

# Professional Cheerleaders



## Occupational Brief Title Codes:

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## Occupational Subtitles:

- Choreographers

## Work Classification Based Related

### D.O.T. Occupations:

- Choreographers
- Dancing Instructors

## Interests Based Related

### G.O.E. Occupations:

- Dance Studio Managers

## Skills Based Related

### O\*NET Occupations:

- Actors
- Makeup Artists, Theatrical and Performance
- Models
- Professional Photographers

## Noteworthy Quote:

*“Although the schedule can be extremely demanding at times, being a professional cheerleader has been one of the most invaluable experiences of my life. I enjoy being a part of the whole game day experience, and there is nothing like performing in front of tens of thousands of screaming fans, but I never imagined I would be interviewed for television and radio, or travel to places all over the world, not to mention the wonderful feeling of empowerment, like I have made a difference, participating in community and charitable events.”*

➤ **Professional Cheerleader/Dancer**

**Professional cheerleaders** (pro-`fes-sion-al `cheer-lead-ers) perform cheer and dance routines to root for their football or basketball team and entertain audiences.

Today 3.8 million Americans are involved in the cheerleading industry. One of the most hated and adored of American pastimes, cheerleading, for all its bouncing and cheering, is a serious matter with a distinct heritage.

The first pep club was established at Princeton University in the 1870s by a group of male students. This was followed by the first organized yell in the 1880s. As football and basketball became more popular, so did cheerleading. Women, however, did not become active in cheerleading until the 1920s. During that same period gymnastics and tumbling were incorporated into the cheers. As tradition would have it, the guys did most of the gymnastics, while the ladies danced—later giving rise to dance teams.

The first professional cheerleading squad in history was organized by the Baltimore Colts football team. However, the evolution of “dancing cheerleaders,” as we know them today, began in 1976 when the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders performed at Super Bowl X. Now all 32 NFL (National Football League) teams, and 26 (out of 29) NBA (National Basketball Association) teams have their own cheer and dance teams.

Modern cheerleading and team dancing require a mix of dedication, strength, and talent. These high-intensity activities are both art and sport wrapped into one. Every good performance is the result of practice, creativity, and comradery of highly skilled and competitive performers.

## Work Performed

Professional cheerleaders and **team dancers** provide excitement, spirit, and entertainment for sports fans. Most routines are extravagant musical productions performed in spectacular uniforms and costumes. In addition to dance steps, cheerleaders and dancers often incorporate stunts and maneuvers which may include jumps, pyramids, twirling, flipping, and tossing. They may also use pom-poms (pom-poms), megaphones, flash-cards, flags, or other props.

As representatives of their team, professional cheerleaders and team dancers must be professional, enthusiastic, and knowledgeable about the team they work for. They must always smile and look like they are having fun during every game, performance, and appearance. They should stay in formation, not only while performing, but while standing on the sidelines or side court as well. They must also pay attention to the game, as the game may affect how they cheer and what they say.

During routines, cheerleaders and dancers perform in front of thousands of screaming fans. They must shout out any cheers and chants loudly and clearly. They must also coordinate their motions and words, and make sure they are doing them in unison. All movements must correspond with the syllables of the words in their cheer/chant, or the count (beat) of their dance routines or stunts. Their body motions should be made sharp and snappy by keeping their muscles tight. Their transitions should be smooth and graceful. Dance moves, clap or clasp motions, jumps, tosses, and stunts should look clean and neat.

Cheerleaders and dancers must maintain a glamorous, fit, and cultured appearance. To keep their bodies in shape, cheerleaders and dancers must devote time to physical fitness training. Good diet and nutrition are important. They must also learn professional communication skills.

Cheerleaders and dancers must attend all rehearsals and games. When *team captains* and *choreographers* create new routines for the squad, they instruct the other cheerleaders and dancers at practices to achieve the desired effect. Team captains and choreographers may also be involved in the auditioning process.

Most cheer and dance teams combine performance work with other activities. They must devote time to public relations, including answering fan mail, signing autographs, and participating in radio and television interviews. They must attend numerous charity events as well as paid public appearances. Some entertain at college/university half-times, and a variety of professional sports, community, and business events. Some host cheerleading/dance competitions.

Many teams have junior cheerleading and dance programs for girls between the ages of 6 and 18. Some teams tour for part of the year, and may include performing for NFL Europe or international basketball tournaments, to supplement the performance schedule at home. Many entertain for US military personnel throughout the world on USO Tours. Most teams also publish swimsuit calendars and posters, which may include a trip to a tropical location for the photo shoot.

Several teams also select an elite group of cheerleaders or dancers to be part of a show group. Show groups feature elaborately costumed and carefully staged production numbers filled with singing and dancing for every taste from Classical to Country to Rock-n-Roll.

Because professional cheerleading and team dancing is not a full-time job, most cheerleaders and dancers have alternate jobs (including parenting) or are students. Some are full-time dancers or choreographers performing in or choreographing other types of productions including opera, theater, television, movies, music videos, and commercials. Some teach dance or cheerleading in camps, clinics, or studios. Others have professional careers in unrelated fields, including law, teaching, and banking.

### **Working Conditions**

Closed stadiums and arenas, and other indoor appearances are usually climate-controlled and comfortable. However, open stadiums and arenas, and outdoor appearances are subject to weather conditions, and cheerleaders and dancers may be exposed to both the hottest and coldest of conditions, including rain, snow, and blistering heat.

Basic uniforms are provided, but cheerleaders and dancers are responsible for maintaining them. Uniforms often include boots/shoes, shorts, blouse, vest, pom-pons, warm-ups, rainwear, travel outfits, jackets, and any show group costumes.

Cheerleading and dancing is strenuous. With all the stunts and maneuvers, they can be as dangerous as most any sport. There are a certain amount of bumps, bruises, and scrapes involved. The most serious injuries may include concussions and spinal injuries from falling off the top of a pyramid, or a broken leg from doing a basket toss. Injuries are minimized, however, by following safety rules and regulations, and through practice.

### **Hours and Earnings**

Professional cheerleading and team dancing is not a full-time job, but requires a substantial time commitment. All cheerleaders and dancers must have a flexible schedule. The time commitment is usually 12-20 hours per week for rehearsals, games, and appearances. Show group members should expect to add 8-10 hours per week for additional rehearsals and shows.

Practices are usually held during the evenings 2 to 3 times per week, lasting 2 to 3 hours (from 7 to 11). During the season, weekends are generally left free for promotional opportunities. Pre-season, rookie, and show group practices, however, often include weekend hours. Some teams even have a mandatory weekend training camp held at the beginning of the rehearsal schedule.

Many performances are in the evening and during weekends, and may include some holidays. Cheerleaders and dancers must be at home games 2 to 5 hours prior to kick- or tip-off for pre-game rehearsals. Most teams also require a minimum number of appearances per season ranging from 12 to 22.

Earnings for cheerleaders and team dancers vary with employer, skill, and the number of performances and appearances. Most are paid a flat rate of \$50 per game. Other paid appearances are usually contracted to pay each cheerleader or dancer a specified amount. Some teams also pay for rehearsals, but many do not.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2002, dancers, in general, earned anywhere from \$12,880 a year to \$53,350 a year. Half earned between \$14,570 and \$34,660 a year. Most supplement their earnings with an alternate source of income.

As part-time employees, most do not receive any paid sick leave or vacations, nor health or pension benefits. However, many groups receive sponsorship benefits such as tanning, hair salon services, and workout memberships. Many teams also provide their cheerleaders and dancers with at least one pair of season tickets to share with friends and family members.

### **Education and Training**

Professional cheerleaders and team dancers must have at least a high school diploma or equivalency, and full- or part-time employment, be a student, or a stay-at-home parent. Most have a bachelor's or graduate degree

and a full- or part-time career (including parenthood), or are current college or university students.

Although the degree may not be in a related field, a strong background in dance and fitness is crucial. Some teams even require previous dance training with experience in jazz and hip-hop. Gymnastics, tumbling, choreography, martial arts, and singing skills can also be useful. The safest way to learn any of these skills is in a gym or studio with a professional coach and equipment.

High school and college students should start by joining their junior or senior varsity cheer or dance squads. Students who demonstrate proficient skill should obtain more intensive and advanced professional training. There are many formal cheerleading training programs, videos, clinics, workshops, and camps.

They should enroll in dance, choreography, gymnastics, and tumbling classes. Useful dance styles may include ballet, tap, jazz, hip-hop, and lyrical, which teach important skills such as double pirouettes, split leaps, splits, high kicks, and axel turns. Many colleges and universities offer bachelor's or master's degrees in dance. Many also offer cheerleading/athletic scholarships to help cover tuition costs.

Cheerleaders and team dancers should also know at least the basics of the sport they are cheering for. They should know basic rules of game play, scoring, and what each position does. At the Seattle Sea Hawks Sea Gals tryouts, applicants are even given a test of their football knowledge.

Most professional cheer and dance teams also hold workshops and prep classes before auditions begin. Often, the actual audition dance routine is taught at these workshops, as well as interview, audition, and hair and make-up tips, what is expected of those selected for the team, and a question and answer period.

### **Certification and Professional Societies**

Professional cheerleaders and dancers may belong to any of a number of organizations which support cheerleading, dancing, and overall fitness. They may, for instance, belong to Dance/USA, a national service organization for professional dance. Many for-profit cheer associations and organizations also offer training and support for cheerleaders and coaches through camps, clinics, workshops, competitions, and open forums. Some even offer certification to coaches who meet specified standards.

### **Personal Qualifications**

Most professional cheerleaders and dancers must be at least 18 years old, although, for a few teams, they must be at least 19, and 21 to be a Chicago Bulls Luvabull. Cheerleaders and dancers need an entire package. They need to be physically fit, energetic, composed/poised, well-spoken, and able to dance. There are no specific

height or weight requirements, however, a lean, well proportioned figure is demanded by the uniform.

Pizzazz is another crucial element. It is a combination of confidence, enthusiasm, a bright smile, overall showmanship, and crowd-appeal. Other important qualities include strength, stamina, rhythm, coordination, timing, flexibility, balance, an energetic voice, and a positive attitude.

Cheerleaders and dancers must also be sociable, outgoing, mature, self-disciplined, patient, and have a strong desire to support the sports team and the cheer/dance squad. They must be able to work as part of a team and cooperate with both management and squad members during practices, games, appearances, and related events.

Occupations can be adapted for workers with disabilities. Persons should contact their school or employment counselors, their state office of vocational rehabilitation, or their state department of labor to explore fully their individual needs and requirements as well as the requirements of the occupation.

### **Where Employed**

There are 32 professional football teams in the NFL, and 30 professional basketball teams in the NBA. Each football team has a cheer or dance team with 20 to 40 members. Twenty-six (out of 30) basketball teams have a dance team with 10 to 20 members, however, some have as many as 26. Other professional sports employing professional cheer or dance teams include arena football and World Championship Wrestling (Nitro Girls).

Most professional sports teams are located near major cities, such as New York, Los Angeles, Detroit, Seattle, and Houston. Many teams even require squad members to live or relocate within their metropolitan area.

### **Employment Outlook**

Increasing attendance at sporting events and a continued interest in this form of entertainment are sure to spur on continued growth in professional cheerleading and team dancing. New and emerging professional sports, such as arena football, are also creating more opportunities for professional cheerleaders and team dancers.

However, the average career of a professional cheerleader is about five years—slightly longer than the average career of the players they are cheering for. In addition, professional cheerleaders and dancers are only contracted on a seasonal basis (for one year), and must re-audition every year. Candidates will continue to face intense competition as the number of applicants vastly exceeds the number of job openings. Only the most talented and those willing to learn new skills will find regular cheer/dance team work.

### **Entry Methods**

Those interested in becoming a professional cheerleader or dancer must first get into shape on a good workout program. They should then find out what the requirements will

be as well as audition schedules and deadlines, and get any paperwork they'll need to fill out. Most NFL cheerleading and dance tryouts are held in April, while those for the NBA are held in August.

Most candidates help prepare for auditions by attending prep classes and workshops, and/or buying a videotape of the audition routine. Completed applications must often be submitted with a non-refundable application fee, a non-returnable current photograph (does not have to be professionally done), and signed medical consent, release and assumption of risk, and photo/video release forms. Some teams also require a dance resume and a physical.

At the actual auditions, applicants must show legal photo identification, such as a drivers license or passport. They must come fully prepared with hair and make-up done. They must wear a two-piece dance outfit or a sports bra or crop top with briefs or short shorts; flesh colored nylons or tights; and sneakers or dance shoes. They may also need to bring professional interview attire in the event they make it to the interview stage of auditions. They may not wear any jewelry other than small earrings and engagement/wedding rings. They must also cover any visible tattoos with make-up.

Audition routines are first performed in small groups and may include a free-style dance portion. The judges focus on enthusiasm, poise, showmanship, personal appearance, figure, personality, energy, and high kicks. Applicants with tumbling ability are generally also given the opportunity to execute a pass of their choice for the judges, although it is not required. The number of cuts and routines vary with the team, but always include an introduction and interview portion. Some final auditions even include a modeling segment, or an individual talent presentation and performance.

### Advancement

Advancement often takes the form of a growing reputation, more frequent work, bigger and better performances and appearances, and higher pay. Highly-skilled and creative cheerleaders and dancers may become team captains and choreographers.

However, because it is so physically demanding, most cheerleaders and dancers stop performing by their late thirties. Some remain in the field as choreographers, cheerleading or dance instructors or competition judges, or as cheerleading, dance, or artistic directors. Some become cheerleading or dance team coaches at colleges or universities, high schools, or junior high schools. Others move into administrative positions, such as cheerleading or dance team manager or coordinator, or overall entertainment manager.

### For Further Research

**Dance/USA**, 1156 Fifteenth Street, N.W., Suite 820, Washington, DC 20005-1726. Web Site: [save-as-dance.org](http://save-as-dance.org)

**National Basketball Association**, 645 Fifth Avenue, Fifteenth Floor, New York, NY 10022. Web Site: [www.nba.com](http://www.nba.com)

**National Football League**, 280 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10017. Web Site: [www.nfl.com](http://www.nfl.com)

**Palgrave Macmillan Ltd.**, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

*Cheerleader!: An American Icon*. Natalie Guice Adams and Pamela Jean Bettis. 182 pages. \$24.95.

**Three Rivers Press**, c/o Random House, Inc., 280 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10017.

*The Ultimate Guide to Cheerleading: For Cheerleaders and Coaches*. Leslie Wilson. 288 pages. \$16.95.

### Acknowledgments

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