Corina Blanco, who placed second. Mya Silvestre (fifth), Hannah Brennan (seventh), Haylie O'Connor (ninth), Avery LeFort (eleventh), and Mackenzie Owens (sixteenth) also placed for the Wizards.

Does the sport get respect?

Cheerleading as a sport at the high school level is new. It has been recognized by the Rhode Island Interscholastic League since 2007, which is far younger than just about every other sport. This begs the question: how much do people really care about and follow cheerleading?

“I think in the last five years or so it’s gotten better than it used to be as far as the recognition but it’s not exactly equivalent to

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other sports like basketball and football," Witherspoon said.

Said Gargano: "I think it's starting to get more respect. I don't think the athletes get the respect that they deserve. I think if anyone came to our practice and saw how hard they work they would be shocked."

That work includes practices three to four times per week in the fall and winter seasons and cheering in games on top of that.

"We love cheering at the games. That's the basics of cheering is bringing school spirit, bringing the energy to events. It's a lot. We'll come straight from practice ... we love what we do we love being together as much as we can and it's just another chance for us to show the community what we're doing," Gargano said.

The Wizard Cheerleaders need look no further than their own team for validation. Devin Beaulieu is a senior captain on the cheer team and football team, for which he was a lineman. He has been doing cheer since eighth grade and had five years of dance instruction when he was younger.

"I grew up in a cheer family anyways so I just became a natural in the sport when I came into eighth grade," he said. "I'm a lineman on the football field so you've got to work with those people all the time and cheer is constantly working with the same group of people and getting better as a team. So I bring those two together and use them for both sports."

Ironically, what the cheerleaders lack are fans to cheer for *them*.

"My freshman, sophomore, junior year we were not the best we still had people at our [football] games and stuff. That just shows that people will come to watch a football game even if it's not the best team playing, but cheer-wise, you don't really see a lot of students go to a cheer competition," Beaulieu said.

But the number of teams competing at the high school level seems to be on the rise.

According to Gargano and Witherspoon participation in the sport has been increasing. In fact, they say, some 30 teams competed at the high school level this past competition cheer season.

"The numbers are going back up, which is great," Witherspoon said. "Teams are getting better. A lot of teams are starting to catch up to us, which hasn't been done in a while ... hopefully, more schools will come out of the woodwork and start creating teams."

For that to happen, schools need support. Gargano and Witherspoon said that the support they have received from Athletic Director Greg Kortick has been vital.

"Mr. Kortick does everything he can to make us supported and feel the same as any other sport at this school and we would not be able to do this without him," said Gargano, who added that technically the sport is not regulated by the RIIL so it is up to the various schools' athletic directors to determine the level of funding for cheer teams.

So far the support has paid off, as the high school team has won 17 division and state titles in the Game Day and Competition seasons - the most of any Rhode Island team. And as this school year ends 10 seniors will graduate, including Messina, who will attend (and cheer at) The University of Massachusetts-Amherst in the Fall.

Next year the team looks to rebuild - some might say reload - the roster. No matter who is on the team the goal remains the same, according to Gargano.

"Everybody knows what they're signing up for when they join our program. They know that the standards are high. They know that the pressure is high. They know that the skill and the talent are high ... the team doesn't mess around. They have expectations that they want to achieve and they're going to do what they need to do to achieve those things."