

## **The Cheerleader**

It was the middle of September when Christina, my high school freshman, told me she wanted to be a cheerleader. She had suspected that her feminist mother would not be happy. She was correct. For more than eight years I had schlepped her to soccer practice, basketball camps, and swimming lessons. Now she wanted to be a cheerleader. I was confused and I was disappointed.

In 1962, when I was a high school freshman, sports meant gym class. To pass gym class one had only to prove they had washed and pressed their blue cotton gym suit on a weekly basis. Taking showers increased your grade. Anyone who didn't bow out of class with cramps was rewarded with an "A" grade.

Cheerleaders, however, were the only girls pictured in the sports section of my yearbook, something my daughter had commented on, and becoming a cheerleader wasn't easy. It was a political accomplishment with a degree of difficulty right up there with becoming the homecoming queen. To be chosen as a cheerleader meant you were popular, pretty, obedient, and probably dating a football player.

I flashed back to my own painful experiences of trying to make the squad. Try-outs included at least a hundred girls in a gym, dancing and jumping in unison following the gym teacher's instructions. There were cuts. The humiliating kind. Hopeful contenders were too short, too tall, too heavy, too thin, or they didn't have that elusive quality called "school spirit."

Hope was built and hope was destroyed. The seemingly endless process of weeding out the "insufficient" ended friendships. It was adolescent torture. And, no matter how high I jumped, or how I curved my back in flight, I never made last cut.

My mind raced as Christina stood in front of me. She was waiting for my

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approval. I knew that the feminist I was today would never have wanted to be a cheerleader. Cheerleading was sexist. It was about wearing short skirts and boosting the moral of guys while ignoring girls' achievements in sports. While cheerleading was the only athletic activity open to me as a high school student, girls today had the opportunity to play real team sports. It was the '90s. Why would anybody even want to be a cheerleader today? What about all the titles women had fought for, like U.S. National Champion and Olympic gold medalist?

Christina held her head high, showing her resolve. I looked into her big blue eyes. She had decided to be a cheerleader *and* she wanted my support. I had said what I thought, but added with sincerity that she should do what she wanted to do. "Feminism is about choices," I said, "and you need to make your own."

In her school filled with female sports achievers, first in the state in soccer, first in the state in basketball, my daughter became a cheerleader. Then she became the cheerleading captain. She learned to choreograph dance numbers and demand equal practice space from none too happy football coaches and principals alike. Working with an elderly advisor and no coach, she sought out former cheerleaders in the community that volunteered to help her teach her squad.

Christina refused to wear the school's traditional Indian Warrior costume reserved as a special honor for head cheerleaders. She proclaimed it not only cumbersome for her sport, but racist as well. Then she moved on to recruitment. She wanted to integrate the team by gender. In her senior year she successfully trained two young men to be cheerleaders—a first in the district.

Under my daughter's leadership, cheerleading gained new-found respect as a team sport. Cheerleading had been an exclusive club and an admired activity for girls in my high school, but it had been a devalued activity in my daughter's school. Most hurtful was the criticism of cheerleaders voiced by female cohorts playing "real" sports. Christina was undaunted. Soon her squad began cheering for girls' teams at the invitation of the girls' teams themselves. She worked her squad every night while holding down a job and carrying excellent grades. She was voted the most valuable player by the team and given the sportsmanship award by her principal.

My daughter had entered this sport knowing full well it was going to be a challenge—a much different challenge than the one I had experienced as a young woman. I wanted to be accepted as a member of the popular girls' clique. She wanted to challenge the status quo. I looked at the choice she had made through a new lens. I could not help but admire her courage. She became my hero. No one was prouder than I when she was on top of the pyramid, the center dancer on the football field, or leading a cheer for other girls' teams. My daughter, the feminist cheerleader. She not only had my support, I thought she was awesome.