

BEYOND THE POMS: THE VALUE OF PROFESSIONAL SPORTS ENTERTAINMENT

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THE BEGINNING

For decades the world of professional sport cheerleading and dance has been viewed as one that highlights eye candy and marketing propaganda to simply serve the 'big business' of professional sports. Seen as a "newer" concept in entertainment, with a surge in popularity over the past 50-60 years, the 'business' of pro sports entertainment itself, has begun to level the playing field in recent seasons. Yes the players on any dance team are paid tens of millions of dollars less than their respective club's athletes. However, professional dance teams today are one of the most powerful driving forces of the evolving dance industry as well as one of the most recognizable and profitable aspects of marketing and social media for pro sports organizations. Dance and cheer squads put in the same number of hours as sport players do, in terms of training, game days and community appearances. Today, pro dance and cheer teams are equally represented in most championship game festivities, junior dance team development and exhibition games abroad. Many pro dance and cheerleading team members go on to careers in television, film and on stage. Some teams have been featured in their own ongoing television series (e.g. "Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders: Making the Team" on CMT). Although cheerleading itself began as a male sport, with celebrities through history including presidents holding spots on college teams, today the majority of professional squads are comprised of women. The current emphasis is on class, quality and community. This field is clearly becoming one of female empowerment for cheerleaders and the teams they serve. The following is a brief personal perspective on pro dance team operations.

THE PROCESS

To become a professional dancer or cheerleader, extensive auditions take place. This consists of instant 'look' cuts, followed by 1 to 3 rounds of dance cuts. The initial cuts take one day up to 3 weeks. Added to this process is a Boot Camp period of training and evaluation. Everything from dance technique to weight, appearance, sports knowledge and speaking ability will be judged during this period. This period lasts up to 2.5 months. Final cuts are usually the 'Field Evaluation Day' for NFL, NBA or CFL teams, wherein dancers must prove themselves in terms of fitness and dance ability, for a panel of critical judges, before being rewarded with the privilege of taking the field. Out of the tens of millions of citizens of North America, only a select group of young women, and men, will successfully complete this process and thus be able to call themselves a professional dancer or cheerleader.

THE PROCEDURE

Training and quality control on any professional dance or cheerleading team incorporates a wide variety of skill areas. A strong background in dance technique is essential. Team members are required to submit monthly written evidence of regular physical workouts and strength as well as flexibility training (useful, for example, for those drop-splits and acrobatics featured on many NFL teams). Cheerleaders and dancers must also learn new choreography every week for 3-6 feature dances. This is done in 8-12 rehearsals monthly, each rehearsal lasting 3-4 hours, most at a local dance studio facility. Additional game-day material, such as cheers, sideline dances, player tunnels and fan interaction, is also rehearsed and refined weekly. The typical season lasts 8-10 months, with a full 12 months of public relations also involved. Regular evaluations take place to judge technique and knowledge of material. Every professional sports game has a theme or a designated charity partnership attached to it, for marketing purposes. Dance Team Directors must then also incorporate themed pre-game or half-time presentations which often include working as back-up dancers for top-name musicians, or which highlight a chosen charity or holiday. The role of the Dance Team Director also includes finding additional costuming, formations, props and musical selections, to meet these weekly demands. Often this is done with little to no budget or preparation time. This invites the topic of sponsorships.

THE ROLE OF SPONSORS IN THE FUNCTIONING OF A PROFESSIONAL DANCE TEAM

Corporate sponsorships are invaluable for any professional cheerleading or dance team. Sponsors typically include: photographers, videographers, tanning companies, uniform companies, teeth whitening, hair and make-up sponsors, footwear and warm-up gear, and marketing materials production companies. Because most dance or cheer teams do not have the luxury of a substantial budget, such sponsorships allow a team to function within their means. Most sponsors are given perks such as free game tickets, billboard or jumbotron logo mentions, personal appearances by team members, and logo representation on calendars, photo cards, web and social media.

DANCE STYLES ENCOMPASSED IN PROFESSIONAL SPORTS ENTERTAINMENT

A pro dance team in most markets will focus on commercial dance styles such as street jazz, hip hop, and acrobatic technique. Poms are often used due to the size and scope of performance venues. Most NBA teams feature multiple spirit squads which allow for breakdance and novelty styles to be showcased also at home games. Many teams also perform Broadway and musical theatre-style jazz routines for 'themed' games such as Hallowe'en ("Thriller" themes) and Christmas ("Santa" themes). Numerous top-level dance teams also feature a separate "performance troupe". This group is comprised of the strongest, most technically proficient and most diversely skilled dancers on the team. This small, elite squad will travel near and far. They dance at charity, corporate, military and community events. They perform a full repertoire of styles such as lyrical, contemporary, tap, acro, latin/ballroom, jazz and tap, in both group and solo categories. For a professional cheerleader on an elite show team,

this means an additional commitment of at least 2-4 hours of rehearsal per week, not including numerous external performances and travel.

CHOREOGRAPHERS, DIRECTORS AND TRAINERS

Typically, professional dance teams attend a team Boot Camp at the start of the season. During this intensive, they work with a designated professional choreographer, to set multiple routines within a short period of time, as well as to cover organizational procedures and etiquette guidelines. These dances are then taken back to the rehearsal facility to perfect and set into formations. Additionally, in North America, some of the top teachers and choreographers for music videos, awards shows, the Superbowl, etc are easily available for hire, to personally choreograph for your dance team. Special conferences designed for pro dance and cheer teams, are also held regularly in the USA and Canada. Many of the top NBA and NFL teams attend these conferences annually to stay at the head of the pack in terms of evolving movement styles, look and music. Most pro teams have a Director and a Choreographer who work in tandem to produce the on-field or on-court show each week. Directors and Choreographers on any team can expect full-time hours and responsibilities, 24/7 social media upkeep and extensive mentoring work. Most Directors are former dancers whose passion for the industry and for their team has blossomed into a leadership role over time. Many are sourced from within this industry due to the specific movement stylistics and marketing “look” which each team maintains. This type of leadership career is truly a labour of love and it is a lifestyle choice as well.

COMPENSATION AND RECOGNITION

Professional dance team members and professional cheerleaders are paid by stipend, approximately \$35 to \$75 USD each, per game performance. This figure varies by league. In the NFL and NBA, some dancers also receive an hourly rate for rehearsals, corporate appearances and mileage compensation to such appearances. Team members assist to build the budget themselves for this compensation, through fundraisers and solicitation of sponsorships, throughout the season. Some teams are owned by the sports club itself and therefore have a tight budget and very firm directives for image and activity. Other teams are owned as separate limited liability companies and therefore have greater flexibility in terms of operations. The consensus remains that the true and main value of participation for a performer on any pro sports squad is the networking possibilities – not the pay.

VALUE IN THE COMMUNITY

The presence of a professional dance or cheerleading team in a community has 4 main benefits:

- 1) Role model presence by accomplished, polished performers and ambassadors, for young people in the community, which gives youth someone to emulate. Strict work contracts and standards of conduct for team members help to maintain high standards for all. Image is everything. One must always be a shining example of professionalism and performance perfection.
- 2) Increased visibility for key charity causes and initiatives, such as: food drives, cancer awareness, children's foundations, disaster relief, etc. The power of celebrity has helped numerous causes over the years.
- 3) League-wide standards and annual meetings to strengthen the backbone of direction across dance and cheer teams near and far. This bodes well for the future of the industry.
- 4) Alumni Organizations provide the opportunity for long-term commitment by a dance team, to the home community. Alumni cheer and dance organizations are now more active than ever in terms of performing, promotions and charity work. Contacts, fan base, fundraising can now grow and strengthen over decades.

THE FUTURE OF PROFESSIONAL SPORTS ENTERTAINMENT

In the coming decades, professional sports entertainment will continue to command an integral spotlight on game day as well as will maintain a key role in the marketing campaigns of sports organizations. The explosion of social media is now employed to connect dancers to their fans, sport club and community in direct ways. Dance styles are evolving to incorporate new styles and themes of performance. Multi-disciplinary extravaganzas with technologically involved production elements are taking their place across the globe. These developments are equally as inspiring as the developments seen in classical and contemporary dance companies, on Broadway and in film and television. Commercial dance styles and current music will continue to dominate the movement on the field and court. Choreography will continue to focus on sharp, visually pleasing elements that can be seen and enjoyed from a distance (such as in stands or seating levels). This includes extensive formation work, precise motions, intricate pom patterns and high kicks. Professional dance and cheerleading teams will continue to grow in strength and in scope over the coming decades, as more and more women (and some men) complete both active and alumni aspects of their careers. The financial and customer loyalty value of such an entity to their respective sport club will continue to build.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Elizabeth Morgan has studied dance since age 3, classical music since age 7 and theatre since age 7. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Literature and Psychology with additional studies in Drama-in-Education. She was admitted to the Canadian Dance Teachers' Association in 1993 and has been a member of the International Dance Council since 2011.

Miss Morgan is an accomplished performer, teacher, choreographer, and a sought-after talent competition judge. She has choreographed/performed/directed for productions, teams and venues including: NBA, WNBA, CFL, NFL, UFL, AIFL, OHL, NAFL, OVFL, NBL, the Grey Cup, the Canada Summer Games, the Juno Awards Show, the Ohi-Ontario Games, Walt Disney World, The Harlem Globetrotters, college and university dance teams, and numerous national and world-level dance and cheerleading teams. Her dance training includes ballet, jazz, hip hop, tap, acrobatics, lyrical, liturgical, musical theatre, song and dance, cheerleading, tumbling, pom dance, ethnic dance, Zumba, fitness conditioning, yoga, and ballroom. Elizabeth is one of only a few Canadians in history to have held a Captain position on both an NFL and a CFL pro dance team. In 2004 she was awarded the Overall Talent Scouting Award from among 300 professional cheerleaders from NFL, NBA and CFL, at ProDance Miami.

Elizabeth's most recent extracurricular efforts include direction of two teams who achieved bronze medals at Dance World Cup Canada in July 2013 in the lyrical/contemporary and jazz categories, as well as co-coordinating CFL Alumni CFL cheerleaders from 3 decades to perform live at a Toronto Argonauts half-time show for Breast Cancer Awareness in October 2013. She is active with local charity commitments and works to apply evolving dance concepts to community initiatives. Elizabeth owns Expressions Dance Arts Inc. which operates three successful studio locations in Southwestern Ontario. She has also worked in television in both production and on-camera roles. Elizabeth freelances as a dance and fitness writer, judge and guest consultant for professional dance and cheerleading teams around the globe.

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