Cheerleading and the Law: Risk Management Strategies for Cheerleaders

Cheerleading has changed dramatically since its beginning in the 1800s. The number of cheerleaders on every level from Little League to professional sports has increased and with the added popularity cheerleading has brought a significant rise in injuries to its participants. In addition to the regular cheerleading at football and basketball games and other sports, competitive cheerleading has been added in many colleges where it has become a varsity sport.

The Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) reports that there were 24,674 cheerleading-related injuries in 2002 and Dr. Fred Mueller, who publishes national statistics on cheerleading injuries notes that the number of injuries in cheerleading doubled from 1990 to 2002. Unfortunately with the increase in participation and injuries, there is an increase in the number of cheerleaders who go to court for various reasons. From 1989 until 2006, lawsuits are filed for unsafe facilities, uncertified coaches, religious discrimination, stunts and pyramid stunts that lead to falls, death in transporting cheerleaders, unqualified coaches and a myriad of other reasons. Damage awards are at an all-time high and many damage awards change the manner in which cheerleading is conducted by colleges and universities. The University of Nebraska settled a lawsuit for $2.1 million when a cheerleader fell practicing an aerobatic flip. Because insurance became so costly, university officials banned stunts such as flips, tumbles and pyramids.

Cheerleading coaches and other personnel as well as cheerleaders disagree on many issues but all agree that as many cheerleaders are athletic and gymnasts they agree that coaches should be certified and trained, facilities safe and risk management strategies implemented.

In this presentation, risk management strategies including guidelines for starting a season will be featured. Changing guidelines for insurance coverage and new rules will be discussed as well as handouts that deal with reported injuries on the collegiate level. Trends such as competitive cheerleading will be discussed as well as emergency medical plans and certification of coaches.

Time will be available for questions and comments from the audience and handouts of forms for informed consent and safety audits will be provided for attendees.

Learning Outcomes:

1. Create an awareness of the need for safety and appropriate risk management strategies for cheerleaders.
2. Understanding and assessing legal liability in cheerleading.
3. Understanding medical aspects including emergency medical care for cheerleaders.
4. Be familiar with types of injuries that occur in cheerleading.
5. Be familiar with safety equipment.
6. Be knowledgeable about spotting in stunts and pyramids.
7. Understand the requirements for competitive cheering on the collegiate level.
8. Understand coaching certification requirements.