
HANSON, MARY ELLEN. *GO! Fight! Win Cheerleading in American Culture*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1995. Pp. 172. Notes, illustrations, bibliography, index. \$14.95 pb., \$29.95 cb.

Recently, a women's studies colleague confided to me in an embarrassed tone that she had been a cheerleader in high school. She quickly assured me, however, that despite this youthful indiscretion, her feminist credentials were intact. It seems that cheerleading had turned out to be the ultimate consciousness-raising experience. By the time basketball season rolled around, my friend had concluded that the moves she was required to perform were largely designed to show off her legs to male spectators, and she angrily quit the team. The punch line to my friend's story was that in firmly distancing herself from her cheerleading past, she reinforced the image of the cheerleader as a frivolous sex object, the antithesis of the intelligent, independent, competent woman my colleague had subsequently become. But for every such saga that emphasizes the negative qualities supposedly embodied by the American cheerleader, there is a story that promotes the cheerleader as a symbol of leadership, wholesomeness, popularity, and youthful prestige. Appropriately, then, at the center of Mary Ellen Hanson's engaging history of cheerleading lies a key question: "How did cheerleading come to represent both the essence of social success and the target of social scorn?" (p. 2).

The answer to that question lies in the changing nature of cheerleading from its inception in the late nineteenth century to the form it takes in contemporary America. The original cheerleaders were student volunteers at the nation's elite all-male colleges. Typical of these early practitioners was young Franklin D. Roosevelt, who led cheers for Harvard in its 1903 football contest with Brown. Cheering, identified with the masculine upper class, thus became an idealized activity. A major transition in the history of cheerleading occurred in the 1920s, when young women at the nation's state-supported coeducational colleges expanded their participation in previously male-dominated campus organizations, including the cheering squad. At the same time, compulsory education laws were making secondary education a mass experience for American youth, and high schools increasingly patterned their athletic programs on those of the nation's colleges. Among the practices that high schools adopted from the collegiate model was cheerleading, an activity performed by both male and female secondary students. By the 1970s, the transformation was complete. Cheering had become a common practice in public schools, at all socioeconomic levels, and the majority

of cheerleaders were female. Now viewed as a feminine activity that was subsidiary to masculine athletics, cheerleading became trivialized. As Hanson notes, however, the image of cheerleading in the 1990s is decidedly mixed. Professional squadsó such as the famous Dallas Cowboy Cheerleadersóare exclusively female, highly eroticized, and therefore largely devalued. In contrast, college and scholastic cheerleading is coeducational and increasingly athletic and competitive, qualities that are greatly valued in American society. Contributing to the dual image of cheerleading in the 1990s, the debate, particularly prevalent on the high school level, centers on whether cheerleading constitutes a legitimate ìsportî to be financed by a schoolís athletic budget or merely a support ìactivityî to be maintained by the participantsí own fund-raising efforts. Although both positive and negative stereotypes of cheerleaders clearly coexist in contemporary America, Hanson argues that ìprevailing images generally cast the cheerleader in feminine, devalued termsî (p. 3).

As Hanson notes at one point in her study, ìEvery participant in American culture has a personal story, comment, or opinion about cheerleadersí (p. 99). And she has exhaustively gathered such accounts, from prescriptions for ideal cheerleader deportment published in instruction manuals of the 1920s to press coverage of the notorious Texas cheerleader ìhit momí in the 1990s. In a book that attempts to present the history of cheerleading throughout the United States, however, an inordinate amount of discussion is centered on developments in the state of New Mexico, where the author is employed at the University of New Mexicoís General Library. In portions of her study, Hanson also includes information that is largely irrelevant to her analysis, including a lengthy list of national celebrities who are former cheerleaders.

These criticisms aside, Hanson presents a competent, thoughtful history of a uniquely American phenomenon. Whether praised or damned, the cheerleader remains a prominent icon in our culture, and one certainly worthy of the scholarly treatment Hanson has given the subject.

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