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Cheerleading Safety

There is no doubt that cheerleading is a sport, demanding rigorous training, athletic exertion and teamwork. Because of its extreme athleticism, the sport of cheerleading requires close attention to safety standards.

A recent Southern Illinois University cheerleading accident has spurred the American Association of Cheerleading Coaches and Administrators (AACCA) to ban certain aerial and towering stunts. The accident involved a fall from a 15 foot human pyramid, resulting in a concussion and a fractured neck for the cheerleader. Other recent accidents at the collegiate level left two cheerleaders paralyzed. In both of these cases, lawsuits have been filed, alleging negligence on the part of the school and the cheerleading coach.

Granted, high school cheerleaders do not generally execute as demanding – and dangerous – routines as do college cheerleaders. Nevertheless, cheerleading accidents at the high school level are not unheard of. This is a good time to review the safety standards and practices of local cheerleading programs. A few areas to consider include:

- Develop a written manual, including lesson plans for progressive development of cheerleading skills that recognize the level of experience that the squad demonstrates.
- Build strength, flexibility and agility into the physical training regimen so that the squad is conditioned to perform the stunts. Stress both warm-ups and cool down exercises.
- Require that all cheerleading coaches complete an AACCA safety certification course, and keep their knowledge up to date over the years by periodic refreshers. This same requirement should also be extended to non-staff members who coach.
- Support your coach's participation in local, state or national coaches' conferences to promote continuing education.
- Practice facilities should be organized similarly to gymnastics programs with absorptive mats, trained spotters, close supervision, adequate lighting and control of the practice area etc. Practice and perform only on floor surfaces that are suited for the traction and absorptive characteristics appropriate for the routines.
- Require appropriate attire that will not increase the hazards during stunts. Jewelry should be removed prior to cheerleading.
- Emergency response plans and communications should be in place and updated regularly.

Refer the American Association of Cheerleading Coaches and Administrators (www.aacca.org) for more detailed information, and the AACCA Cheerleading Safety Manual.

