

Memories of our Cheerleading Past

(Celebrating 30 years of Competitive Cheer)
By Susan Wood

Some of these “memories” are from the early MHSAA years, but many of them date way back to the MCCA years when Michigan cheer teams were competing as sideline teams in summer, fall, and winter. All of what we once did, has brought us to this incredible sport we have now.

We are celebrating our 30th year in the sport of Girls Competitive Cheer! But do you remember when.....

- We competed on the gym floor, and the basketball court boundary lines were *our* boundary lines. That meant a huge area, but teams were much smaller back in the day.
- Many teams competed with 6 or 8 girls, so if you had a whomping 10 girls, your team was huge! And then along came a team or two with 12 and we were all so jealous.
- Speaking of small teams, we never took a bus to compete. We just all crammed into a car or van, not everyone in a seat belt, and the coach drove.
- And honestly, many decades ago, the term “coach” was difficult to earn (from some of those “good old boys”). So we were called advisors or sponsors.
- Let’s not even think about the pay inequities, lack of practice space, etc. Let’s get back to the topic of competing.
- Competitions were often held in local shopping malls with whatever space and flooring they had.
- Competitions were also held at county and state fairs (which meant we did our stunts and tumbling on cement, or in mud, or on straw that covered manureor was that mud actually manure?or in the beer tent!)
- Every competition had its own rules, time limit, and procedures, which meant there was sometimes music, sometimes we performed sideline chants and multiple cheers, sometimes we used props, and sometimes the entire competition was “ground bound.” There were choices galore!
- Judges were usually untrained in the really early years, with possibly no knowledge of cheer. They could be local business owners, city council members, administrators, school secretaries, or dance or gymnastic teachers. We are forever grateful for Marilyn Bowker, so passionate about judging with accuracy and professionalism, who was our first trainer to help coaches and judges analyze each category appropriately.
- Before the MCJA was formed, the MCCA put much effort into not only the safety of the participants, but also bringing consistency to how competitions were run and who was judging. Although this was not ideal, judges were mostly cheer coaches (to assure that they had the knowledge needed), many of whom were currently coaching, or ex- cheer coaches. So judges were coaches and vice versa.
- Remember when the MHSAA had judges wearing navy blue instead of black as we currently do? Well, in the early years (MCCA years) judges wore anything and any color they wanted.

- At many competitions, and definitely at the MCCA State Championships, teams didn't always head back to the warm-up area in between rounds. Sometimes teams were required to sit in the bleachers on the opposite side of the gym in single file lines from the bottom to the top of the bleachersin a specific order (can't remember if it was alphabetical, or in round order). When each team was up to compete, they would stand up and file in one line down out of the bleachers as if it was a choreographed part of the competition....assigned seating for teams!
- For many years the thinking was that although other sports can be viewed from anywhere in the gym, cheerleading needed to be seen from the front. So spectator seating was always on one side only, with participating teams sitting behind the competitors. At some point in the 90's, Cindy Tyzo (I'm pretty sure it was her because she was the guru of competition organization) organized a competition where spectators sat on each side of the gym and there were two judging panels (or did one set of judges get up and walk to the other side after each team?). No one had ever thought of that so spectator seating had always been an issue. Brilliant! Plus, competitions could host more teams, and run faster.
- Not until the MHSAA began running the sport did we ever know the scores until the winners were called off. A positive effect of knowing the sub-total of the first two rounds (these days) is that sportsmanship has improved. Not many spectators or athletes are surprised with the outcome. They can digest any disappointment and control their reactions.
- Although stunting seemed safe to us at the time, we had much, much more freedom than we have now and we did some crazy things!
- Pyramids were 3-high, or 2 ½ high, and we used to vault over other stunts.
- These very high and very impressive pyramids would take most of the cheer to build. Watching a cheerleader scale the back side of a pyramid to add another layer was what it was all about! It was like you were watching a human house of cards, or dominoes, and holding your breath to see if they would topple or succeed. Then the last girl would confidently reach the final peak and put her arms up in a bladed high V, with palms facing inward. Maybe that's a "you needed to be there" experience, but trust me, it was beyond amazing!
- We did toe pitches over other competitors and even through pyramids.
- Stunts and competitors were allowed to move over, under, and through other stunts and competitors. Girls would forward roll under slap jumps and dive roll over pony stand bases. Suspended splits would travel under elevators, or extended suspended splits, or flyers in back bend positions. One of my favorites was when two girls would face each other standing on the floor, and one would forward roll at the exact moment that the other would dive roll over herso cool! And on hard floor!
- Entire 3-high pyramids would purposely lean forward and tension drop to the floor, or do a complete collapse on top of each other on their stomachs, on purpose, like a stack of pancakes!
- Girls would climb up the back side of a pyramid using any body part of her teammates that could get her to the top, and then back flip off the backside to the floor. And don't forget how coaches would quickly drag a panel mat out behind the pyramid for just such a trick, and then hustle it back out of the way.
- In the 80's there were a few stand out teams that I remember watching in amazement. Teams like Pontiac Catholic (Oakland Catholic), Milford (wow, basket toss flips!), Alpena (watching their coach, Liz Klemens, was even more fun), Bishop Gallagher, East Detroit, Lake Orion (remember Kye Ferguson?), and an all-time favorite was watching Joyce Smith's "Big Reds" from Osborn and that giant extended pendulum with her co-ed team throwing that little flyer back and forth. The crowd was screaming with excitement!

- In the winter of 1986, an event happened that caused a major change. Three major changes came from one incident. A flyer at an MCCA Regional competition was in an extension (called "high arms" at the time). Although most teams were quite proficient at standing on thighs, backs, and shoulders, it was a brand new concept to be standing in the hands of a teammate. There was no such thing as a spotter because high arms was fairly new and was performed with two bases and a flyer and *that's all*. The flyer fell, not hard but of course we didn't compete on mats so no spotter and no mat. She blew out her knee and sat in the middle of her teammates who were trying to finish the cheer (she couldn't get up and move and the team thought they should finish). You can probably guess what happened from that experience. Beginning in 1987 cheer competitions were on wrestling mats (now cheer mats), spotters became an obvious necessity, and it was decided that judges should intervene and stop a competition when an injury occurred.
- Oops, that last one was a bit of a buzz kill!
- Jumps have really changed. The best jumping teams used to perform consecutive slap jumps (aerial jumping jacks), often going from a squat position to the peak of the jump, and when toe touches took over, some teams would land them with legs apart (in second position) on purpose! They landed in sort of a straight-legged wide stance like a super hero, and it looked powerful.
- Coaches used to just sit in the bleachers with the spectators. There were no scores to check, there was no need to go back to the warm-up area, and teams wore just one uniform and didn't change between rounds.
- In the late '80's, competition directors sometimes had a roped off area in the bleachers for the coaches to sit together called "the coaches' box." This area was not necessarily on center and all coaches, of all teams, sat together for the entire competition. It was sometimes tense sitting next to your coaching competitors and sometimes fun to chat with them.
- At one of the earlier MHSAA State Finals, at Delton-Kellogg High School, the judges were in the bleachers and the coach of the competing team had to sit in a chair at the bottom of the bleachers, in front of the judges, so the judges could see over the coach (hence, no standing coaches that year....just prim and proper behavior).
- In the MCCA days, teams had to stay on the mat at the end of round one, in their final formation, and be judged on appearance. They stayed until the announcer dismissed them. It was awkward, but appearance used to be a really big deal!
- Video review used to be allowed at the MCCA State Championships. So penalties could be disputed. So glad that is over.
- In the MCCA days, the go-to person to approve legal stunts (and help coaches figure out how to tweak the stunts and make them legal) was Sheila Brownlee. This made everything consistent around the state. Many of us had her phone number memorized. Then when the MHSAA began competitive cheer, we had to call the MHSAA office and talk to someone with no cheer knowledge at all about our stunt questions. These were caring people, but they knew nothing about the terminology. The growing pains were huge; no one there knew a single thing about our sport and frustration was widespread.
- In the first few years of the MHSAA State Finals, only the runner-up and first place teams were announced. It seemed sort of mean or cold. Many of us hated that all teams weren't recognized for making it that far. The MHSAA wouldn't budge on that one until the early 2000's. We were told "we are not here to rank the teams; we are here to crown a champion." It is, of course, a much more positive experience these days. Again, growing pains.

- When the MHSAA began running the State Finals (the 1993-94 school year), many teams were reluctant to stop competing in the MCCA State Championship. So lots of teams did both. Four weekends in a row were the MHSAA Regionals and States, then the MCCA Regionals and States. That was allowed until the MHSAA required teams to make a choice. In 1997, it was the last time teams did both. MCCA continued to run a sideline championship through 2008.
- I vaguely remember that rounds 1 and 2 were switched. The first few years of MHSAA began with the compulsory round.
- Did teams used to have to make up their own 10-count arm drill? It seems like none of us were doing the same thing. Don't know; my VHS tapes are too brittle to look at.
- When back tucks began to be a compulsory skill in 2000, teams had to eliminate a 12-point skill if they were going to do the 14-point back tuck. It was thought that it wouldn't be fair to do the two 12-point skills plus a 14-point skill, so back tucking teams were limited to only one 12-point and one 14-point skill.
- To be fair to teams with lower tumbling ability, the universal jump and pike jump were put in the 12-point category. Not sure what year(s) that was. It didn't last long.
- The MHSAA rules meetings used to be live only, and in multiple locations. So the only way to know what questions were being asked (and therefore answered) was to attend as many as possible. You had to be a "rules meeting junky." Still, there was always more than one answer to a question, and getting that information to all coaches didn't go smoothly. We've come far in our 30th year, and are not done growing.
- There used to be 5 MHSAA Regions *per class*, and the top 2 teams from each moved on to the Finals. Actually, not sure if that is right, and I can't name which years. But I do know that for the first 2 or 3 years there were 8 MHSAA Regions *per class* and only 1 team from each moved on to the Finals! Yikes!
- As the number of schools fielding a Competitive Cheer team grew, it became necessary to add District level competitions in 2009.
- MHSAA Finals have been at East Kentwood High School (1994 and 1995), Delton-Kellogg High School (1996 and 1997), Grandville High School (1998 and 1999), Lake Orion High School (2000, 2001, and 2003), and Oxford High School (2003 ...2 divisions at Lk. O, and 2 divisions at Oxford).
- The Finals were held in a high school gym for 9 of the first 10 years, and after bursting at the seams, it was moved to Grand Valley State University in 2002 (18 inches of snow fell that day!). It was split between two high schools in 2003, then permanently to the Delta Plex beginning in 2004 (and of course the pandemic year was MSU). In 2023, our 30th year, the Delta Plex closed down and the Finals were held at CMU.
- Hair styles have been everything imaginable. Two pigtails with ribbons tied in each, two braided pigtails with four ribbons (top and bottom of each), one side ponytail, high ponytail with huge curls (and huge bangs to match), fake cheer curls (hair pieces), low pony tails with straightened hair, messy buns, French braids, and of course lots of gorgeous pre-made bows.
- Uniforms have been wool, polyester, motionflex, and powerfit. And teams have worn box pleats, knife pleats, pants (with suspenders and stirrups), A-line skirts, and shorts. And before polyester shell tops, teams wore short-sleeved sweaters, often with long-sleeved turtlenecks underneath.
- Shoes have varied from big and cloddy shoes, to smaller softer shoes with no support, and for a short time teams even wore gymnastic slippers (I'll refrain from saying more on that topic). Socks have been knee socks, scrunch socks, above the ankle socks, and no-show socks.

- Briefs used to be sequence dots, polka dots, or tiger paws. In early years they were called spankies or lollies and were regular cut. Thank goodness for boy cut briefs because “wedgies” were a bit distracting no matter how hard you tried not to look.
- Until recent years, teams stood at the back of the mat until called onto the floor. The spacing and choreography of how teams stood there felt important because it was the first impression of the team. It varied from robot style, double lines, chins up, to jumping up and down using up every bit of energy you had until called to the mat. Running straight onto the mat these days (with no waiting) is less formal and speeds up the competition.
- Actually, I think that in the 80’s, teams were required to enter *and exit* using the back side of the basketball court or back side of the mat.
- The first team back handsprings were performed in the early- to mid-80’s (sorry folks, I’m not sure about the 70’s because all I remember about those years are some of the tallest and most impressive pyramids I have ever seen).
- The first basket tosses came from right here in Michigan! I hope I have this right. Tony Pizza took that trick from the circus in the early 80’s, and named it a “Barnum.” He didn’t share the how-to for that trick for a couple of years so that his MSU teams could get some mileage out of it, but then it exploded (pardon the pun) into high schools and all around the nation. UCA began calling it a basket toss, or just basket, and the rest, as they say, is history.
- This is not true for the rest of the nation, but right here in Michigan teams started doing extensions in the mid-80’s, full twist cradles in 1994, double full twist cradles in 1995, team standing back tucks in 2000, and kick double twist basket tosses in the early 2000’s.
- In the first decade of Competitive Cheer, many teams were reluctant to compete for even the minimum 4 competitions. Or was it the school districts that weren’t on board yet and didn’t want to pay the entry fees? With basketball teams playing the maximum 22 games before their play-offs began, it seemed inequitable to say the least. It was still hard to convince the public, and the administration, that Competitive Cheer was really a sport. And for coaches who wanted to stop cheering at games and do the maximum 12 competitions, well, good luck convincing an A.D. that he was discriminating against a female sport. But in defense of the teams who really only *wanted* to do the 4, they felt it was difficult to learn all the rules and to choreograph 3 rounds (instead of the 2 that were used for sideline competitions), and to find athletes who could handle all the stress of our new sport.
- In the early years of sideline competing, and of Competitive Cheer, the spectators were mostly parents, and sometimes not many. Then in the late 90’s, spectators started to include cousins and grandparents, siblings and boyfriends, and full blown student sections. Most cheer competitions now have not an empty seat to be found! Spectators wear matching t-shirts and use poms, signs, organized crowd response yelling, cow bells, and water bottles filled with pennies. Ah, the noise makers!
- We used to have to find a fax machine to send score sheets and round 3 description sheets because e-mail wasn’t really a thing yet in the beginning of Competitive Cheer. Is that right or was I just oblivious to using e-mail?
- Before we had assigned seating at the Finals, spectators used to camp out in the parking lot at the Delta Plex for 18 hours so they could get good seats! Lots of east side and west side parents became friends as they took turns sleeping in their cars and saving each other’s place in line.

- From 2008 through 2012, our round 2 was worth 258.48 and the skills (already worth certain amounts; 6, 8, 10, 12, 14 points), were then multiplied by a 1.12. Our scores used to take forever to be tallied, plus the round 2 scores were carried out to the 10,000th decimal place! That's four decimal places!! It was always a ridiculous task for the announcer to read off scores because of the seemingly endless numbers.
- Speaking of tally people, do you remember when they used to use adding machines and coaches would then get their scores back with the adding machine tape stapled to the score sheets? No one "re-added" since we could just look at the numbers on the tape to see if they punched the right scores into the machine.
- For many years the Competitive Cheer manual came out every year instead of every two years. And of course it has gotten thicker and thicker, so the expense of printing it will likely dictate that we will never go back to a new manual every year.
- Beginning in 2008, we were told by the MHSAA that Girls Competitive Cheer had the largest State Finals attendance of all girls' sports in Michigan, officially surpassing Girls Basketball. That was true for many years....not sure if it still is.