

# GET OUT YOUR POMPOMS FOR FEMINISM

By Patty Fisher

07/29/2010. Mercury News

The case involved Quinnipiac University in Connecticut, one of a handful of colleges that treat competitive cheerleading as a varsity sport.

Cheerleading a sport, like basketball or soccer? My reflex is to stand up and shout: Hey, Hey, No Way!

I don't dispute that cheerleaders are athletes. They train hard and perform difficult lifts and tumbling routines. But their traditional place is on the sidelines looking perky and pretty while the real athletes play the real sports. The women's movement has been about getting women off the sidelines and into the game, in sports as well as business and politics.

Quinnipiac tried to convince U.S. District Court Judge Stefan Underhill that cheerleading should count as a sport under Title IX, the federal law that guarantees women equal access to educational opportunity. The school planned to cut its women's volleyball program for budget reasons but claimed that its competitive cheer team offered women a comparable chance to participate in sports.

A victory for women?

When I heard that the judge ruled against Quinnipiac, saying that competitive cheerleading wasn't organized enough to be a real sport, I saw it as a victory for women's rights. Then I had a talk with Kimberly Archie, founder of the National Cheer Safety Foundation. She told me my feminism was stuck in the 1970s. Whether I like it or not, cheerleading is a lot more popular than volleyball, with an estimated 4 million American girls and women participating. And competitive cheer, which is separate from the sideline variety, has about as much to do with supporting guys on the field as fencing has to do with stabbing people to death. It's about strength, skill and teamwork. Teams are judged on their flips, basket throws and pyramid acrobatics.

But because competitive cheer is not a recognized sport, teams don't have the equipment, coaching or medical support other sports have. Archie says that's why cheerleading is the most dangerous women's sport, accounting for 65 percent of all catastrophic injuries in high school and college.

No protection

Archie created the foundation seven years ago after her daughter broke her arm practicing for her high school team. She was appalled to learn that Title IX didn't require schools to provide proper training and equipment, like floor mats, that would protect cheerleaders from injuries.

"Yes, they defy gravity," she said. "But if you know how to do it right and have a trained coach and access to proper medical care, then it takes a lot of risk out of it."

Archie blames feminists for keeping cheerleading from getting the support it deserves.

"The Title IX feminists think cheerleading is too feminine," she said. "They are afraid it would hurt other sports, like basketball and rugby. I find it ironic that Title IX opened doors to women athletes, but now they are confined to traditionally male sports."

She has a point. Competitive cheer is as much a sport as gymnastics, which is recognized by Title IX.

We can't let cheerleading replace soccer. But if we want women to compete, why shouldn't they be able to compete in their own sports? That's equal opportunity.