

# Cheer Parent 101

Everything you wanted to know as a parent of an All-Star Cheerleader

Presented by the Parent Action Committee of USASF

## What is All-Star Cheerleading?

All Star cheerleading is a competition sport that involves boys and girls performing a 2 minute and 30 second routine composed of tumbling, stunting, pyramids, dance, and cheer segments. This routine is performed and scored against other competitive teams at various local, regional, national, and worldwide competitions. When we refer to tumbling, we mean gymnastic type skills like cartwheels and back handsprings. Stunting refers to a group of two or more individuals that elevate another cheerleader in the air. This also includes co-ed stunting that may only include one base and one flyer. Pyramids are a form of stunting but are done as a large group and are interconnected. Dance is a portion of a routine that consists of choreographed high energy dance moves. Lastly, the cheer portion is a part of the routine that team members perform precise coordinated motions while chanting a gym cheer. The main difference between High School cheer and All Star cheer is that a High School cheerleading team's primary purpose is to support a local school's sports team and keep the crowd excited. An All Star team performs purely for the challenge, thrill, and competition of the sport. Other differences include All Star cheerleading seasons can be as much as a year long, All Star cheerleaders are not required to be from the same school or area, and in many cases the skill set required for All Stars is much more difficult.

Pop Warner and BGYF (Bill George Youth Football) are also cheerleading programs like All Star. Cheerleaders in these programs are taught the basics of cheer and compete only occasionally against other recreation teams within the same program. Often the more talented cheerleaders from these programs "graduate" to All Star in search of a more challenging cheer environment that focuses more on their skills and accomplishments rather than the standing of their relative football teams. Most All Star Cheerleading teams are affiliated with a local gym. These gyms may also house gymnastics, dance, or other related sports. In addition they may have one location or multiple locations across several states. Likewise the number of cheerleaders each gym totals can be as little as 25 to over 800. A particular gym's style, values, and individual requirements can vary widely and will be discussed at length later in "How Do We Start?" The United States All Star Federation (USASF) is a governing body that is working to standardize and assist gyms across the nation. While it is not required for all gyms to belong to the USASF, most high quality gyms choose to belong and adhere to the USASF regulations.

## What does it take to be an All-Star Cheerleader?

Dedication to the sport, a commitment to hours of practice each week, and being a team player are all fundamentals of cheering for an All Star team. All Star cheerleaders are dedicated to the sport of cheerleading and it being seen as such to the public. Members are not chosen based on popularity, attractiveness, or familial status but on the skill they can offer the team. Team members are athletes in every sense of the word and work hard to dispel any biased assumptions of what a cheerleader should be. Parents and cheerleaders should be aware that cheering All Star is a large time commitment. It is akin to the commitment level of a club soccer team or a traveling baseball team. Normally, seasons begin with tryouts in the spring with light to heavy practices in the summer followed by a competition season running from fall to the spring of the following year. Some gyms offer a ½ year or compacted season but a typical commitment is 10-11 months long. Practices can be 2-3 hours long and as often as 2- 3 times a week. These practices are usually mandatory since many elements of a routine cannot be done without everyone there. In addition, most gyms require and/or encourage tumbling sessions or other private sessions to improve skills. Most teams will attend 5-10 competitions a season which usually consist of a total weekend commitment if not more. This being said, it is a full schedule for the average child to balance both All Star cheerleading and school commitments. Many have a hard time managing other sports while cheering All Star. Lastly, every All Star cheerleader should be aware that this is a team sport. Decisions are made based on what is best for the team and the performance. There may be times when a parent or athlete may question a coach's decision. Before discussing these issues with any gym staff, you should always ask yourself whether this decision was better for the team even though your child may not be in the position they had hoped. There will always be ups and downs in an All Star cheerleader's career, but rarely are these decisions made with any bias.

## **What are the Age Requirements, Divisions, and Levels?**

There are many different combinations of age groups, divisions, and levels. So many sometimes that they can be quite confusing! These were all created to insure that like ages were competing with like skill sets. Levels were designed to make sure that each team competes and is judged by how well they demonstrate a standard set of skills expected for every team competing at that same level. The levels range from 1-6 in All Star cheerleading with level 6 being the highest and most difficult. Often the younger cheerleader competes at the lower levels, but there are also many cheerleaders that enter All Star cheerleading in their teens that may start at level 1 or 2 as well. Remember that levels are purely based on skill, not on age. In addition, you may find your child has been placed in a level that is above or below what you expected. Coaches make these type decisions based on many different criteria. To learn more about specific skills allowed at each level, please go to <http://usasf.net/safety/cheerrules/>. Divisions also determine which group a team will compete. These are based on the age of the cheerleader as of August 31<sup>st</sup>, however other divisions have been included that incorporate the number of male cheerleaders allowed on each team. These age ranges are very strict and must be adhered to by each gym. To see a list of USASF divisions please go to [http://usasf.net.ismmedia.com/ISM2/Member%20Documents%20/09\\_10\\_Age\\_Grid.pdf](http://usasf.net.ismmedia.com/ISM2/Member%20Documents%20/09_10_Age_Grid.pdf)

## **What are the Costs Involved?**

Costs for All Star cheerleading can be quite high, but can be managed with some planning. In addition the exact costs vary widely from gym to gym but we can give you an idea of what to expect and question. There are two different areas of cost for All Star cheerleading. One is the money you pay directly to the gym. This can include tuition, competition fees, uniforms, make up, shoes, private sessions, coaches fees, or practice clothes. Secondly, there is the cost of travel to competitions. This can include gas/mileage or airfare, car rentals, hotel rooms, food during the event, and any extra money needed for souvenirs. Whether you pay these travel costs directly to the gym or pay on your own usually depends on the level of your cheerleader and whether they travel "as a team" to the events. Most gyms have lower level and younger children travel with their parents while older children travel with the gym.

Gyms tend to bill for expenses in one of two ways. Some gyms will add up all cost associated with the season and bill in equal monthly payments. Many parents prefer this method because they know exactly what to expect each month. The downside is that it leaves little room for the gym to make changes to the competition season once the year has begun. Other gyms choose to bill only the monthly tuition each month and then bill all other expenses as they occur. This requires a great deal of bookkeeping but many gyms prefer this method because it gives them flexibility in planning. It is important when you interview gyms to ask for a total cost of expenses and how these are expected to be paid. It is nearly impossible for us to give you a total cost for All Star cheer but a typical range would be from \$500 - \$5000 a year depending on the age and level of the team. However we will say that there are many gyms that cost far more than the upper limit mentioned here.

## **What about Competitions?**

Competitions are where each team performs their routine against other like competitors. These events can be local, regional, national, and worldwide. In addition some competitions can hold more prestige in winning than others. Your All Star team may only compete in your state, in the surrounding states, or travel nationwide. Often this is determined by the amount of competition in your area and the level of your teams. The competitions can be 1 or 2 day events. Typically 1 day events are local and regional competitions, while nationals are 2-day events. However there are many exceptions to this rule.

There are a couple things to know about event producers before you learn about the competitions themselves. There are hundreds of cheerleading companies across the nation. Likewise each of these companies usually offers state or national championship competitions. Sometimes the same company may even offer multiple "national" events. It is important to realize that an All Star gym can claim many national championships in just one season by attending multiple national events. There is not currently a system in place that crowns 1 state champion or 1 national champion. It is also important to know that different competitions are scored differently. While all require the elements of tumbling, stunting, pyramid, and dance within each applicable level, some may score certain skills with more weight than others. There is currently not a standard score sheet that is used industry wide for competitions. Your gym's "style" may cater to a certain score sheet and you'll find that your teams may compete at these events more often.

A gym's competition season can start as early as August and may last until April. Most gyms will start with local competitions, then attend regional or state competitions, and then save national competitions towards the end of the season. The norm is to attend between 5 and 10 competitions a season. Typically lower level, younger teams will attend less events. Competitions are chosen based on cost of travel, timing, prestige, company affiliations, availability of teams in each division, event producer rebate program, and world bid potential (we will discuss this later).

Your gym will give you a schedule of competitions at the beginning of the season. It is best to go ahead and begin looking into reservations at that time. Work with an experienced cheer parent or the gym to guide you through this process. Some competition hotels book immediately while others can wait until the last minute. Flights may be necessary or you may choose to carpool for a long drive. Your gym may also have pre-arranged travel planned for you. The travel can become quite stressful between being a new cheer parent and the cost of events. Please make sure you talk with your gym, an experienced cheer parent, or feel free to contact anyone on the Parent Action Committee at USASF.net before you let it overwhelm you. Once you have a few years under your belt you'll be an old pro!

An exact schedule for the competition will usually not come out until the week before the event. However there are usually some basic assumptions. Every team will have a call time, a warm up time, and a competition time for each day. Times can range from 7:00 am until 10:00 pm depending on the size of the event and the age/level of the team. In addition these times may change from day one to day two. From call time to performance time the difference can easily be 2+ hours. Also, most gyms want all families and cheerleaders to support each team in the program. This means you will not only be there for your own child's performances but for many others as well. This all being said, we recommend you plan a full day for any competition until you receive the exact schedule. For two day events, the first day you should expect your cheerleader to compete once and then cheer on other gym teams. On the second day your cheerleader will perform, cheer on other teams, and attend an awards session. Once you arrive at the competition you will need to drop your cheerleader off with their team or make sure your older child knows where to meet. Your gym will let you know ahead of time when and where to do this. Most gyms expect your child to be in full uniform attire including hair and make-up at that time. You may not see your child for several hours after this. Once you drop off, you will want to purchase a ticket or armband for entry if required (and they are almost always required!). In addition you may want to purchase a program as well. This will help you find the specific arena where your child is performing in addition to where other teams are performing as well. If this information is available online you may consider printing it off ahead of time and saving the cost of a program. Go into the arena, find a seat, and get ready to enjoy lots of cheerleading! Do not be alarmed if you see that your child's team has no competition in their division. Unfortunately this can happen quite often. Many parents blame the gym for deciding to attend this competition but the gym does not know what teams will be attending until the week before as well. It is best to see this as an opportunity to perform and critique the routine without the pressure of placement.

Most competitions will have "priority seating" available. This means that families and friends of the gym can go to a sectioned off area of seats to cheer on their team. Typically these seats are in an area that gives the best view of the team performing. You usually enter the priority seating on one side and exit on the other. This area is only for friends and family and is cleared out after each performance. Check your schedule and plan to be at the entry for priority seating one or two performances before the team you are waiting to see. Many cheer parents develop friendships with parents from other gyms and want to cheer on their children as well in priority seating. Usually you are able to go in with these parents but do not be surprised if a security person stops you from entering because you have logo apparel on from another gym. While it can be frustrating, they are trying to control anyone that may be there to cause trouble for another team.

Awards will either be on the first or second day depending on if it is a one or two-day event. Your gym will give you a time and place for your cheerleader to meet up with the team to attend awards together. Awards can be on the stage where the teams performed or in a separate location. Your cheerleader will sit with the team on the stage during the awards session. Awards are announced in a variety of ways but usually all teams are announced from the last place to the first place team. It is always important to hold your applause and excitement until your gym name has been called. This can be especially hard when you have heard the 2<sup>nd</sup> place team and know your team will be called next as the winner. The team may receive banners, medals, trophies, shirts, jackets, or other memorabilia based on their placement and level.

Scoring is always a hot topic in the industry of cheerleading. It is hard to get a real grasp of scoring until you have attended several events and even then it can be daunting. Many competition companies will post their score sheet online. These can be fun to look at as you become more knowledgeable of the sport. You will notice that each company may weight a skill differently. The exact same division and routines could be competed at several different competitions but be scored and awarded entirely different. Many competitions are held in vacation type spots. Because of the cost of travel already needed to attend the event, many families choose to extend the days into a family vacation. This can be quite cost effective and easier for siblings that are not involved in the sport. However, please remember that the cheer event has to come first during those 1 or 2 days of competition.

Lastly, use this experience as a chance to see other gym's teams and other levels. It's good to learn about other styles of cheer throughout the country because they will differ greatly. In addition you can get an idea of the higher levels of cheerleading that your child may be competing in the future. Plus you've spent a lot of money to attend this event, so you might as well make the most of it!

### **What is required of me as a Parent?**

We have discussed the cheerleader's commitment to All Star but it's also important to know the commitment level for parents as well. Most parents minimally drive their cheerleader to the gym twice a week however this number can be as much as 6-7 times a week. In addition, depending on the location of your gym, you may end up spending many hours at your child's gym waiting for practices to finish. This is outside of the weekends spent at the actual cheer competitions. As a parent of a younger non-driving cheerleader this can be quite taxing and often interrupts other activities like family night dinners. It can be especially tough on other siblings that are used to having that parent around more often. It is best to speak with a coach and other cheer parents who have children in an applicable age group and division about true time commitments and whether your family can make this sacrifice.

Once you and your athlete have made the commitment to All Star there are a few extra things that you want to keep in mind. Because of the competitive nature of the sport, cheerleading can often encourage gossip and mean spirited words. Many times this is coming more from the parents than the cheerleaders. It's imperative to remember that as a parent it is your responsibility to remain supportive of your cheerleader, your cheerleader's teammates, and your gym. This means not talking about other children or parents, especially in gym waiting areas, and quickly dealing with your own child if he or she is encouraging gossip. We all would like to say that the world of All Stars is free of this type thing but it can quickly get out of hand with a few bad apples in a cheer gym. Also, there will be times when the coaches make decisions that you are not comfortable or agree with as a parent. If a problem occurs (barring a safety issue) we encourage you to step back and think through your issue for a few days. Ask yourself several questions like...Am I being overly protective? Was my child doing something to deserve reprimand? What could be the reasons for my child's placement in a routine? Is there another reason this decision was made that I am not aware of as a parent? If you still feel strongly about the issue, your first conversation should always be with your child's coach. The coach can explain why decisions were made and give you more insight into the process. We would guess that as many as 95% of issues can usually be resolved between coach and parent. For most gyms, the appropriate way to make contact with the coach is by a phone call or email. DO NOT approach a coach on the cheer floor during practice or some other cheer activity. This is one of the cardinal rules of being a good cheer parent! The coaches need to concentrate on our children and their safety and cannot be worried about an angry cheer parent approaching them during this time.

Lastly, as a cheer parent, you will want to support your child with every up and down they experience in cheer; and there will be many of them. There may be skills your child masters in days and then there will be that one skill that takes two or more years to perfect. They may have what we call "mental blocks" where they just cannot perform a skill that they may have been doing for some time. Most times mental blocks happen after some type of injury or fall but typically there is not a physical reason preventing it. Also, there are times when your child may not make a team they expected or even worse see their friends go to higher level teams without them. Along with all these lows there are many highs though. The thrill of seeing your child perform a skill for the first time is incredible; while the pride of watching your tiny 5 year old daughter perform in front of thousands without any issues will bring tears to your eyes. There are great times and tough times but your support as a parent is priceless.