



South Kitsap cheer flyer Alyson Bell is tossed during a stunt above the protective arms of her teammates. (Bob Smith | Kitsap Daily News)

**SOUTH KITSAP****CHEER, SK-style**

Hit television docuseries highlights the peaks, pitfalls of cheerleading

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By **Mike De Felice**

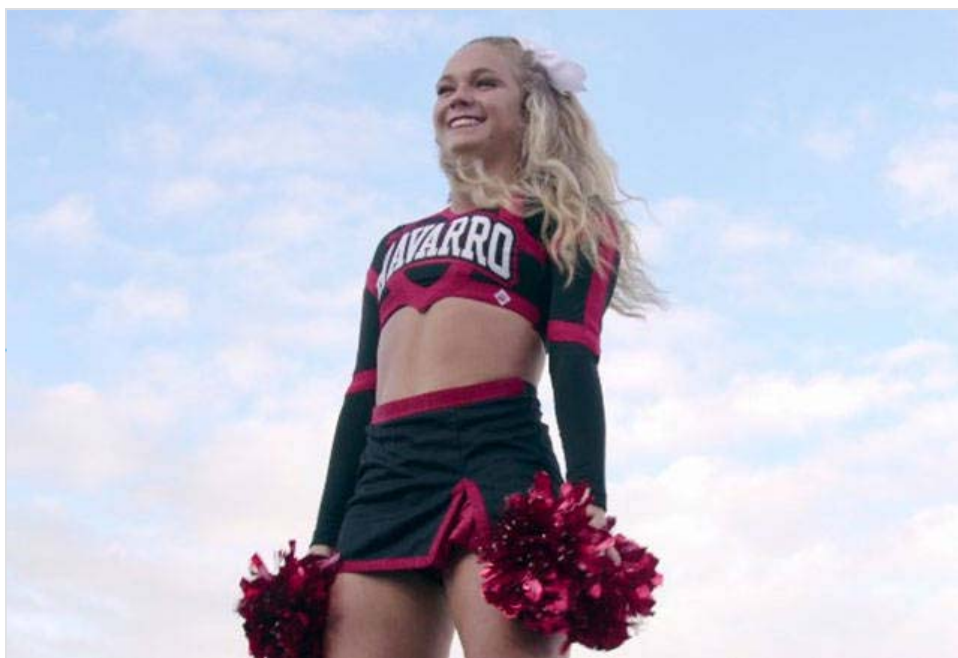
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No matter your view of cheerleading, what era you followed their chants or

how closely you identified with the girls and guys who would exhort the crowd to cheer on the local team, the image you most likely have is of perky teenagers dressed in identical outfits, expending seemingly endless energy to whip the sports crowd into a frenzy.

While it's all that, being a member of a high school and college cheer squad these days is so much more. More athleticism. More precision. Seemingly endless practicing. And more injuries.

Over the past several weeks, a breakout docuseries on Netflix is giving viewers an intimate back-stage view of the stressful and sometimes dangerous world of cheerleading. The six-part series, "Cheer," has become a viral television hit and is racking up huge ratings while viewers become acquainted with a group of Texas junior-college cheerleaders who compete on one of the premier squads in the nation — the Boston Celtics of the cheerleading world — little two-year Navarro College.



"Cheer" is a multi-part docuseries on Netflix. (Courtesy Netflix)

The six-part "Cheer" documentary spotlights the Navarro College cheer team, a noted co-ed squad representing a community college in Corsicana, Texas, a small town south of Dallas. Coach Monica Aldama has led the team to 14 national championships since 2000 and five NCA grand national championships since 2012. The series follows the team's attempt to perfect a 2-minute and 15-second routine at the NCA national cheerleading championship in Daytona Beach, Florida.

Coach Aldama, sometimes referred to as "The Queen," is viewed by many as a caring "mother bird" to her collegiate charges, and by others as a win-at-all-costs coach who can seem dispassionate when someone is injured before a major event.

The trending show, which follows the high-flying, acrobatic world of competitive cheerleading and also exposes the dangerous side of the sport, is inspiring cheerleaders across the country — including those at South

Kitsap High School.

At South Kitsap, 4-foot-10 junior Kianda Purdum has the build of a diminutive gymnast combined with the flashy smile of an airborne cheerleader. Not surprisingly, she got hooked on the series.

“I’m obsessed with it,” said the 17-year-old flyer, who is regularly tossed in the air to spin and flip. “It shows the real, hard stuff of the sport.”

Her fellow squad member, junior Makenzie Vanden Bos, quickly agreed. “I really like it,” said the 16-year-old back base, whose job is to hold and catch flyers like Purdum. “I watched all of the episodes in a day!”



Serenity Gainey, Elle Matheson, Kianda Purdum and Makenzie Vanden Bos share a laugh during practice. (Bob Smith | Kitsap Daily News)

Competitive cheer routines featured on the television program are at a different level than that performed by old-school sideline cheerleaders, who shake glistening pompons, do basic maneuvers and root for the home team.

Competitive cheerleaders compete against other squads by performing exacting athletic routines in which members are tossed 25 feet in the air while performing acrobatic spins, and then fall into the arms of teammates down below. Meanwhile, others at ground level run through a complex series of gymnastic leaps and backflips that blur the eye.

The 20-member South Kitsap team performs both competitive and sideline cheerleading styles. They appear at football and basketball games, plus battle in regional cheer competitions with the hope of going to state.





Serenity Gainey throws a stunt during cheer practice at South Kitsap High School. (Bob Smith | Kitsap Daily News)

The team is coached by Heather Hays, who, in addition to leading the Kitsap team for three years, is a counselor at the high school. Hays began her cheerleader career at Olympia High School in Bremerton, then cheered at Central Washington University and later for a semi-pro football team. She turned to coaching after suffering a back injury in an automobile accident. Hays oversees the team alongside assistant coach Merissa Ekman, a former University of New Mexico cheerleader.

## Injuries

Viewers of “Cheer” routinely witness Navarro athletes as they suffer injuries during workouts.

In one episode, Morgan, a flyer/tumbler from Wyoming, is practicing just days before the national competition when she injures her ribs while landing. She is reluctant to tell the coach and secretly goes to the emergency room between practices. She’s prescribed pain medication and is warned that more hits to the ribs could lead to fractures and organ damage. Concerned that taking medication will keep her from practice, she decides not to take the pills and ends up returning to the gym for more punishment.

In another episode, Allie, a top flyer on the elite squad, nonchalantly tells viewers she has suffered five concussions.

TT, a stunter, returns to practice after getting injured at an outside cheerleading event the coach told him to avoid. Coach Aldama asks the athlete to practice. After a few attempts to catch female cheerleaders, TT eventually falls to the ground in pain.

Injuries always loom as a possibility for those who participate in the activity — at South Kitsap and at Navarro.

“The risk of injury for the girls is as great in cheer as it is in other sports. You are talking about athletes lifting others that are their own weight,” Hays said. “And flyers [those who are tossed in the air and caught] do full

spins into the arms of others.”



South Kitsap cheer coach Heather Hays (center) and assistant coach Merissa Ekman (inside right) huddle with the team prior to heading out to perform in a boys basketball playoff game against Rogers Feb. 8. (Bob Smith | Kitsap Daily News)

Some high-risk maneuvers that put cheerleaders in harm's way include a "full down," where a flyer tossed in the air does a 360-degree spin before landing in the arms of teammates, and a "pyramid," in which flyers are supported by bases (those who hold flyers up) and tossed up to do aerial stunts.

The cheerleaders can suffer injuries such as rolled ankles, hurt and broken noses, and concussions, Hays said.

"If someone gets a concussion, there are strict athletic protocols that must be followed before they can return," she said. These include the student getting cleared by their own doctor, then getting cleared by the school's athletic trainer.

"The process can mean the person is sidelined three to four weeks," Hays said.

The American Academy of Pediatrics issued a report in 2012 noting that cheerleading "accounted for 65 percent of all direct catastrophic injuries to girl athletes at the high school level and 70.8 percent at the college level" between 1982 and 2009.

### **Grueling schedule**

The South Kitsap girls endure a year-round schedule. They appear at football games in the fall and basketball games in the winter. They also compete in head-to-head competition against other cheerleader teams from November to February. In spring, they practice until May tryouts. July is their only full month off.

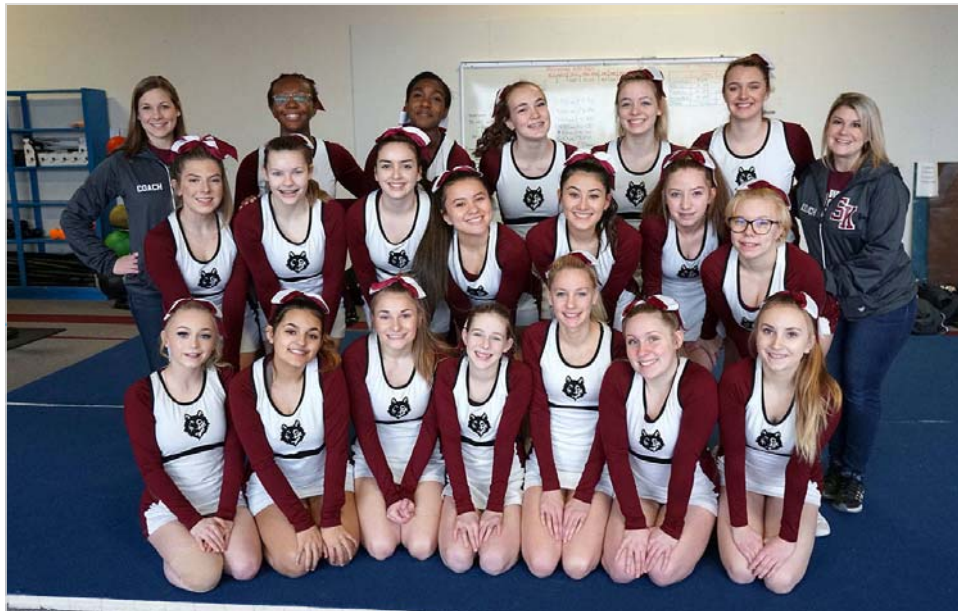
Ironically, when SKHS squad members go to regional competitions, they

have no cheerleaders rooting for them and attract few spectators outside of their parents.

Last year, the Kitsap girls entered three competitions. They earned more points in each successive event. The girls missed going to state (the week of Feb. 8 in Battleground, Washington), by a slim 1.7 points, Hays said.

Of this year's cheerleaders, 10 were invited to try out for the All American team; four ended up being accepted.

Currently, the SKHS team consists of girls, but no boys. That is not always the case. One year a male gymnast joined the team to provide him a venue to showcase his talents, the coach said.



“I would love to have guys on the team,” Hayes said. “I need them for stunts.”

Boys can realize major benefits by joining the team, Hayes said. Athletes can keep in shape during the off-season by joining, she said, and there are plenty of college cheerleading scholarship opportunities available for them.

### Expenses

Being a cheerleader can be an expensive proposition.

Girls pay for their own uniforms, practice clothes and equipment. They also cover the costs of going to a two-day cheerleader camp. Annual costs run an average of \$1,000, Hays said. Only competition entry fees are covered by the school, but even those expenses are raised by the girls in mandatory fundraising events.

Despite the costs involved and realizing that their hard work won't become the subject of a Netflix series, it seems the cheerleaders enjoy the prospects of representing South Kitsap High School.



South Kitsap's cheer squad gather before departure to perform at a boys basketball playoff game against Rogers Feb. 8.

## Key Team Profiles

### Kianda Purdum

Standing 4-feet-11 tall, Kianda Purdum is ideally suited to be a flyer, a cheerleader who is hoisted above teammates in the crowd-pleasing pyramid formation, and tossed in the air.

Kianda's physique is ideal for the high-flying stunts she performs, Hays said.

Like most of her teammates, Kianda loves the "Cheer" series.

"The show has inspired me to not give up when I'm physically exhausted," she said. "The goal is to keep improving."

Becoming a cheerleader has had a significant impact on Kianda's life. Growing up, she was bullied by other kids because of her size and suffered from anxiety.

"I didn't like to be around people. I mostly kept to myself," the junior said.

Last year, her family moved here from Idaho so her mother, who suffers from an autoimmune disease, could be closer to her doctors. The move took Kianda away from friends, which added to her anxiety.

Joining the cheer squad, however, has boosted Kianda's self-confidence and increased her circle of friends.

"I love my team," she beams. "They are my best friends."

### Makenzie Vanden Bos

"During my freshman year, I slacked and put things off," said 16-year-old Makenzie Vanden Bos, a base on the team.



Getting on the cheerleader squad changed things for Makenzie. “Now I have to keep my grades up, otherwise I could get benched and miss games,” the junior explained.



South Kitsap cheerleader Makenzie Vandenberg said participating in the activity has helped her to step outside her comfort zone and become better organized with her schoolwork. (Bob Smith | Kitsap Daily News)

She decided to try out for the team for what many would view as a courageous reason.

“Usually I kept to myself, but I wanted to step outside of my comfort zone,” she explained. Now she is at ease being in front of crowds at assemblies and games.

Makenzie attributes being on the team with teaching her leadership skills and helping her become more responsible about managing time so she can earn good grades.

“I want to get on a [competitive] All-Star team and be a cheerleader in college,” she said of her future goals. She also plans to enter the medical field and possibly

follow in the footsteps of her aunt, who is a nurse.

A big “Cheer” fan, she binge-watched the series in a day. She appreciates how the show portrays cheerleading.

“A teacher asked the class, ‘Who is in sports?’ I raised my hand and someone said cheer is not a sport.”

Makenzie was not pleased. “Cheer helped show me [that] this is a sport. It shows how time-consuming it is.”

### Elle Matheson

Being on the Spirit Squad at Sedgwick Middle School is much different than being a high school cheerleader, noted freshman Elle Matheson, who serves as a base for the cheer squad.

“I had to adjust to doing stunts,” the 14-year-old said. “I had not worked out much, but now we do conditioning like running, push-ups and lunges. I’m [often] very sore.”

All the physical exercise of cheerleading, however, has paid dividends.

“I have much more energy. That has helped with PE and helps me during the school day and when it’s time to study,” Elle said.

Like many on the team, a pet peeve of hers is when others do not consider cheerleading a sport.

“We lift weights. But in our case, [what we lift] are other people,” she pointed out. “Most people don’t see our workouts or see us at our



competitions. We work just as hard as others do.”

At the end of the school day and before practice starts, Elle often can be found in the school’s commons area cracking open her school books to take care of some homework projects.

The diligent habit may explain why, despite going to three practices a week, cheering at weekday and weekend games and preparing for cheerleader competitions, Elle has been able to maintain a 4.0 GPA.

### Serenity Gainey

Whenever the cheerleaders are battling through a tough workout and need some comic relief, they turn to Serenity Gainey.

“Serenity can break the tension,” coach Hays said with a smile.

Before a stunt, such as throwing a girl in the air, someone counts down so everyone is on the same page. Serenity is famous for calling out numbers using accents.

“Sometimes I do a British accent,” the 15-year-old freshman joked. “I also do a good ‘old man’ voice,” she added, using a gravelly voice to demonstrate.

Once while cheering at a sparsely attended girls’ basketball game, as the home player was shooting a free throw, Serenity called out a cheer in a voice better suited for an outdoor football game. She drew the attention of players on both teams and learned there are times she needs to curb her enthusiasm. “My bad,” she smirked.

If anyone suggests that cheerleading is not a sport, Serenity speaks out.

“We don’t wear glitter and lipstick. We are running and catching flyers. During our competitive season every week, we have three practices, three games [many on Friday nights] and compete on Saturdays.”



It’s hands up after a South Kitsap cheer squad routine. (Bob Smith | Kitsap Daily News)

Serenity began her cheer career in eighth grade at Cedar Heights Middle School. Cheerleading is a tradition in the family. Her mother and aunt both led cheers in high school.

After graduation, the freshman wants to cheer at a college somewhere in the Northwest. “I want to move out but not be so far away that I miss getting free laundry!”



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