

Inside Sports: St. John's Catholic Prep cheerleading team grounded in trust

Video: See what makes the St. John's Catholic Prep cheer team work. Watch them practicing and performing.

By Elizabeth Lowe

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BUCKEYSTOWN - After the final bell rings at St. John's Catholic Prep, some students linger in the hallway by the main entrance, waiting for a ride home or a sports practice.

By 4 p.m. the number has dwindled and about a dozen girls donning white Nike sneakers and workout gear are gathered in the hallway. Steps from the front doors, they begin stretching and practicing their splits.

This is where the St. John's cheerleading team practices.

Their workouts include run-throughs of dance routines, stunts and cheers, all done in preparation for performances at home football and basketball games during the fall and winter sports seasons.



The St. John Catholic Prep cheerleading squad performs a routine during halftime of the varsity basketball game on Feb. 4. (Tom McCarthy Jr. | CR Staff)

The Buckeystown school's main hallway has a soaring ceiling, which allows several girls to hoist the "flyers" - the ones lifted or thrown in the air, typically the most petite girls on the team - high above them.

"I really like going up in the stunts and being high (in the air)," said freshman Shea Smith, 14, a flyer who worships in the Diocese of Arlington. "It was really, really scary (the first time). I trusted my bases (someone who stands on the floor and supports the flyers). I go to school with them every day so it wasn't hard."

Trust and teamwork are the sport's foundation.

"It's a great team sport because you're definitely working together," said Katie Bassett, the Vikings' head cheerleading coach, who took the helm last fall. "You have to really push yourself. If you don't have that will to want to do it, it's not going to

work.”

Senior Alexa Simon, a team captain and base, helps develop choreography for dance routines. She said cheerleading is “all about trust and friendship. I like the dance and the performing.”

The team showcases new dances at each game. During practice Feb. 10, Bassett instructed her team as they rehearsed a routine.

“OK, let’s walk through it,” said Bassett, 23, a parishioner of St. Peter the Apostle in Libertytown. “Can you make it bigger and more dramatic?”

Cheerleading is more challenging than spectators realize, said senior Aurora Simon, Alexa’s identical twin sister and a “base.”

The team doesn’t lift weights or do strength training exercises, said Alexa Simon, who noted her strength comes from her legs and arms, not her back, to lift the flyers.

“Try lifting people and throwing them in the air,” Aurora Simon said. “People don’t think cheerleading is a sport. It’s not easy; it’s hard.”

According to the National Federation of State High School Associations, cheerleading, called “competitive spirit” and defined as “cheerleading/dance/drill/pom and other spirit teams,” counted more than 119,000 participants during the 2012-13 school year, almost as many as indoor track and field.

Colleen Crowley, a junior at St. John’s, is one of 22 student athletes who cheered during the fall season. The 17-year-old flyer has cystic fibrosis, a disease that affects the lungs and digestive system, but said “it doesn’t really limit what I do because my case isn’t that bad.”

If – and when – she falls, “I get back up and try it again,” Crowley said.

“People don’t realize how difficult it is because we only perform so much,” she said.

“They don’t see that (the injuries).”



The St. John Catholic Prep cheerleading squad cheers and performs during a Feb. 4 home game. (Tom McCarthy Jr. | CR Staff)

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