

Exploring Well-Being and Thriving Among Elite Youth Athletes in Competitive Cheerleading

By

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## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to a younger version of myself. To the girl who never quite felt like a star student and who, at times, struggled to see her own potential. I would also like to dedicate this to the version of me who packed up her life and moved 2,500 miles from home, scared and unsure but still willing to try. I hope you can see now that you did belong, and I hope you are proud of how far we have come.

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## ABSTRACT

Competitive cheerleading, like many youth sports, has increasingly adopted professional-style practices such as early specialization, intensive training, and an emphasis on competitive success. While research in sports like gymnastics, swimming, and soccer has linked professionalization to risks including injury, burnout, and social isolation, little is known about how these pressures are experienced in competitive cheerleading—a similarly high-intensity but under-researched sport. Guided by the thriving framework, which conceptualizes thriving as the joint experience of development and success, this study explored how athletes at Allstar Cheer Elite (ACE) interpreted and experienced well-being and thriving within their sport. Using a qualitative case study approach grounded in constructionism and symbolic interactionism, the study examined how gym culture, coaching practices, organizational structures, peer relationships, and parental influences shaped athletes' interpretations of well-being and success. Data were collected through interviews, participant observation, and document analysis at ACE, a purposefully selected elite cheerleading gym. Seven key themes emerged: coaching practices and power dynamics; pressure to win and perfectionism; athlete demands; team dynamics and peer relationships; parental and family influences; organizational culture and leadership; and athlete reflections and meaning-making. Findings revealed that athletes often equated thriving with sacrifice and the endurance of physical and emotional strain, reflecting the influence of professionalized structures and win-at-all-costs culture. This study highlights the need for coaches, administrators, and sport organizations to challenge harmful cultural norms and foster environments that prioritize athlete well-being alongside competitive goals.

*Keywords:* competitive cheerleading, youth sport culture, athlete well-being, thriving, professionalization

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## Chapter One: Introduction

### Vignette: "A Night at the Gym"

The sound of chants and thumps against the mats momentarily faded as I grabbed my phone for a quick water break. My fingers, slick with sweat, struggled to dial my mom's number. As the phone rang, I glanced around at the tired yet determined faces of my teammates. They, too, were feeling the strain of our grueling preparation for the upcoming competition.

*"Hey, Mom,"* I said, trying to sound more upbeat than I felt.

*"Practice is running late again... Yeah, for the fourth time this week."*

There was a brief silence before my mom's voice came through, laced with concern.

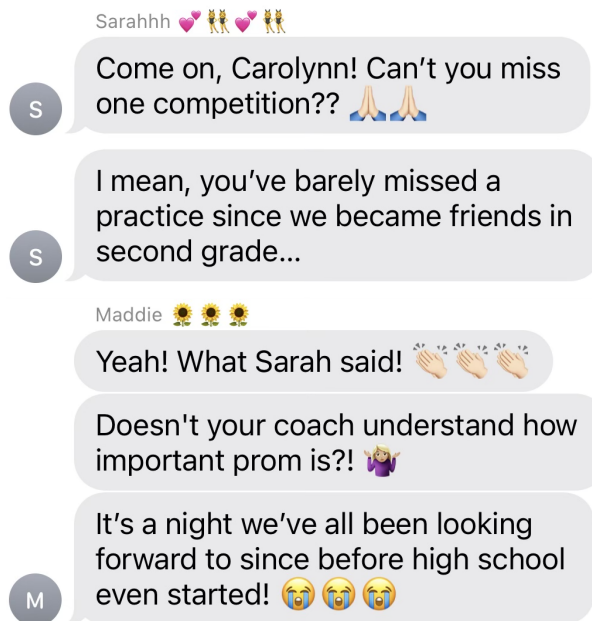
*"You have a mountain of homework, don't you?"* She reminded me gently.

*"I know, I'm going to do it when I get home,"* I replied, the words feeling like a well-rehearsed lie.

Deep down, I knew that "home" meant another long night of staying up until 3 AM to tackle assignments that had piled up. It had become a daily occurrence, this dance between exhaustion and responsibility, but I reasoned that as long as everything was done by the time school started at 8 AM, the lack of sleep would be fine.

After hanging up, I switched to my messages, where the world outside cheerleading beckoned. A few high school friends were buzzing about prom plans, their excitement palpable even through text. My heart sank as I typed out my response, informing them I had a competition that day and to make plans without me. The finality of hitting 'send' felt like sealing away a part of my teenage life I'd never get back.

Before I could put my phone away, another message from my friends lit up the screen.



Initially, their lack of understanding was frustrating. *They just don't get how competitive cheerleading works.* Our routines were intricately designed around each athlete's skillset. There was simply no 'backup' for anyone. Missing a competition would require overhauling our entire routine on short notice, severely risking our chances of success. I couldn't let my team, my coaches, or my parents down, especially after all the time and money they had invested in my training. Not for prom, not for anything.

I'm really sorry guys. I just can't...

While crafting my response, a familiar sense of isolation wrapped around me, marking yet another social invitation declined. My reply echoed the countless times I had chosen my athletic career over my school and social life. I could count on one hand the number of practices I had missed in nine years; once for a broken arm, once for illness, once when my grandmother passed away, and once when we moved my sister to college. Missing practices was hard enough; the thought of missing a competition was unimaginable.

As I put my phone away, I reached for the bottle of Advil I'd stashed in my bag and popped four into my mouth to mask the persistent ache in my ankle. Wrapping it tighter, I numbed the pain until it was just a distant throb, a necessary sacrifice for what lay ahead. Just as I finished, our coach's voice sharply interrupted my thoughts.

*"Set back up!"* She yelled, her tone leaving no room for protest.

We all knew what that meant; another set of full-out routines was upon us. For two minutes and thirty seconds, we'd push our bodies beyond their limits, synchronizing every move, every jump, every tumble, with precision honed through relentless practice. Why? Because we all carried the unspoken truth that nothing hurts as bad as losing does.

## **Reflection**

Throughout my career as an elite competitive cheerleading athlete, the relentless pursuit of championship titles often overshadowed my well-being. As illustrated in the vignette above, this quest for victory demanded adherence to a rigorous training regimen, significantly impacting various aspects of my life. While the intense training sessions enhanced my physical strength and endurance, they also led to chronic overexertion. I frequently pushed through injuries and neglected essential periods of rest, falling into a cycle of dependence on pain management. Mentally, the sport sharpened my focus and discipline, but the unyielding pressure to succeed, coupled with the fear of letting down my team, resulted in heightened stress and anxiety, often culminating in burnout. This pressure eroded my ability to enjoy personal time, maintain meaningful relationships, and find balance outside the gym. Emotionally, though victories provided immense satisfaction, my self-worth became increasingly tied to winning, which led to feelings of inadequacy during periods of defeat. Though I made close friends through cheerleading, its time demands often isolated me from other peers and family, confining my

interactions to those within the gym and distancing me from other social activities. Culturally, my experience mirrored broader societal values that emphasize success and victory, fostering a win-at-all-costs mentality that often prioritizes achievement over well-being (Coakley, 2010).

When I transitioned into coaching and program management, I encountered similar challenges and ethical dilemmas that echoed the win-at-all-cost mindset I once experienced as an athlete. In my drive to secure wins, I made decisions that compromised my athletes' well-being, applying the same pressures that my coaches had once placed on me. In doing so, I expected my athletes to endure the same extreme, often unhealthy training demands I had faced. For instance, I pushed them to train despite clear signs of exhaustion, disregarded instances of mental burnout to maintain a demanding practice schedule and justified harsh coaching methods as necessary for competitiveness. The academic and social lives of my athletes became secondary to their performance in the gym, and I allowed parental pressure to create an environment where additional private lessons became more of an obligation than a choice, further intensifying the pressures placed on these young athletes. These decisions were fueled not only by the drive to win, but also by the harsh reality that without competitive success, athletes and their families would seek out other programs, jeopardizing the gym's stability.

Reflecting on my experiences as both an athlete and a coach, I now question the pride I once took in sacrificing well-being for success. At the time, this pride seemed validated by tangible outcomes; over 50 national titles and a top 30 finish at the World Championships. These accomplishments appeared to justify the countless hours of intense training and personal sacrifices. When I shifted to coaching, my insistence on rigorous training regimens led my teams to achieve many of their own competitive victories. After many years of reflection, I have come to realize that what I once saw as personal ambition was instead a manifestation of harmful

practices deeply embedded in the gym culture; practices that valued competitive success over the holistic development of athletes.

This gym culture, while effective in producing competitive success, often did so at the expense of athletes' well-being. The primary focus was not on cultivating sustainable athletic careers or fostering life skills, but on achieving immediate, short-term results. Winning became the ultimate metric of success, and any deviation from this standard was seen as a lack of commitment. Athletes who thrived under this pressure were celebrated, while those who struggled were marginalized or overlooked. This atmosphere of constant pressure normalized pushing athletes beyond healthy limits, making it difficult to challenge or question these detrimental practices.

This outcome-obsessed environment extends beyond a single sport or gym, reflecting a broader cultural shift that has permeated youth athletics in recent decades. It has created a competitive world where athletes, parents, and coaches collectively believe that success is defined primarily by titles, rankings, and future career prospects. While the desire for external rewards can be a powerful motivator, it often comes at the cost of athletes' physical, mental, and emotional well-being, leading to burnout, stress, and long-term disengagement from sports (Coakley, 2016). Understanding this broader cultural shift and its implications is essential for addressing the well-being challenges faced by young athletes today.

### **The Evolution of Youth Sports**

The landscape of youth sports has transformed dramatically over the past century, mirroring shifts in societal views on childhood, physical activity, and competition. In the early to mid-20th century, youth sports were primarily informal, play-based activities, naturally integrated into children's lives and emphasizing fun, creativity, and social interaction. This era

allowed children to develop problem-solving skills and physical abilities in low-pressure environments where enjoyment took precedence over achievement (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998; Frost, 2010). Theorists such as Piaget (1962) and Vygotsky (1978) highlighted the role of play in cognitive and social development, suggesting that, through play, children learned social rules and engaged in imaginative thinking. Physical play fostered motor skills and social competency, contributing to a more inclusive and resilient childhood.

By the mid-20th century, with growing societal concerns about children's health and behavior, the structure of youth sports evolved. Organized activities gained prominence, emphasizing physical and social benefits. Schools and community programs introduced formal sports to teach teamwork, discipline, and sportsmanship (Holt, 2008). Although more structured, these programs still prioritized holistic child development, blending physical activity with the intrinsic joys of play (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005). This period saw sports as tools for shaping well-rounded individuals, in alignment with broader educational and developmental goals.

The late 20th century marked a significant shift towards privatization, commercialization, and professionalization in youth sports, altering the structure and culture of youth athletics today. Privatization in youth sports became increasingly prevalent during the 1980s, driven by cultural and political shifts that prioritized individual responsibility and minimized government roles in public programs. As private organizations assumed a larger role, the structure and priorities of youth sports shifted accordingly, with private clubs beginning to emphasize early specialization, intensive training, and competitive success.

Following privatization, commercialization introduced market-driven practices into youth sports, making financial incentives prominent influences on program structures and priorities. As private clubs and organizations became the primary providers of youth sports, they increasingly

relied on sponsorships, advertising, and membership fees. This commercialization has shifted youth sports from recreational engagement to competitive performance, with events marketed as high-stakes spectacles aimed at attracting spectators and generating profit (Parker & Vinson, 2013).

Additionally, commercialization has significantly impacted parental expectations and motivations. Programs advocating early specialization and future rewards suggest that investing in competitive sports early can lead to long-term benefits for young athletes, such as college scholarships, professional contracts, and social mobility (Côté et al., 2009). This narrative fosters a culture where youth sports are viewed as pathways to success, encouraging parents to perceive their financial investment as an investment in their children's future. Consequently, the pursuit of external validation leads to an outcome-oriented approach in youth sports, where young athletes are motivated not only by personal enjoyment, but also by rankings, trophies, and college opportunities (Gould & Carson, 2004).

Driven by privatization and commercialization, the professionalization of youth sports has introduced training regimens, competitive standards, and performance benchmarks modeled after those in professional sports. This shift has led to the emergence of "elite youth sports," characterized by high-intensity training, early skill specialization, and long-term performance goals requiring year-round commitment (Gould & Carson, 2004). Although elite youth athletes only constitute an estimated 8-10% of the overall youth sports population, their numbers are growing as societal and financial incentives for athletic success increase, with over 60% of youth sports spending in the U.S. directed toward elite programs (Aspen Institute, 2024).

Participation in elite sports programs typically involves adult-led training focused on deliberate practice and intensive skill refinement, encouraging young athletes to pursue

professional-level achievements early in their careers (Baker & Côté, 2006). This professionalized approach demands significant time commitments and reduces opportunities for rest and unstructured play, reflecting a societal emphasis on athletic success and its financial rewards. Moreover, the pressures and practices of elite youth sports extend to non-elite athletes, with over 40% of non-elite youth experiencing pressures to specialize early and engage in intensive training as elite practices diffuse into recreational programs (Jayanthi et al., 2013). This trend leads to diminished enjoyment, increased burnout risk, and potential long-term impacts on athletes' well-being (DiFiori et al., 2014; Brenner, 2016).

Professionalization has also reshaped coaching methods and expectations. Coaches in professionalized youth sports are often pressured to deliver high-level results through rigorous training and competitive excellence to attract and retain clients (Mason et al., 2020). This economic dependence on performance creates environments where young athletes face physical and psychological demands misaligned with their developmental needs, increasing risks of overuse injuries and mental health challenges (Coakley, 2016). Overall, professionalization has significantly influenced youth athletes' developmental trajectories, promoting early specialization as a pathway to success, despite less than 1% achieving professional status by age 14 (Jayanthi et al., 2013; DiFiori et al., 2014). This trend underscores the need to balance competitive aspirations with young athletes' well-being and holistic development.

Despite intentions for athletic improvement, this specialized approach to youth sports has introduced several drawbacks. The emphasis on a single sport limits broader skill development and multi-sport participation, which benefits athleticism and personal growth. Additionally, research indicates that early specialization increases the risk of physical injuries and reduces overall enjoyment, as young athletes prioritize immediate success over a balanced athletic

experience (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009; Malina, 2010). In this high-stakes environment, young athletes are often treated as "mini-adults," expected to handle adult-like pressures and expectations, which can lead to adverse health outcomes (Gould et al., 2002).

### **The Impact of Professionalization on Athlete Well-Being**

The professionalization of youth sports has sparked an ongoing debate about its benefits and consequences. Structured training environments provide athletes with opportunities for skill development, exposure, and access to collegiate and professional pathways. Professionalization has opened doors for scholarships and career opportunities, with media coverage and sponsorships allowing young athletes to showcase their talents on a global stage (Bailey & Collins, 2013). Moreover, the pursuit of athletic excellence within professionalized settings can instill valuable life lessons, such as the merits of hard work, self-sacrifice, discipline, and resilience. These experiences contribute to personal growth and character development, equipping young athletes with skills transferable to other areas of life (Gould & Carson, 2008)

However, alongside these benefits, significant concerns about athletes' well-being persist. Early specialization and intense training often lead to a higher incidence of injury. Athletes who specialize in one sport at an early age are significantly more likely to suffer injuries than their peers who play multiple sports (Jayanthi et al., 2015). Overuse injuries, common in early specialization, have increased by 50% among youth athletes, contributing to long-term physical consequences (Post et al., 2017). These injuries often persist into adulthood, leading to reduced physical activity and a heightened risk of chronic conditions (Jayanthi et al., 2015).

Mental and emotional exhaustion also looms large in professionalized youth sports. The relentless pressure to perform can cause heightened stress, anxiety, and eventual burnout, with nearly half of youth athletes experiencing stress related to competition (Jayanthi et al., 2015).

Burnout affects around 30% of young athletes, diminishing their enjoyment of sports and stifling their holistic development (Gustafsson et al., 2017). Socially, the demands of intense training often isolate young athletes from their peers, limiting opportunities for social engagement, which are critical for overall development (Wiersma, 2000).

External pressures from parents, coaches, and peers further compound these challenges. Parents, in particular, play a critical role in shaping the sports experience, often placing heightened expectations on their children in hopes of securing scholarships or professional contracts. This pressure can lead to early specialization and overtraining, with young athletes internalizing these expectations to the detriment of their well-being (Coakley, 2010).

While the pursuit of excellence and the desire to win are not inherently harmful, these goals become problematic when they compromise young athletes' well-being. In youth sports, athletes often have limited autonomy and may not fully comprehend the long-term risks associated with their training, making them susceptible to pressures from coaches, parents, and peers that push them beyond healthy limits (Gould & Carson, 2008). Therefore, it is critical to balance the drive for success with a focus on holistic development to protect athletes from physical, emotional, and social harm (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008). Supporting well-being in elite youth sports involves recognizing athletes as whole individuals and fostering a culture that values their confidence, identity, and social skills alongside their athletic achievements. Coaches and parents who prioritize well-being contribute to healthier sports environments, where personal development and resilience are as important as winning (Gould et al., 2007). Research indicates that young athletes thrive in settings that support their development as individuals first and athletes second, enhancing both their well-being and long-term engagement in sports (Mountjoy et al., 2015).

## **Theoretical Framework and Relevant Literature**

The concept of thriving, as conceptualized by Brown et al. (2017), represents the joint experience of development and success, defined by achieving high-performance while maintaining holistic well-being. This multifaceted framework is grounded in the notion that humans have an inherent drive for self-growth and fulfillment. It emphasizes the interplay between personal enablers such as resilience, self-belief, and intrinsic motivation, and contextual enablers such as supportive environments, coaching practices, and social networks, which together shape the thriving experience.

Achieving a state of thriving necessitates a holistic integration of physical, mental, and social domains to achieve well-being. For instance, consider an athlete who excels in high-pressure competitions while maintaining a positive mental outlook, strong social connections with teammates, and good physical health. This athlete exemplifies thriving due to a balance between success and well-being. Conversely, another athlete who attains high-performance but suffers from chronic injuries, emotional exhaustion, and strained relationships would not be considered thriving, as their well-being is compromised despite, and potentially due to, their achievements.

This study employs the thriving framework as a nuanced lens for exploring how elite youth athletes interpret and experience well-being and thriving within the context of competitive cheerleading. By emphasizing the joint experience of development and success, it facilitates an in-depth analysis of the individual and contextual factors shaping athletes' experiences within this environment. For example, personal enablers like resilience, a drive to master complex routines, and self-belief in overcoming performance pressures, as well as contextual factors specific to competitive cheerleading such as coaching practices, gym culture norms, and critical

social support from teammates and family, all play a role. This combined focus is vital for understanding how cheerleaders navigate high-stakes competition to achieve peak performance while either preserving or, at times, failing to preserve holistic well-being.

Additionally, the framework offers a structured approach to examining the balance or imbalance between competitive success and well-being, highlighting conditions that enable athletes to thrive or cause them to struggle. By situating athletes' lived experiences within the broader context of elite youth sports, this approach deepens our understanding of thriving and informs practical strategies for creating healthier, more supportive training environments that prioritize both sustainable success and holistic well-being.

### **Research Design**

This study is rooted in a constructionist epistemology, which holds that meaning is co-created through interactions between individuals and their environments. In the context of competitive cheerleading, well-being is not simply a fixed state but is interpreted and shaped by athletes' experiences and interactions within their sport. Constructionism provides the philosophical foundation for understanding well-being as a dynamic and context-dependent construct, acknowledging that athletes' subjective experiences of wellness are influenced by the social, cultural, and interpersonal contexts of competitive cheerleading (Charmaz, 2014).

While a constructionist epistemology emphasizes meaning-making through athletes' subjective experiences, there can be aspects of well-being that exist independently of those interpretations. For instance, athletes may perceive themselves as thriving, even when objective indicators, such as persistent injury, chronic fatigue, or distressing behaviors, suggest otherwise. Constructionism does not negate the existence of objective indicators but situates them within a broader social and relational context. When faced with an athlete who claims to be thriving but

exhibits signs of poor well-being, a constructionist inquiry would explore the interplay between their subjective experience, the cultural norms and pressures of competitive cheerleading, and the collective expectations within their gym environment. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding that respects the athlete's self-assessment while interrogating contextual factors that may obscure or influence their interpretations (Charmaz, 2014).

Building on this epistemological foundation, symbolic interactionism serves as the theoretical perspective for exploring how athletes interpret and construct meaning in their experiences. Symbolic interactionism emphasizes how people create and interpret meanings through their interactions with others. In competitive cheerleading, athletes continuously negotiate their understanding of success, health, and well-being within a framework defined by coaches, teammates, and family members. This perspective allows the study to focus on how athletes interpret the pressures and demands of cheerleading, recognizing well-being as something influenced by the symbolic meanings they attach to experiences, relationships, and performance expectations (Blumer, 1986).

To examine these interpretations in depth, this study employs a qualitative case study methodology, focusing on Allstar Cheer Elite (ACE), a single, purposefully selected competitive cheerleading gym. Case studies are ideal for capturing complex phenomena in real-life settings, and by centering on ACE, the study offers a bounded system for exploring how gym culture, external pressures, and training regimens shape athletes' well-being and thriving within this unique environment. ACE's context includes athletes aged 12-18, a rigorous training regimen, and a deeply ingrained culture emphasizing high-performance and competitive success. The boundaries of this case are defined by ACE's physical setting, organizational structure, athlete-coach interactions, and the broader cultural and social dynamics that influence athlete

experiences. By immersing in this particular gym environment, the study seeks to provide a rich, contextualized understanding of how well-being is experienced and interpreted by athletes navigating a high-pressure, high-stakes competitive sport.

### **Significance of the Study**

Competitive cheerleading has evolved into an elite athletic pursuit, engaging over 4 million youth athletes annually in the United States (USA Cheer, 2023). Despite its widespread popularity, the sport remains under-researched concerning its impact on athlete well-being. This study seeks to fill that gap by focusing on ACE as a case study to examine the unique pressures and risks competitive cheerleaders face due to gym culture, external expectations, and rigorous training regimens.

The high-intensity nature of competitive cheerleading subjects athletes to a range of physical, mental, and emotional challenges with both immediate and long-term effects. Data indicates heightened risks of severe injuries and mental health issues such as anxiety and burnout. The severity of these impacts often extends beyond the gym, influencing athletes' daily lives and potentially leading to lasting health consequences. Given that many athletes begin intensive training at a young age, addressing these issues is both pressing and critical.

This study contributes to the literature on athlete well-being and thriving through a qualitative framework rooted in constructionism, interpretivism, and symbolic interactionism. By exploring how athletes construct meaning within their gym culture, it provides insights into the social, psychological, and physical dynamics of high-pressure sports environments. Additionally, it expands the broader youth sport literature by contextualizing competitive cheerleading within discussions on athlete well-being. The findings offer practical guidance for coaches, gym administrators, parents, and policymakers by highlighting supportive and detrimental practices

within competitive cheerleading. This research also informs strategies to create healthier training environments, mitigate the negative effects of intense regimens, and enhance safety standards and athlete care protocols for organizations like USA Cheer and the United States All Star Federation (USASF).

The broader relevance of this study is illustrated by athletes such as Simone Biles, Naomi Osaka, Michael Phelps, and Marcus Rashford, who began elite careers at a young age and have shared their struggles with well-being amid intense competition. Biles withdrew from events at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics to prioritize her mental health, highlighting the immense pressures of elite sports. Osaka stepped away from major tournaments due to mental health challenges and media scrutiny. Phelps has spoken about his battles with depression and anxiety, while Rashford has reflected on the relentless pressures of youth soccer. Their stories underscore the costs of prioritizing winning over well-being and emphasize the need for systemic change. By situating competitive cheerleading within this broader context, this study seeks to foster a youth sports culture that balances holistic well-being with sustainable success.

### **Research Questions**

1. How do competitive cheerleaders interpret and experience well-being and thriving at ACE?
2. How do relationships, expectations, and organizational culture within the gym shape athletes' experiences of well-being and thriving at ACE?

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

The professionalization of youth sports refers to the adoption of structures, practices, and expectations typically associated with professional athletic environments and their application to children and adolescents. These include early specialization, rigorous year-round training schedules, and an intense focus on achieving competitive success, often at the expense of holistic development. Although youth athletes are not professionals in the traditional sense, their sports environment increasingly mirrors that of adult professional athletes, emphasizing performance, rankings, and external validation over play and intrinsic enjoyment (Côté & Hancock, 2016; Gould & Carson, 2008).

Central to this model is a win-at-all-costs mentality, which prioritizes competitive success above all else. This mindset arises from multiple interrelated pressures. For parents, privatized and commercialized youth sports require substantial financial investments, such as gym fees, travel expenses, and specialized training, which create pressure to justify these costs through competitive achievements or potential college scholarships (Coakley, 2016). Sports organizations perpetuate this culture by focusing on performance outcomes to secure sponsorships, maintain revenue streams, and attract top talent, making well-being a secondary concern (Anderson & Dixon, 2019).

Coaches, as key figures in athletes' development, play a pivotal role in reinforcing this performance-driven culture. Many coaches are former athletes, bringing strong technical and tactical knowledge to their roles. However, their exposure to well-being-focused leadership is often limited unless they have participated in specialized training or professional development initiatives. Research indicates that fostering well-being requires distinct skills, such as emotional intelligence, communication, and athlete-centered coaching, which are rarely prioritized in

traditional athlete development pathways (Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016; Tamminen et al., 2017). Without formal training in these areas, many coaches default to the performance-driven methods they experienced as athletes, perpetuating the prioritization of results over holistic development (Knight et al., 2018).

Additionally, coaches' reputations and, in some cases, their livelihoods are tied to the success of their athletes, further incentivizing a focus on short-term performance over long-term development (Knight et al., 2018). Coaches operating within highly competitive, performance-oriented environments may also feel constrained by organizational demands that emphasize immediate results, leaving little room to prioritize well-being. Even when coaches recognize the importance of mental and emotional health, the structural and cultural norms of youth sports often limit their ability to address these dimensions effectively (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003).

Existing research highlights a troubling gap in how well-being is integrated into coaching philosophies. For instance, Fraser-Thomas et al. (2005) found that while many coaches acknowledge the importance of supporting athletes' mental health, few feel equipped to address these needs. Instead, psychological support is frequently delegated to sports psychologists, who may not be readily accessible in most youth sports programs. This fragmentation of responsibility leaves many athletes without adequate resources to navigate the pressures of elite competition (Tamminen et al., 2017). Furthermore, cultural norms within sports perpetuate the idea that addressing mental or emotional well-being is secondary to achieving peak performance, further marginalizing these aspects of development (Coakley, 2016).

These systemic pressures lead to the willful neglect of dimensions of well-being that are not immediately tied to performance metrics. Mental, emotional, and social health, essential for long-term development, are often deprioritized because they are less tangible and more

challenging to measure than physical performance. Practices such as overtraining, inadequate recovery, and limited attention to psychological needs reflect a culture that glorifies toughness and sacrifice (McMahon et al., 2022). Success is narrowly defined by rankings, medals, and external recognition, while mental health concerns or expressions of vulnerability are stigmatized, discouraging athletes from seeking support (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005).

The consequences of this performance-first culture are evident in high dropout rates among youth athletes. Research shows that approximately 70% of athletes disengage from organized sports by age 13, often citing stress, burnout, and lack of enjoyment (Brenner et al., 2024; Crane & Temple, 2015). These outcomes reflect the overwhelming pressures on young athletes, particularly in elite settings, where many report high levels of stress and anxiety due to competition demands and the relentless pursuit of peak performance (Gustafsson et al., 2011; Nicholls & Polman, 2007). Additionally, the intense focus on competitive success limits opportunities for unstructured play and social development, further compromising overall well-being (Côté et al., 2012). Well-being, in the athletic context, is not simply about avoiding illness or achieving success on the field but about sustaining growth, balance, and fulfillment throughout an athlete's life.

This chapter examines the dimensions of well-being in youth sports, with a focus on understanding how the professionalization and win-at-all-costs culture contribute to the neglect of holistic development. It emphasizes the roles of key stakeholders, like athletes, coaches, parents, and administrators, in fostering environments that prioritize both performance and well-being. The concept of thriving is introduced as a framework for integrating performance with holistic development, offering a pathway to balance these often-competing priorities. Finally, the

chapter delves into the unique culture of competitive cheerleading, exploring how contextual factors shape athletes' experiences.

### **Current Research on Well-Being in Youth Sport**

The nature of youth sports offers both significant challenges and meaningful opportunities for well-being. On one hand, research highlights the potential for youth sports to promote physical fitness, personal growth, and skill development (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005; Gould & Carson, 2008). On the other hand, these same activities often come with inherent risks to holistic well-being. While injuries are an expected part of athletic participation, they are frequently intensified by performance-driven practices such as overtraining, insufficient recovery, and early specialization (Brenner, 2016; DiFiori et al., 2014). These practices can disrupt the delicate balance between the benefits of sports and their physical and emotional toll.

Well-being, however, is not simply the absence of harm or injury. It is a complex and dynamic construct, reflecting a constantly shifting state influenced by the interplay of physical, emotional, and social factors (Hettler, 1980; Keyes, 2002). Rather than being a static or universal ideal, well-being is better conceptualized as a continuum that evolves over time. This perspective aligns with the reality that individuals cannot sustain peak well-being across all dimensions simultaneously. Instead, well-being is a fluid experience, responding to life's changing demands and contexts (Brown & Arnold, 2019).

In youth sports, this fluidity is particularly evident. Participation can enhance certain dimensions of well-being, such as fostering resilience and social connections, while simultaneously straining others through physical exhaustion or heightened performance pressures (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009; Knight et al., 2018). For instance, supportive relationships formed with teammates and coaches can promote emotional and social well-being,

even as the pressures of competition test athletes' physical and mental capacities (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). This section delves into how youth sports both support and challenge well-being across physical, emotional, and social dimensions, shedding light on the complex and multifaceted nature of these experiences.

### ***Physical Well-Being in Youth Athletes***

While youth sports are often pursued for their physical fitness benefits, they paradoxically put athletes at a higher risk of physical harm. One major concern is the high prevalence of overuse injuries among youth athletes, especially in sports requiring early specialization. Early specialization, characterized by intensive focus on a single sport, increases the risk of overuse injuries, such as stress fractures, tendinitis, and ligament damage (DiFiori et al., 2014). Sports with repetitive motions and year-round schedules, including cheerleading, gymnastics, tennis, and swimming, are particularly susceptible to these injuries. Jayanthi et al. (2013) found that early specialization can increase the likelihood of chronic injuries by up to 50% in adolescence, underscoring the long-term physical costs associated with intensive sports participation.

These injuries often have lasting consequences. Brenner (2016) notes that young athletes with overuse injuries, including stress fractures and tendinitis, constitute nearly 50% of all injuries in youth sports, particularly among athletes engaged in year-round training programs (Brenner et al., 2024; DiFiori et al., 2014). Risks are amplified by inadequate recovery times and growth plate injuries, especially during key developmental stages. Baxter-Jones (2013) found that intensive training during growth spurts significantly heightens the risk of both acute injuries and long-term damage as the body undergoes rapid changes in bones, muscles, and tendons.

Acute injuries, such as concussions, also pose critical risks in youth sports. Concussions account for approximately 15–20% of sports-related injuries among young athletes, with higher rates in contact sports like football, soccer, and hockey (CDC, 2020). Roughly 1 in 10 youth athletes in contact sports sustain a concussion each season (Pfister et al., 2016). McCrory et al. (2017) highlighted the lasting neurological damage concussions can cause, particularly when head injuries go untreated. Beyond immediate cognitive impairment, concussions have enduring effects on emotional regulation, memory, and mental health. Developing brains are particularly vulnerable, and repeated concussions can lead to chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) and other neurodegenerative conditions, necessitating rigorous safety protocols (Giza & Hovda, 2014).

In addition to injury risks, athletes in sports that emphasize leanness, such as cheerleading, gymnastics, figure skating, and distance running, are more prone to body image pressures that can lead to disordered eating behaviors. The Female Athlete Triad, which includes disordered eating, menstrual dysfunction, and low bone density, affects up to 30% of female athletes in these sports (De Souza et al., 2014). Sundgot-Borgen and Torstveit (2004) reported that around 20% of female athletes suffer from at least one component of this triad, with long-term impacts on bone health and reproductive function. For example, athletes with menstrual dysfunction are three times more likely to experience stress fractures, often due to low bone density (Gibbs et al., 2013). Additionally, weight cycling, common in sports like wrestling and lightweight rowing, poses further health risks. Artioli et al. (2010) found that athletes who engage in rapid weight loss and regain are at risk for severe metabolic disruptions, cardiovascular strain, and weakened immune systems, all of which may lead to chronic health issues.

### ***Emotional Well-Being in Youth Athletes***

The emotional well-being of youth athletes is highly susceptible to strain due to the intense pressures associated with high-level competition. Studies estimate that up to 30% of youth athletes report experiencing performance anxiety, often stemming from the combined pressures of parental and coaching expectations (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008). Persistent anxiety, intensified by fear of failure, disrupts mental and emotional stability, leading to elevated stress levels and, in many cases, burnout. Burnout affects approximately 10–20% of youth athletes in elite sports, particularly those who engage in high-intensity training with minimal rest. Characterized by emotional exhaustion and disengagement, burnout can have long-lasting effects, potentially causing athletes to detach from both their sport and personal identities associated with athletic achievement (Gustafsson et al., 2017).

Mental health challenges, including depression and anxiety, are notably prevalent among youth athletes. Rice et al. (2016) conducted a meta-analysis indicating that youth athletes are at a 1.5 to 2 times higher risk of developing depression and anxiety compared to their non-athlete peers. The constant demands to perform well, coupled with the fear of not meeting these standards, heighten emotional vulnerability, especially during setbacks like injury or loss. Identity foreclosure, where athletes define themselves solely through their sport, occurs frequently in those who specialize early, heightening the risk of physical and emotional crises when faced with sport disruptions (Choudhury et al., 2024; Smith, 2010).

Despite these challenges, strong, supportive relationships with coaches and peers can buffer psychological strain. Jowett and Cockerill (2003) found that athletes who have positive, supportive relationships with their coaches report up to 30% lower stress levels and a 20% boost in self-esteem compared to those under authoritarian or overly critical coaching styles.

Conversely, athletes exposed to more punitive or performance-focused coaching environments are at a significantly higher risk of anxiety, diminished self-worth, and emotional detachment. Prioritizing environments that support both performance and emotional well-being can improve long-term mental health outcomes, helping athletes build resilience that benefits their athletic careers and personal development.

### ***Social Well-Being in Youth Athletes***

Youth sports offer structured environments that can support social development, yet they also risk isolating athletes from broader social interactions, potentially limiting overall social well-being. Participation in sports allows young athletes to form deep connections with teammates, fostering crucial skills in teamwork, leadership, and communication. Côté and Fraser-Thomas (2016) emphasize that these bonds help create a sense of community and belonging, which is foundational to the emotional and social well-being of youth athletes. Approximately 80% of athletes in team-based sports report that these relationships contribute positively to their overall enjoyment and motivation in sports (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008).

However, the intensive time commitments required in elite sports often come at the expense of broader social experiences. Youth athletes spend 30–40% less time in unstructured social activities compared to their non-athlete peers, limiting opportunities to build friendships outside of their sporting environments (Larson et al., 2006). This social isolation is particularly impactful during adolescence, a developmental stage critical for identity formation. The competitive atmosphere within elite sports can also strain relationships within teams. Fletcher and Sarkar (2012) found that competition for recognition or starting positions creates tension between teammates, undermining team cohesion, and further isolating individuals. Research by

Dorsch et al. (2016) supports this, finding that 25–30% of youth athletes in highly competitive settings report feeling socially disconnected due to the competitive dynamics within their teams.

Social identity plays a pivotal role in shaping the well-being of youth athletes, as many derive their primary sense of self from their roles as athletes. This strong identification with sport can lead to social challenges, especially when athletes face transitions out of their competitive roles due to injury or other circumstances. Rees (2016) reported that athletes who closely identify with their athletic roles are twice as likely to experience difficulties in maintaining social relationships outside of sports. During these transitions, many athletes report feelings of isolation and detachment, as their heavily sport-centered identities make it challenging to form connections in non-sporting contexts (Taylor et al., 2006).

### ***Interconnected Dimensions of Well-Being in Youth Athletes***

The dimensions of well-being examined above are not isolated; rather, they interact and reinforce one another, shaping the overall experiences of youth athletes in profound ways. Research indicates that declines in one dimension often correlate with declines in others, creating a multidimensional impact on athlete well-being (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005; Gustafsson et al., 2011). For instance, physical injuries and body image pressures can erode emotional stability, and social support, while heightened stress and anxiety can further exacerbate physical vulnerability and social isolation (Jones et al., 2005). Understanding these interconnections is essential for fostering environments that support balanced growth and holistic development.

A study by Fraser-Thomas et al. (2008) found that youth athletes experiencing elevated levels of physical and emotional strain were also more likely to report lower social connectedness and decreased motivation, illustrating how physical demands can influence emotional and social dimensions. Similarly, athletes facing high-performance expectations often

reported intensified feelings of isolation and anxiety, impacting both their social and emotional well-being (Gould & Carson, 2008). This correlation suggests that prioritizing only physical performance may undermine other areas of well-being, leading to disengagement and burnout.

Moreover, studies show that youth athletes who experience burnout, a dimension primarily linked to emotional well-being, are at a greater risk of physical injury and often face academic challenges as well (Gustafsson et al., 2017). Burnout, characterized by exhaustion and emotional detachment, has been shown to impede athletes' focus, making them more susceptible to severe injuries (Brenner, 2007). The interconnected nature of these dimensions means that emotional distress can ripple across physical and social dimensions, underscoring the need for interventions that address well-being holistically.

Social support has also been identified as a crucial buffer that can mitigate the negative impacts of physical and emotional stress in youth sports. Athletes with supportive peer and coaching relationships report higher levels of resilience and motivation, even under intense training conditions (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). However, when athletes experience social isolation, whether due to time commitments or team dynamics, they are more likely to experience heightened anxiety and physical strain, indicating that social well-being is instrumental to both mental and physical well-being (Dorsch et al., 2016). In sum, the interconnected nature of these dimensions illustrates the importance of a holistic approach to well-being in youth sports. The following section explores the roles and responsibilities of athletes, coaches, parents, and sports administrators in promoting or neglecting well-being across these dimensions, highlighting the systemic factors that influence outcomes for young athletes.

## **Accountability for Athlete Well-Being**

Responsibility for the well-being of youth athletes is shared among multiple stakeholders, including athletes, coaches, parents, and sports administrators, each of whom contributes to the culture, structure, and values that shape an athlete's experience. Research underscores that athletes, coaches, parents, and sports administrators all play a role in either supporting or neglecting athletes' holistic well-being. However, varying priorities and pressures often result in environments where well-being may be overshadowed by performance metrics and competitive outcomes, leading to a neglect of comprehensive well-being considerations.

Athletes themselves hold a degree of responsibility for their well-being, yet research shows that they often engage in behaviors that compromise long-term health in the pursuit of short-term gains (Baker et al., 2014). High-performance athletes, especially, are conditioned to tolerate excessive training loads, play through injuries, and sacrifice rest and recovery to meet the demands of competitive sports (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005; Miller & Hoffman, 2009). These behaviors are frequently reinforced by a sports culture that celebrates resilience and toughness, sometimes at the expense of mental and physical health (Theberge, 2008). Young athletes, who may lack the maturity to assess long-term consequences, are particularly susceptible to adopting risky behaviors, often normalized by peer expectations and the implicit messages received from their environment (Gould & Carson, 2008).

Coaches play a pivotal role in shaping athletes' experiences, with their approach directly influencing athletes' motivation, mental well-being, and long-term engagement in sport (Knight et al., 2018). Studies show that autonomy-supportive coaching styles foster greater athlete well-being by encouraging resilience, intrinsic motivation, and personal growth (Knight et al., 2017). In contrast, controlling or authoritarian coaching approaches, which emphasize performance over

welfare, tend to elevate athletes' stress and risk of burnout (Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016; Smoll & Smith, 2006).

However, many coaches feel that addressing the holistic well-being of athletes is a shared responsibility rather than solely their own. While they often recognize the importance of supporting mental and emotional health, many perceive specialized mental health support as best provided by sports psychologists or counselors, citing limitations in time, resources, or expertise (Giges et al., 2004; Tamminen & Gaudreau, 2014). The demands of high-performance sports environments can further complicate this, as coaches are frequently pressured by organizational goals and parental expectations to prioritize results over well-being.

This performance-oriented culture can lead coaches to focus primarily on physical health and achievement metrics, leaving emotional or psychological support to be viewed as secondary or outside their remit. Some coaches report feeling that the culture of elite sport discourages attention to athletes' emotional needs, creating a tension between their roles as performance facilitators and potential well-being advocates (Wagstaff, 2016). While many are aware of the complex, multidimensional needs of their athletes, the structure of competitive sport often places coaches in a balancing act, where prioritizing athlete well-being may conflict with the drive for success (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005; Wagstaff, 2016).

Parents play a critical role in shaping the well-being of youth athletes, with their attitudes and involvement profoundly impacting athletes' experiences in sports (Harwood & Knight, 2015). Positive parental involvement that emphasizes personal growth and enjoyment has been linked to lower stress levels and higher satisfaction among young athletes (Knight et al., 2010). However, when parents become overly invested in competitive outcomes, they may unintentionally contribute to athletes' stress and anxiety. For example, research indicates that

"sideline coaching" and post-game criticisms can erode athletes' enjoyment, leading to burnout and potential disengagement from the sport (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008). The delicate balance of supporting without pressuring is key; however, in high-performance environments, the competitive pressures parents face, such as financial investments in their child's athletic career, can lead them to unintentionally prioritize performance over well-being (Gould et al., 2006).

Sport administrators and organizations set overarching policies and frameworks that define the competitive culture and expectations within sports programs. Research suggests that administrators, motivated by funding requirements and sponsorships, may inadvertently emphasize performance metrics over holistic health (Brenner, 2007; Kerr & Stirling, 2012). This can create an environment where athletes are viewed primarily as assets within a system aimed at producing competitive results (Westerbeek & Hahn, 2013). Additionally, sports organizations may lack policies that address athletes' emotional and psychological needs, focusing instead on physical training and skill development (Baker et al., 2009). When well-being policies are absent or underdeveloped, sports organizations risk perpetuating a culture where athletes feel pressured to perform without adequate mental health resources, recovery protocols, or balanced training schedules (Gould & Carson, 2004).

The tendency to prioritize performance over well-being reflects the complex, sometimes competing priorities of stakeholders within youth sports. Athletes, coaches, parents, and administrators each operate under pressures, whether internal or external, that may shift focus away from the holistic needs of young athletes. As research highlights, fostering well-being in youth sports requires a collaborative, integrated approach where each stakeholder actively contributes to creating balanced environments that value both performance and personal growth (Brenner, 2007; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005). This balance is central to the concept of thriving,

which emphasizes the interconnectedness of well-being and achievement, offering a framework to support youth athletes in both their development and success.

### **Thriving in Elite Sports: A Balanced Perspective**

As previously discussed, the pursuit of success in elite sports offers numerous benefits, including sustained funding, enhanced job security, and recognition for athletes and organizations (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009). However, the intense focus on achieving peak performance often fosters a win-at-all-costs mentality, which can prioritize results over athlete welfare. This approach has led to widespread concerns about culture within elite sports, particularly due to recent allegations of maltreatment, such as emotional and physical abuse (Kerr et al., 2019). These incidents underscore the pressing need for systemic reform that moves beyond narrow definitions of success to incorporate athlete well-being. The emerging concept of thriving, as both a state and a process, offers a compelling framework to address these challenges by exploring how success can coexist with holistic development.

Thriving is defined as "the joint experience of development and success" (Brown et al., 2017), where development reflects the human drive for self-fulfillment and growth, and success refers to meaningful outcomes relevant to an individual's context. Brown's definition of thriving also emphasizes that well-being and performance are interconnected rather than mutually exclusive (Brown et al., 2017). This dual emphasis distinguishes thriving from constructs like resilience, which focuses on recovery from adversity, and flourishing, which highlights optimal functioning without specific attention to achievement (Brown et al., 2018). Thriving is characterized by the simultaneous presence of well-being and performance, with athletes categorized into low, moderate, or high levels of thriving based on their experiences of both dimensions (Brown et al., 2021). Importantly, excelling in one domain without the other reflects

an incomplete state of thriving. For example, high-performance at the expense of well-being undermines holistic thriving, while strong well-being without meaningful performance outcomes may fall short in competitive contexts (Brown & Arnold, 2019). Thriving can manifest in specific combinations, such as physical vitality paired with relational well-being, but its most robust expression emerges when multiple domains interact synergistically to support both personal growth and athletic success.

This interconnectedness extends to how achievement is conceptualized within the thriving framework. Importantly, achievement in the context of thriving is not narrowly defined by winning or being at the top of the leaderboard. Thriving is highly contextual and reflects the athlete's ability to find meaning and satisfaction in their journey, regardless of competitive ranking. For example, an athlete who consistently improves their personal performance or develops strong, meaningful relationships with teammates may experience thriving even without podium finishes. This broader conceptualization of success acknowledges that athletes can thrive through internal measures of achievement, such as mastering a new skill, contributing to a team dynamic, or aligning their efforts with intrinsic goals (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

At the heart of thriving are two fundamental dimensions of well-being: hedonic well-being and eudaimonic well-being. Hedonic well-being emphasizes immediate positive affect, including happiness, satisfaction, and vitality, which refers to the subjective sense of energy and aliveness (Brown et al., 2017). Vitality is particularly significant in elite sports, as it reflects both physical fitness and psychological wellness and enables athletes to sustain high levels of performance. For instance, athletes frequently describe moments of joy and engagement during training and competition as markers of hedonic well-being, often linked to fulfilling their psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Brown et

al., 2018). Autonomy fosters a sense of control and alignment with personal values, competence reinforces confidence in one's abilities, and relatedness builds meaningful connections that enhance motivation and resilience.

Eudaimonic well-being focuses on long-term fulfillment through personal growth, self-realization, and meaningful achievement (Brown et al., 2018). It encompasses the pursuit of goals that align with an individual's core values and motivations, emphasizing authenticity and agency. Athletes who derive purpose from their sport consistently report higher levels of eudaimonic well-being, viewing their athletic journey as a means of self-transformation. Brown et al. (2018) found that athletes often cited moments of overcoming adversity or mastering new skills as pivotal to their development, highlighting the alignment between intrinsic motivation and thriving. They also found that athletes who prioritize mastery or community contribution over external rewards, such as fame or financial gain, exhibit greater resilience and satisfaction (Brown et al., 2018).

The conditions necessary for thriving are created through the interaction of personal and contextual enablers, which together foster an environment conducive to development and success. At the individual level, personal enablers such as resilience, optimism, and intrinsic motivation are foundational to thriving. Resilient athletes demonstrate adaptability and emotional regulation under pressure, allowing them to maintain performance in challenging situations (Brown et al., 2018). Optimism, or the belief in positive outcomes, has been shown to enhance persistence and adaptability, while proactivity, characterized by setting goals and seeking growth opportunities, further distinguishes thriving individuals. A learning orientation, marked by a commitment to continuous improvement, ensures that athletes remain engaged and motivated, equipping them to excel in evolving sports contexts.

Contextual enablers also play a crucial role in promoting thriving. High-quality relationships with coaches, teammates, and family members provide emotional security, constructive feedback, and encouragement. These connections build trust and support athletes in navigating the demands of elite competition effectively (Davis et al., 2021). Organizational culture is equally influential, with environments that prioritize psychological safety, collaboration, and transparency offering a strong foundation for success. For instance, sports programs with clear expectations and adequate resources enable athletes to focus on their development without unnecessary stress (Passaportis et al., 2022). Conversely, performance-driven cultures that neglect welfare undermine the conditions necessary for thriving, often resulting in burnout and disengagement.

The mechanisms linking enablers to thriving are grounded in self-determination theory and challenge appraisal frameworks. Satisfaction of psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness is a critical process for thriving, as it promotes both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Brown et al., 2018). When athletes experience autonomy, they feel empowered to make decisions aligned with their values. Competence reinforces their belief in their abilities, fostering confidence and engagement, while relatedness enhances their sense of connection to others, providing emotional support and motivation. Together, these needs create a foundation for thriving by ensuring athletes experience both immediate positive affect and long-term growth.

Challenge appraisal, or the ability to perceive challenges as opportunities for growth rather than threats, further supports thriving. Athletes adopting this mindset engage more fully with their tasks, enhancing performance and personal development. For example, Brown et al. (2021) observed that athletes who reframed competitive stress as a motivator reported greater

vitality, focus, and resilience, enabling them to sustain high-performance over time. These mechanisms work together to create a feedback loop, where thriving athletes are continually motivated to pursue new opportunities for success and well-being.

Thriving is inherently context-sensitive, with its pathways and indicators varying across different sports. In individual sports, thriving often centers on self-discipline and incremental performance improvements, while in team sports, it involves balancing individual and collective goals. Team cohesion and mutual support are critical factors in these settings, fostering a sense of belonging and shared purpose. To address this, Brown et al. (2017) emphasized the adaptability of the thriving framework, underscoring its relevance across diverse athletic environments. This flexibility highlights the importance of employing varied methodological approaches to fully capture how thriving manifests across different sports contexts. The following section examines the methodological considerations and research applications that have an advanced understanding of thriving in elite sports.

### ***Methodological Considerations and Applications in Thriving Research***

Diverse methodological approaches have been employed to study thriving in elite sports, each offering valuable insights that deepen understanding of the construct. These methodologies have helped identify the psychological, relational, and contextual factors that foster thriving and how it manifests across different levels of athletic experience. By examining thriving through varied lenses, researchers have provided a more nuanced understanding of its dynamics and pathways, advancing both theory and practice.

Quantitative methodologies have played a critical role in measuring thriving and its predictors. For example, Brown et al. (2021) used a prospective design to assess 51 male hockey players, linking thriving to the satisfaction of psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and

relatedness) and positive challenge appraisals. This study also explored physiological biomarkers, such as cortisol and DHEA, though these proved less predictive than psychological variables, emphasizing the centrality of mental processes in thriving outcomes. A different study by Brown et al. (2021) employed repeated surveys of 268 athletes over 28 days, demonstrating thriving as a dynamic and self-reinforcing process. This methodological approach illuminated the temporal nature of thriving, revealing that sustained well-being and performance arise from consistent psychological need satisfaction and recent thriving experiences.

Person-centered analyses have further contributed to understanding thriving as a differentiated experience among athletes. Brown et al. (2018) used factor mixture analysis to categorize 535 athletes into thriving, low-functioning, and moderate groups based on their responses to competitive stress. This methodology highlighted the heterogeneity of athlete experiences and the role of resilience, psychological skills, and challenge appraisals in distinguishing those who thrive. Such person-centered approaches reveal not only the predictors of thriving but also the diverse pathways through which athletes navigate high-pressure environments.

Relational methodologies have expanded the focus of thriving beyond individual characteristics to include the influence of interpersonal dynamics. Davis et al. (2021) employed cross-sectional and prospective designs to study attachment relationships in athletes across various sports and skill levels. By examining secure versus insecure attachments to coaches and parents, this research emphasized the role of relational support in fostering psychological need satisfaction and thriving outcomes. This methodological approach has been pivotal in showing how thriving is shaped by the quality of interpersonal connections.

Qualitative research has provided rich, contextualized insights into the environmental and cultural factors that facilitate thriving. For instance, Brown and Arnold (2019) interviewed 18 professional rugby players to identify thriving-enabling conditions such as trust, inclusivity, and strong interpersonal bonds. These findings underscore the importance of collaborative team cultures and relational support as critical drivers of thriving. Additionally, Passaportis et al. (2022) employed a 16-month ethnographic approach to examine how decentralized leadership structures fostered thriving in a British Olympic organization. This in-depth methodology captured the complexities of systemic change and highlighted the importance of organizational trust and empowerment in promoting thriving across levels.

Participatory research methodologies have bridged the gap between theory and practice by involving practitioners directly in the study of thriving. Passaportis et al. (2024) documented a nine-month collaboration with a sport psychologist, exploring how systemic interventions can foster thriving within an Olympic organization. This methodology provided actionable insights into navigating organizational dynamics, democratizing responsibility for well-being, and creating conditions for sustained thriving.

Lastly, multilevel frameworks have expanded the scope of thriving research to include collective experiences. McGuire et al. (2023) proposed a conceptual framework for understanding thriving in team environments, exploring how shared goals, emotional contagion, and supportive interactions contribute to group-level thriving. This approach recognizes thriving as an emergent phenomenon that transcends individual experiences, emphasizing the importance of team dynamics and organizational culture.

Together, these methodological approaches have significantly advanced understanding of thriving by addressing its multidimensional nature. Quantitative designs clarify the predictors

and prevalence of thriving, while qualitative and participatory methods offer rich, context-specific insights into the environments that foster it. Relational and multilevel frameworks further expand the concept beyond the individual, emphasizing the importance of interpersonal connections and collective dynamics. This diverse body of research provides a robust foundation for developing interventions that promote sustainable well-being and performance in elite sports. Applying these insights, researchers can explore how the principles of thriving are uniquely expressed and influenced within specific contexts, such as competitive cheerleading.

### **Influence of Cheerleading Culture on Well-Being and Thriving**

Competitive cheerleading has evolved dramatically from its origins as sideline entertainment to a high-stakes, performance-driven sport. Initially designed to support athletic teams and engage spectators in the early 20th century, cheerleading transitioned to a competitive discipline by the late 1980s with the emergence of All-Star cheerleading. This form of cheerleading shifted the focus from traditional crowd support to direct competition, featuring intricate routines performed within private programs. Today, competitive cheerleading is characterized by year-round preparation, complex stunts, and highly synchronized performances that push the boundaries of creativity and athletic excellence (Hobbs, 2024).

This unique culture presents significant challenges and opportunities for athletes' well-being and thriving. The sport's emphasis on high-performance demands that athletes navigate rigorous training schedules, intense team dynamics, and the relentless pursuit of precision under pressure. Athletes often begin structured training as early as six years old, as allowed by the United States All Star Federation (USASF) age guidelines (USASF, 2024). Teams practice multiple times a week for two to four hours per session, incorporating strength training, tumbling, stunting, and choreography. During competition season, practice schedules frequently

increase to five or six days a week. This early exposure to elite-level training introduces considerable physical and psychological demands, often forcing young athletes to balance developmental needs with the expectations of high-performance.

### ***Challenges to Well-Being and Thriving in Competitive Cheerleading***

The structured environment of competitive cheerleading can strain holistic well-being, particularly when performance pressures overshadow individual needs. Mixed-age teams, a common feature, combine younger athletes with older, more experienced peers. While this structure can inspire growth and mentorship, it also increases pressure on younger athletes to perform at levels beyond their developmental readiness. Flyers, often younger athletes chosen for their smaller size, experience heightened physical risks and psychological pressures when executing complex stunts. Additionally, the synchronized nature of team performance fosters a "team above self" mentality, where individual well-being is sometimes compromised for collective success (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005).

The scoring system in competitive cheerleading further amplifies these pressures. Routines are evaluated on difficulty, precision, and synchronization within a rigid two-minute-and-thirty-second window. This structure incentivizes high-risk skills to maximize scores, potentially leading athletes to push through injuries or exhaustion for fear of jeopardizing their team's success. Moreover, the subjective nature of scoring introduces additional stress, as reputational and financial factors can create implicit biases favoring larger or more affluent programs (Herbert, 2024).

Beyond performance pressures, social and cultural influences also shape athlete well-being. Media portrayals, such as Netflix's *Cheer* and televised competitions, glorify flawless routines and resilience under pressure, creating heightened expectations for young athletes to

replicate these standards. Social media amplifies these pressures by promoting self-comparison, as athletes showcase challenging stunts and routines online. This visibility fosters a hyper-competitive atmosphere where personal well-being often takes a backseat to performance.

Financial demands further complicate the picture. Annual costs for competitive cheerleading range from \$8,000 to \$12,000, including gym fees, uniforms, travel, and competition expenses. These financial investments often lead athletes and their families to prioritize competitive success to justify their sacrifices, reinforcing a "win-at-all-costs" mentality (Knight et al., 2018). Many athletes internalize this pressure, tying their self-worth to their ability to perform and achieve.

### ***Opportunities for Well-Being and Thriving in Competitive Cheerleading***

Despite these challenges, the culture of competitive cheerleading also fosters opportunities for thriving, defined as the harmonious experience of personal growth and success (Brown et al., 2017). Gym environments frequently serve as "second homes" for athletes, offering a powerful sense of community, belonging, and support. These relationships can buffer against stress, enhance resilience, and provide motivation for athletes to pursue both personal and collective goals. When supported by coaches who prioritize autonomy, competence, and relatedness, athletes are more likely to thrive, as these needs form the psychological foundation for sustained well-being and performance (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The sport also cultivates critical life skills, including teamwork, perseverance, and time management. Mixed-age teams can promote mentorship and leadership opportunities, helping younger athletes develop confidence and competence in a structured environment. Additionally, the collaborative nature of team routines reinforces the value of working toward shared goals, which can foster a sense of purpose and collective accomplishment.

However, the potential for thriving depends heavily on how the culture of cheerleading balances its performance demands with holistic support for well-being. Gyms that overemphasize skill progression or competitive outcomes risk creating environments where athletes feel constant pressure to meet escalating expectations. Conversely, programs that prioritize relational support and developmental growth are better equipped to create conditions for thriving.

### ***Integrating Well-Being and Thriving in Competitive Cheerleading***

Competitive cheerleading presents a paradox: it creates significant risks to well-being while also offering pathways for athletes to thrive. The thriving framework provides a lens to examine these dual forces, emphasizing the importance of balancing performance-driven demands with meaningful support for holistic development. Thriving encompasses more than achieving performance success. It includes long-term fulfillment, personal growth, and the capacity to sustain participation without compromising well-being. For competitive cheerleaders, this balance depends on how the sport's unique cultural elements, such as intense training regimens, team dynamics, and external pressures, are navigated and supported.

Understanding the interplay between well-being and thriving in competitive cheerleading requires focusing on athletes' subjective experiences. Well-being is deeply personal, shaped by intrinsic motivations and contextual factors within the sport. For some athletes, mastering a complex stunt may signify thriving, while others find it in the camaraderie of a supportive team environment. These diverse interpretations underscore the importance of capturing athletes' voices to uncover how they define and pursue well-being in the face of the sport's demands.

By prioritizing athletes' lived experiences, researchers can uncover critical insights into the conditions that enable thriving in competitive cheerleading. This qualitative perspective

highlights how athletes navigate challenges, adapt to stressors, and derive meaning from their participation. Such insights are vital for identifying strategies to create environments where athletes can excel without sacrificing their overall well-being. These findings also provide actionable pathways for systemic improvements. Understanding athletes' interpretations of well-being can inform coaching practices, team cultures, and organizational policies, helping ensure that the pursuit of competitive success aligns with developmental needs.

In conclusion, integrating thriving and well-being in competitive cheerleading necessitates a deeper exploration of athletes' perspectives. These subjective accounts reveal how well-being is experienced and supported within the sport's context, offering a compelling rationale for qualitative inquiry. By centering athletes' voices, this research aims to bridge the gap between theoretical frameworks and practical applications, fostering environments where peak performance and holistic development coexist.

### **Chapter Three: Methodology**

This chapter outlines the methodological framework for examining how gym culture, external pressures, and training regimens shape athletes' interpretations of their well-being and thriving in the context of competitive cheerleading. The study adopted a qualitative case study approach focused on a single, purposefully selected gym, referred to as Allstar Cheer Elite (ACE). By delving deeply into this specific setting, the research aimed to provide rich, nuanced insights into the complex interplay of factors that contribute to athlete well-being and thriving in high-pressure sports environments.

The chapter details the research design, including the epistemological and theoretical perspectives that guide the study. It then describes the case selection, providing an in-depth look at ACE's physical layout, organizational structure, gym culture, and its position within the competitive cheerleading landscape. The data collection methods are outlined, encompassing participant observation, interviews, and the analysis of documents and artifacts. The data analysis procedures are explained, highlighting the use of NVivo software and methodological practices informed by key qualitative research theorists.

Furthermore, the chapter addresses the challenges associated with the researcher's insider status and outlines measures taken to mitigate unwanted influences on the study. Ethical considerations are discussed that ensured the protection of participants and the integrity of the research. Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness and rigor are also presented, emphasizing the study's commitment to methodological excellence. Finally, to guide the research process systematically, there is a timeline of specified events that was followed.

By integrating these components, this chapter provides a comprehensive methodological foundation for examining how gym culture, external pressures, and training regimens shape

athletes' interpretations of well-being and thriving at ACE. The study's findings aim to contribute valuable insights to the broader discourse on athlete development and well-being in competitive sports environments.

## **Research Design**

### ***Epistemology and Theoretical Perspective***

This study is grounded in a constructionist epistemology, which posits that knowledge and meaningful reality are shaped through the dynamic interaction between human beings and their environment (Crotty, 1998). This epistemological stance emphasizes that meaningful reality is not an objective entity waiting to be discovered but is instead co-created by individuals engaging within their social contexts. In the context of ACE, constructionism aligns with the aim of understanding how athletes construct their meaningful realities within the gym's culture. For example, the processes through which training regimens are developed and the shared experiences of rigorous practice sessions contribute to the collective understanding of what it means to thrive in a high-pressure sports environment.

Building on this epistemological foundation, the study adopted an interpretivist theoretical perspective. As Schwandt (2000) notes, interpretivism focuses on understanding the subjective meanings that individuals assign to their experiences. This perspective is essential for exploring how athletes make sense of their roles, relationships, and challenges within competitive cheerleading. By prioritizing the participants' viewpoints, interpretivism seeks to uncover the nuanced ways in which athletes interpret their training regimens, manage external pressures, and engage with their coaches and peers. For instance, an athlete's interpretation of a rigorous training schedule may vary based on personal motivations, previous experiences, and individual resilience, thereby influencing their psychological well-being and performance.

Additionally, the study incorporated symbolic interactionism as a form of interpretivism. Symbolic interactionism, as articulated by Blumer (1986), emphasizes how individuals create and interpret symbols, interactions, and social processes within their environments. This theoretical perspective is particularly relevant for understanding the complex social dynamics in competitive cheerleading. For instance, the shared language, symbols, and traditions within ACE, such as specific chants, gestures, or rituals, are not merely superficial practices but are integral to forming a collective identity among team members. These symbols and rituals influence how athletes interpret their experiences, navigate challenges, and perceive success, thereby shaping their overall thriving in a high-pressure sports environment.

Integrating constructionism, interpretivism, and symbolic interactionism provides a robust and multifaceted theoretical foundation for the study. Constructionism offers the epistemological stance that knowledge is co-constructed through social interactions, while interpretivism provides a lens for understanding the subjective meanings individuals assign to their experiences. Symbolic interactionism further enriches this framework by focusing on the role of symbols and interactions in shaping these meanings. Together, these perspectives allowed for an in-depth exploration of the nuanced ways in which gym culture, external pressures, and training regimens impact athlete thriving at ACE.

### ***Qualitative Case Study Approach***

Building upon the established epistemological and theoretical foundations, the study employed a qualitative case study design, which is particularly well-suited for exploring complex social processes within their real-life contexts where the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clear (Yin, 2018). By focusing on ACE, a single gym, the research provided a bounded system for in-depth analysis, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of

the unique cultural dynamics, interpersonal relationships, and organizational practices that influence athlete thriving.

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), a case study involves an in-depth exploration of a bounded system, emphasizing detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions and their interrelationships. This approach is appropriate for examining the experiences of athletes in a high-performance cheerleading gym, where factors such as team dynamics, coaching styles, parental expectations, and societal pressures intersect to impact their development and well-being. By situating the study within the natural environment of ACE, the research captured the richness and complexity of athletes' lived experiences.

The study integrated key features of a qualitative case study as outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018). Clear case boundaries were established by explicitly defining ACE as the case, focusing on athletes aged 12 to 18 who have been part of the competitive teams for at least one year. This boundary ensured that participants had sufficient experience within the gym's culture to provide meaningful insights into the factors influencing their thriving. For example, athletes who have progressed through various competitive levels within the gym were able to offer perspectives on how the evolution of the training regimen and its impact on their personal growth.

Furthermore, contextualization was achieved by situating ACE within its real-life context, considering the cultural, social, economic, and organizational factors that shape the gym's environment. The gym operates in a suburban community where competitive sports are highly valued, and families often make significant financial and time commitments to support their children's athletic pursuits. Understanding this context is critical for analyzing how external pressures, such as parental expectations, community prestige, and societal ideals of success,

influence athlete thriving. For instance, the local community's celebration of the gym's achievements places additional performance expectations on the athletes, affecting their experiences of pressure and motivation.

The study utilized multiple data sources to enhance the credibility of the findings through triangulation (Yin, 2018). Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with athletes, coaches, parents, and administrators; participant observations during practices, competitions, and team events; and analysis of documents and artifacts such as training manuals, performance evaluations, and promotional materials. This triangulation allowed for cross-verification of information from diverse sources, strengthening the validity of the study. For example, coaches' perspectives on training intensity were compared with athletes' experiences and documented training schedules to identify consistencies or discrepancies.

Employing the concept of "thick description" as articulated by Geertz (1973), the study provides rich, detailed accounts of the gym's culture, practices, and rituals. By immersing in the everyday life of the gym, the research captured the nuances of athlete experiences, such as the significance of pre-competition rituals, the impact of coaching feedback on athlete confidence, and the subtle dynamics of team interactions. This level of detail enables readers to understand the complexities of the environment and the factors that contribute to athlete thriving, facilitating a deeper appreciation of the phenomena under investigation.

By integrating these elements, the qualitative case study approach offers a comprehensive exploration of how gym culture, external pressures, and training regimens shape athlete thriving at ACE. This methodology is context-sensitive, richly detailed, and well-equipped to generate meaningful insights. With a strong epistemological and theoretical foundation established, the

next step is to select a case that exemplifies the dynamic interplay among gym culture, external pressures, and training regimens.

## **Case Selection**

### ***Description of the Competitive Cheerleading Gym***

ACE is strategically situated in a suburban area, providing accessibility to families from various nearby cities. Notably, some athletes commute up to an hour to attend practices, underscoring the gym's regional draw and esteemed reputation. Spanning approximately 20,000 square feet (about four times the area of a basketball court), ACE is equipped with state-of-the-art facilities meticulously designed to support elite athletic training. The gym's physical layout is purposefully crafted to foster a high-performance environment, facilitating both individual and team development.

A central feature of ACE's infrastructure is its multiple spring floors, including two full-size competition-standard spring floors utilized for team practices. These specialized floors enhance athletes' performance by providing additional bounce, reducing impact on joints, and minimizing injury risks during high-impact routines. The availability of multiple floors allows several teams to practice simultaneously, thereby maximizing training time and efficiency. Complementing the spring floors are tumble tracks and foam pits, essential for safe skill development and progression in tumbling. These facilities enable athletes to practice complex maneuvers, such as flips and twists, with reduced risk, thereby building confidence and refining techniques before executing skills on the main floor.

ACE also features a dedicated strength and conditioning area, equipped with weights, resistance machines, and functional training equipment. This area supports athletes in developing the physical strength, flexibility, and endurance necessary for demanding routines. Strength

training is seamlessly integrated into the overall training program to enhance performance and prevent injuries. Additionally, the gym houses a video analysis room, a dedicated space where athletes and coaches review performance footage to refine techniques and develop improvement strategies. Video analysis allows for detailed feedback on form, synchronization, and execution, contributing to continuous skill enhancement.

The training regimen at ACE varies by athlete level, reflecting the demands and expectations of competitive cheerleading. Lower-level athletes typically practice two to three times per week, focusing on foundational skills, strength conditioning, and routine development. As athletes progress to higher levels, the training schedule becomes more rigorous, often involving four to five practices per week. These sessions emphasize skill refinement, complex stunts, tumbling passes, and synchronized choreography. A key aspect of training includes "full outs," where athletes perform their entire routine with full intensity to simulate competition conditions, build stamina, and ensure routine consistency. These full outs are physically and mentally taxing but are crucial for preparing athletes for the high-stakes competition environment. The intensity and duration of practices reflect ACE's commitment to maintaining a competitive edge while striving to increase athletic performance.

Overall, the gym's layout is designed to facilitate simultaneous training for multiple teams, accommodate specialized coaching sessions, and create an environment conducive to high-level athletic development. These facilities reflect ACE's unwavering commitment to excellence, providing athletes with the resources needed to thrive in competitive cheerleading.

### ***Organizational Structure***

ACE's organizational structure is composed of several key roles that work collaboratively to achieve the gym's mission. At the helm are the owners and directors, who bear responsibility

for the overall operation, strategic planning, and financial management of the gym. They set the vision and goals, ensuring alignment with the gym's mission to foster excellence and support athlete development. The owners oversee program development, staff hiring, and policy implementation, thereby shaping the gym's operational framework.

Supporting the owners are the coaching staff, which includes head coaches and assistant coaches for each competitive team. Coaches possess autonomy over their teams and training programs while operating within guidelines established by the directors. They are tasked with designing training regimens, choreographing routines, providing feedback, and fostering team dynamics. ACE's coaches are seasoned professionals, many of whom have backgrounds as former collegiate or professional cheerleaders. Their extensive experience and expertise are pivotal in elevating the athletes' performance and maintaining the gym's ambitious standards.

Complementing the coaching team is the support staff, comprising administrative personnel responsible for logistics, scheduling, communication with parents, and coordination of events such as competitions and community engagements. The support staff ensures smooth operations behind the scenes, managing registrations, travel arrangements, and day-to-day administrative tasks. By handling these critical functions, the support staff allows coaches to focus on training and athlete development without being encumbered by logistical concerns.

The organizational structure at ACE fosters a balance between autonomy and accountability. Coaches are expected to uphold the gym standards, contribute to its success, and meet performance benchmarks such as competition results and athlete retention rates. While they enjoy significant freedom in managing their teams, they remain accountable to the gym directors, ensuring that all activities align with the gym's overarching objectives. This structure cultivates a professional environment focused on athlete success and continuous improvement.

## ***Gym Culture***

The culture at ACE is deeply ingrained with a strong emphasis on achievement, success, and continuous improvement. This culture is manifested in various aspects of the gym's operations and environment. Visual symbols of success, such as banners, trophies, and photographs celebrating past victories and notable achievements, adorn the gym walls. These symbols serve as constant reminders of ACE's legacy and set high expectations for current athletes, contributing to a motivating atmosphere where excellence is both valued and expected.

Another critical element of ACE's culture is its focus on performance metrics. Athletes are regularly assessed on skill proficiency, and their progress is meticulously tracked. Coaches utilize standardized rubrics to evaluate skills in tumbling, stunting, jumps, and dance elements. Regular evaluations provide athletes with constructive feedback for improvement and set clear benchmarks for advancement, fostering a culture of accountability and continuous growth.

The gym's competition focus further reinforces its culture of excellence. ACE participates in numerous competitions throughout the season, often traveling nationally to compete. The competitive schedule is rigorous, with athletes expected to maintain peak performance levels consistently. Success in competitions is a significant aspect of ACE's identity, reinforcing the gym's emphasis on achievement and high standards.

Additionally, ACE fosters rituals and traditions that enhance unity and shared identity among athletes. Pre-competition rituals, such as team chants or huddles, serve to build camaraderie and boost morale. Celebrating milestones and recognizing individual and team accomplishments are integral parts of the gym culture, creating a supportive and cohesive community where athletes feel valued and motivated to excel.

Understanding these cultural elements is essential for analyzing how they influence athlete thriving. The gym's culture shapes the environment in which athletes train and develop, impacting their psychological experiences, social interactions, and personal growth. It creates a context where high expectations are the norm, and support systems are in place to help athletes meet those expectations, thereby facilitating their overall well-being and success.

### ***Financial Structure and Cost Breakdown***

Understanding the financial dimensions of competitive cheerleading is essential for contextualizing athletes' experiences and the gym's operational dynamics. At ACE, revenue is primarily generated through tuition, competition fees, and merchandise sales, supplemented by facility rentals and fundraising opportunities. This financial structure enables ACE to provide top-tier training and resources for its athletes while maintaining sustainable operations.

**Gym Revenue.** Tuition Fees constitute the largest portion of ACE's revenue, reflecting the significant investment families make in their children's athletic development. Annual tuition for participation in ACE's programs ranges from \$5,000 to \$10,000, depending on the level and duration of training. This fee covers access to coaching, facility usage, and participation in training sessions.

Competition fees also play a substantial role in ACE's financial structure. Athletes are required to pay for participation in various events throughout the season, with fees typically ranging from \$200 to \$500 per competition. These fees cover entry costs, judging, event organization, and logistical support, ensuring that athletes can compete at prestigious venues without additional financial barriers. ACE applies a markup of approximately 30% to 50% on these fees, which is consistent with industry standards to cover administrative costs and generate profit.

Merchandise sales, including uniforms, training gear, and branded apparel, provide another substantial revenue stream. Annual merchandise expenses for athletes can range from \$300 to \$800, depending on team requirements and individual needs. The gym typically marks up merchandise prices by 50%, allowing ACE to cover production costs and contribute to its revenue. These sales not only reinforce ACE's brand but also foster a sense of identity and pride among athletes, contributing to a cohesive team environment.

Facility rentals represent an additional revenue source for ACE. When not in use for training or competitions, ACE rents out its state-of-the-art facilities to other local sports teams, community groups, or special events. This initiative generates an estimated \$10,000 annually, contributing to the gym's financial stability and ensuring optimal utilization of its extensive facilities. Facility rental rates vary based on the type of event and duration, typically ranging from \$500 to \$2,000 per event.

Fundraising opportunities are integral to supporting both athletes and the gym's operations. ACE organizes annual fundraising events such as biannual showcases, which collectively raise approximately \$15,000 each year. Additionally, athletes and their families engage in individual fundraising efforts, including online crowdfunding campaigns and sponsorship solicitations, to help cover personal expenses related to training and competitions. These efforts not only alleviate financial pressures but also strengthen community ties and support networks.

Moreover, sponsorships and partnerships with local businesses and sports organizations provide vital financial support. These collaborations help subsidize costs and offer additional resources for training and competition. Sponsorships typically involve agreements where businesses provide financial contributions in exchange for advertising opportunities, such as logo

placement on uniforms or banners within the gym. These partnerships not only support ACE financially but also enhance its reputation within the community, attracting more participants and fostering a positive public image.

**Gym Costs.** ACE's operational costs are diverse and essential for maintaining a high-quality training environment. These include gym maintenance and equipment upgrades, coaching staff salaries, and administrative costs. Gym maintenance and equipment upgrades represent ongoing operational costs for ACE. Maintaining the multiple spring floors, tumble tracks, and foam pits requires regular maintenance, estimated at \$5,000 annually. Upgrading training equipment and facilities to stay current with industry standards incurs additional expenses, ensuring that athletes have access to the best possible resources for their development. These upgrades are often funded through a combination of revenue streams, including merchandise sales and sponsorships. Maintaining and upgrading gym facilities ensures that athletes have access to the best resources, directly contributing to their training quality and overall performance.

Coaching staff salaries are a significant expense for ACE. The gym employs experienced coaches who bring a wealth of expertise to their roles. Head coaches at ACE typically earn between \$40,000 and \$60,000 annually, while assistant coaches receive between \$25,000 and \$40,000 per year. These salaries reflect the coaches' qualifications, experience, and the high level of responsibility they hold in developing and mentoring athletes. Competitive compensation ensures that ACE can attract and retain top coaching talent, which is essential for maintaining the gym's reputation for excellence.

Administrative costs related to logistics, scheduling, communication with parents, and coordination of events also contribute to the overall expenditure. These costs ensure the smooth

operation of the gym, allowing coaches to focus on training and athlete development without being encumbered by logistical concerns. Administrative expenses are managed efficiently through the support staff, who handle day-to-day tasks and strategic planning to optimize resource allocation.

**Costs for Athletes and Their Families.** The financial burden on athletes and their families is substantial and multifaceted, encompassing tuition fees, competition fees, travel expenses, and uniforms and equipment. Tuition fees for training sessions, coaching, and facility usage represent a significant financial commitment. Annual tuition for participating in ACE's programs ranges from \$5,000 to \$10,000, depending on the level and duration of training. These fees cover access to coaching, facility usage, and participation in training sessions, ensuring that athletes receive comprehensive support and high-quality training.

Competition fees, which cover entry costs, judging, and event organization, add to the financial burden, necessitating careful budgeting by families. Additionally, travel expenses for out-of-town competitions can be considerable, encompassing transportation, accommodation, and meals. For example, traveling to national competitions can cost families upwards of \$1,000 per event, depending on the distance and duration of the trip. These expenses highlight the logistical and financial challenges that athletes and their families face in pursuing competitive success.

Uniforms and equipment are essential for participation and performance, entailing ongoing costs with annual expenses averaging between \$500 and \$1,500 per athlete. These costs cover specialized uniforms, training gear, and maintenance of personal equipment, ensuring that athletes are well-prepared and professionally presented during competitions. ACE mitigates

some of these costs through bulk purchasing and negotiated discounts with suppliers, though markups on certain items help offset these expenses for the gym. [OBJ]

Opportunities for fundraising within ACE play a crucial role in mitigating financial pressures. By organizing events that engage the broader community and leveraging social networks for individual fundraising efforts, ACE creates avenues for families to generate additional income to support their athletes. These opportunities not only provide financial relief but also foster a sense of community and shared responsibility among participants and their supporters.

By addressing both revenue generation and expenditure management, ACE highlights the financial complexities involved in operating a competitive cheerleading gym. Understanding these financial dynamics is critical to analyzing how economic factors affect athlete experiences, well-being, and overall success within high-pressure sports settings. Maintaining a balance between generating sufficient revenue to sustain operations and managing costs effectively enables ACE to provide a high-quality, supportive environment for its athletes. The substantial financial commitments required can also impact athlete retention and participation, as families weigh these costs against other personal and financial responsibilities. To fully appreciate ACE's operational dynamics, it is essential to place the gym within the broader competitive cheerleading landscape.

### ***The Competitive Cheerleading Landscape***

Competitive cheerleading is a dynamic and demanding sport that requires a combination of athleticism, artistry, teamwork, and mental toughness. Organized into levels based on age and skill, ranging from Level 1 to Level 7, the sport emphasizes continuous skill development and

progression. Athletes advance by mastering increasingly complex techniques in stunting, tumbling, jumps, and dance, reflecting the sport's commitment to excellence and high standards.

One distinctive aspect of competitive cheerleading is its year-round commitment. Unlike many other sports, cheerleading operates on a continuous schedule without an off-season, necessitating sustained dedication from athletes. The season typically begins with tryouts in May, where athletes are evaluated and placed on teams appropriate to their skill levels. Following team formation, the summer months are dedicated to learning choreography and building foundational skills through intensive training. This period is critical for perfecting routines that will be performed throughout the competition season.

The competition season runs from October to the end of May, during which athletes must maintain peak performance levels over an extended period of time. Competitions are scheduled frequently, often requiring travel to various locations. The season culminates in major end-of-year events such as The Cheerleading Worlds and The Summit, which take place in late April or May. This structure demands sustained physical conditioning, mental focus, and resilience from athletes, as they must balance continuous training with academic and personal commitments.

The competition framework in cheerleading is rigorously structured, with teams' routines meticulously evaluated based on technical difficulty, precision of execution, creative choreography, and overall performance excellence. Competitions can be single-day or two-day events. Single-day competitions involve teams performing once, with scores based solely on that performance. Two-day competitions require teams to perform on both Saturday and Sunday, with scores from both days combined to determine final placements. These events often take place in distant locations, necessitating travel and time away from school and work, adding to the sport's demanding nature.

Furthermore, competitive cheerleading is segmented into divisions and levels. Gyms are classified as Division I (D1) or Division II (D2) based on the number of athletes and locations. Division I (D1) gyms have more than 125 athletes or multiple locations, while Division II (D2) gyms, like ACE, have 125 or fewer athletes and a single location. Depending on the competition, D2 teams may compete exclusively against other D2 teams or, in some cases, against both D1 and D2 teams when divisions are not differentiated. Teams are also grouped by age and skill level, adding layers of complexity to the competitive field.

Understanding the competitive cheerleading landscape is crucial for contextualizing the experiences of athletes at ACE. The demands of continuous training, frequent competitions, and high-performance expectations are inherent in the sport, influencing how athletes navigate challenges and opportunities.

### ***Rationale for Selecting ACE***

ACE was purposefully selected as the case for this study through convenience sampling (Patton, 2002) due to the researcher's prior employment at the gym. Additionally, its significant role within the competitive cheerleading community and its reflection of key dynamics relevant to the research objectives further justify its inclusion. Established over 15 years ago, ACE has built a reputation for excellence, demonstrated by numerous national titles and consistent top placements in esteemed competitions. Notably, in the past five years, every competitive team from ACE has participated in The Summit, a prestigious, invitation-only national competition for Level 1–5 teams, with most teams placing in the top three each year. This sustained success underscores ACE's commitment to high-performance and provides an ideal context for examining the factors that contribute to athlete thriving in a competitive sports environment.

ACE's sustained success is attributable to its rigorous training programs, seasoned coaching staff, and a culture that prioritizes discipline, teamwork, and achievement. These elements create an environment where high-performance is expected, presenting both opportunities for personal growth and challenges related to stress and burnout. Such an environment makes ACE an exemplary setting to explore how intense training demands and high-performance expectations influence athlete thriving.

Furthermore, as a single-location Division II (D2) gym, ACE encounters unique challenges and benefits compared to larger Division I (D1) organizations. The gym's smaller size fosters a tight-knit community, enhancing social support and cohesion among athletes. This sense of belonging and mutual encouragement is pivotal in understanding the social dynamics that contribute to athlete well-being. Conversely, being a smaller organization may result in fewer resources than those available to larger D1 gyms. This juxtaposition provides valuable insights into how gym size and structure impact athlete experiences, resource allocation, and support systems.

Additionally, the substantial commitment and external pressures placed on ACE's athletes and their families, such as time away from school and work, financial investments, and extensive travel requirements, highlight the significant sacrifices involved in competitive cheerleading. This context allows for an in-depth exploration of how these external factors affect athlete thriving and how families manage the demands of the sport. The necessity to balance athletic commitments with personal responsibilities offers a critical perspective on athlete well-being and thriving.

Lastly, ACE's competitive success and esteemed reputation are integral to its identity, creating a rich environment for examining the interplay between gym culture, external pressures,

and training regimens. The gym's achievements foster a culture of excellence that significantly shapes athlete experiences, making ACE an ideal case for investigating how these elements collectively influence athlete thriving. The established reputation and consistent high-level performance of ACE ensure that the study captured the dynamics of a successful, high-pressure athletic environment.

By selecting ACE, this study gained access to a robust and dynamic environment where the interactions between gym culture, external pressures, and training regimens could be comprehensively examined. The insights derived from this case will contribute valuable knowledge to the existing literature on youth sports and athlete thriving, potentially informing best practices for supporting athletes in similar high-pressure settings. The following section outlines the strategies for gaining access and building rapport within the gym community.

### **Gaining Entry and Building Rapport**

To gain access to participants, the researcher undertook a series of steps to ensure ethical compliance and build trust within the ACE community. Initially, the researcher secured permission from the gym's management, including the owners and directors, to conduct the study within the facility. This process involved presenting the research proposal, explaining the study's purpose, methods, and potential benefits, and addressing any concerns regarding confidentiality and the impact on gym operations (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Flick, 2018).

Following approval from management, the study was introduced to potential participants through informational meetings, emails, and notices posted within the gym. Transparency about the study's objectives, procedures, and ethical considerations were emphasized, ensuring that participants understood their involvement was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without consequences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This transparency was crucial for

fostering an environment of trust and openness, which was essential for the integrity of the research (Patton, 2015).

Building rapport was facilitated by the researcher's familiarity with the gym environment; however, maintaining professional boundaries and adhering to ethical standards remained a priority. Establishing trust involved consistent communication, respecting participants' time and perspectives, and demonstrating a steadfast commitment to research integrity (Finlay, 2002). To mitigate potential conflicts of interest, the researcher clearly defined their role as a researcher, distinguishing it from any previous positions held within the gym (Unluer, 2012). By carefully navigating the process of gaining access and fostering trust, the researcher created an environment that encouraged open, honest participation, thereby enhancing the quality and reliability of the data collected. Once a strong foundation of trust was established, the data collection methods were employed to capture the full scope of participants' experiences.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Prior to data collection, I obtained written informed consent from all adult participants, including parents, coaches, and gym administrators, either in person or via email. For participants under 18 years old, I secured parental consent through a separate parental consent form, provided in person or electronically, and also obtained minors' assent using age-appropriate language to ensure their understanding of the study. The gym owner provided written permission for participant observations to take place at the gym and informed all gym members that the research study was being conducted. All participants were given clear explanations of the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and their rights, including the voluntary nature of participation and the ability to withdraw at any time. Signed consent forms were stored securely and separately from research data to maintain confidentiality.

The study employed multiple data collection methods to gather comprehensive and nuanced information about the experiences of athletes, coaches, parents, and administrators within ACE. These methods included participant observation, interviews, analysis of documents and artifacts, and the use of a research journal. To better understand the unique contexts and perspectives of participants, this study emphasized a data-generation approach, where the researcher played an active role in co-constructing data with participants.

### ***Data Generation***

In this study, data generation involved an active, collaborative process between the researcher and participants (Charmaz, 2006). This approach reflects a constructivist orientation, emphasizing that data is co-created through interactions, dialogue, and observations, rather than passively gathered. Data generation included semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and the analysis of secondary sources, all designed to offer a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the gym culture, and the external pressures faced by athletes.

Unlike traditional data collection, data generation emphasizes the researcher's role as a co-constructor of meaning. Through engaging deeply with participants and the research setting, the researcher explored and co-created insights that emerged contextually, shaped by shared experiences and interpretations (Charmaz, 2014). Reflexivity was critical throughout this process, with the researcher continually examining how their positionality, background, and interactions influenced the data generated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

This approach demands contextual sensitivity, recognizing that participants' meanings and experiences are shaped by their specific social and cultural environments. By actively engaging with these contexts, the researcher's aim was to capture the complex, situated nature of participants' perspectives and experiences (Charmaz, 2006). Moreover, data generation was

iterative, evolving through cycles of observation, interaction, and reflection, allowing emerging themes and insights to guide subsequent phases of data collection.

Through this constructivist lens, data generation becomes a dynamic, relational process that highlights the subjective, context-dependent nature of participants' experiences, providing a deeper understanding of how gym culture, external pressures, and training regimens influence athlete well-being and thriving.

### ***Participant Observation***

Participant observation was conducted in three phases, totaling nine days of fieldwork. Each day of observation lasted between five to seven hours, allowing for extended immersion in the gym environment. The first phase took place in January, during the week leading up to a major national competition. During this time, the researcher observed four days of practices across multiple teams, focusing on daily routines, coaching interactions, and the heightened intensity of pre-competition training. The second phase involved attending one full day (approximately 12 hours) of the national competition, which provided insight into athlete behavior, performance pressure, and coach-athlete dynamics in a high-stakes setting. The third phase occurred in March, during another four days of practices ahead of a non-competition weekend but still within the competitive season. These observations offered a more routine look at gym operations, training loads, and athlete morale.

Across all phases, the researcher generated over 200 pages of detailed field notes. These notes included descriptive accounts of events, interactions, dialogue, and environmental context, along with the researcher's reflections and preliminary analytical insights (Wolcott, 1994). Analytical memos were also used to link observations to emerging themes and theoretical frameworks (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

A descriptive stance was maintained throughout the process, with the researcher avoiding assumptions based on prior familiarity with the setting (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Geertz, 1973). Initial observations were broad to establish a baseline understanding of the environment, while later sessions became more focused as key themes and processes emerged. This evolving approach allowed for a deeper, more targeted examination of how gym culture and training demands shaped athlete experiences.

### *Interviews*

Semi-structured interviews served as a primary method for generating detailed, subjective narratives from a diverse group of participants. A total of 30 participants were interviewed, including seven current athletes (ages 12–20), one athlete who recently aged out (age 21), two recently aged-out athletes who transitioned into coaching roles (ages 20–22), eleven parents of current athletes, six current coaches, and three individuals who held dual roles as coaches and administrators. Athlete participants represented a range of competitive levels (Levels 1–6), team roles (e.g., bases, flyers, tumblers), and years of experience within the gym. Coaches and administrators varied in tenure and team assignments, offering a broad view of leadership practices and organizational dynamics.

Although interviews were conducted with all 30 participants, analysis for this dissertation focused on 19 participants, specifically athletes, coaches, and administrators. Parent interviews were excluded from the final analysis due to time constraints and the decision to prioritize the perspectives of those most immersed in the gym's daily operations. This focused approach enabled a deeper exploration of athlete thriving through the voices of individuals actively involved in training, coaching, and cultural leadership.

Purposeful sampling was used to ensure a range of perspectives across participant roles, ages, skill levels, and team assignments (Patton, 2015). Athlete participants were required to have at least one year of experience at ACE to ensure sufficient familiarity with the gym culture and practices. This criterion allowed for a deeper understanding of how thriving manifests across developmental stages and competitive levels. Coaches were selected based on their current roles within the gym and the variety of teams they led, while parents were included to offer insight into external pressures, support systems, and family dynamics. Directors and administrative staff contributed perspectives on institutional priorities, policies, and gym-wide visions for athlete well-being.

The interviews were conducted in three phases. Phase 1 focused on athletes, capturing their firsthand experiences of training, relationships, identity, and well-being within the gym. Phase 2 included current coaches, who provided insight into leadership practices, athlete development, and cultural expectations. Phase 3 involved individuals in administrative roles, whose perspectives helped contextualize the structural and organizational forces shaping athlete experiences. This sequencing allowed the researcher to build rapport with participants closest to the training floor first, then layer in the perspectives of those with increasing levels of institutional authority.

While this structure supported the development of targeted questions over time, it also presented limitations. Interviewing athletes first minimized the risk of their responses being shaped by adult narratives, but later interpretations may have been subtly influenced by earlier insights from coaches or administrators. To mitigate this, interview guides were carefully tailored to each participant group and contained open-ended questions designed to elicit authentic, independent responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Interviews were conducted in comfortable, private settings to foster openness and minimize distractions, such as quiet rooms at the gym or neutral off-site locations (Finlay, 2002). The researcher accommodated participants' demanding schedules, particularly those affected by travel and competition. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to capture the nuances of their experiences (Poland, 1995). When in-person interviews were not feasible, the virtual platform Zoom was used. Its automated transcription feature was employed to assist with initial transcription, and each transcript was reviewed and edited to ensure accuracy.

### ***Documents and Artifacts***

In addition to participant observation and interviews, the study involved the collection and analysis of documents and artifacts to enrich the understanding of the gym culture and the demands placed on athletes and families. These materials included training manuals, schedules, performance evaluations, documents that detail the year-round training regimen and how the gym structures practice without an off-season; newsletters, emails, and social media posts that inform families about competition schedules, travel arrangements, and expectations regarding time off from school or work; and photographs of the gym environment (with permission), including visual representations of the competition calendar and travel itineraries.

These documents and artifacts were analyzed alongside observational and interview data to provide a comprehensive view of the gym's operations, and the external pressures experienced by participants. This triangulation of data sources enhanced the credibility and validity of the study's findings, allowing for a more nuanced and holistic understanding of how gym culture, external pressures, and training regimens collectively influence athlete thriving at ACE (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

### *The Research Journal*

In addition to other data generation methods, the research journal served as a tool for documenting the researcher's personal reactions, reflections, and insights throughout the study. Maintaining a research journal offered a space to critically engage with the data collection process and to track evolving interpretations, thereby strengthening the reflexivity and transparency of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ortlipp, 2008). This practice was particularly important given the researcher's prior role within the gym, as it provided a mechanism for examining potential assumptions and power dynamics that emerged during interactions with participants (Berger, 2015).

The journal captured detailed notes on emotional responses, evolving perspectives, and contextual observations that were not immediately evident through formal data collection methods like participant observation and interviews. This process helped identify areas where the researcher's background may have influenced data interpretation and allowed for ongoing reflexive analysis, ensuring that data was grounded in participants' experiences rather than preconceived notions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Furthermore, entries included reflections on emerging themes and patterns observed during fieldwork, as well as considerations about how different data sources, such as interviews, documents, and artifacts, informed the broader narrative. These reflections offered valuable insights during the analytical phase, promoting a deeper understanding of how gym culture, external pressures, and training regimens shape athlete experiences and well-being (Charmaz, 2006).

By systematically documenting the researcher's journey and evolving insights, the research journal enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the study (Shenton, 2004). It was

revisited regularly throughout the data analysis process to identify potential influences on data interpretation and to ensure the integration of multiple perspectives. This approach aligns with the broader objective of offering a nuanced, reflexive, and ethically sound exploration of thriving within the competitive cheerleading context.

To derive meaningful insights from this comprehensive data collection, a systematic approach to analysis was crucial. The following section outlines the data analysis procedures employed to synthesize observational, interview, and artifact-based data, ensuring a rigorous examination of the factors shaping athlete experiences and well-being within the gym's culture.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

The data analysis for this study was an iterative and interpretive process, marked by ongoing engagement with interviews, observations, and artifacts to generate deep, contextually grounded insights. As Wolcott (1994) emphasizes, qualitative analysis is not a linear progression, but an evolving interaction between the researcher and the data. Meaning was constructed over time through cycles of coding, memoing, and theme development, allowing for both structure and flexibility in interpretation.

### ***Data Management and Transformation***

To manage the substantial volume of qualitative data, including interviews, field notes, and documents, NVivo software was used throughout the analysis. NVivo supported open coding, axial coding, memo-writing, and theme development (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). All audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. In line with Poland's (1995) recommendations, transcripts included notations of pauses, emphasis, and emotional inflections where relevant, as such details can convey essential contextual meaning (Bird, 2005). For Zoom interviews, the platform's transcription feature was used, and all transcripts were subsequently

reviewed for accuracy. Field notes from participant observations and relevant gym artifacts were also digitized and imported into NVivo to centralize all data for analysis.

Data were categorized within NVivo by participant role (e.g., athlete, coach, administrator), source type (interview, observation, document), and data collection phase. This structure enhanced the ability to retrieve, compare, and interpret data across contexts while maintaining confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms (Richards & Morse, 2012). Organizing the data in this way allowed the researcher to track patterns within and across participant groups and settings.

### ***Coding Process***

The coding process followed Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory approach. Open coding was conducted first, using a line-by-line method to identify significant concepts, experiences, and meanings within each transcript and field note. In vivo codes were used frequently to preserve the language and framing of participants themselves (Saldaña, 2016). Examples of early codes included "travel demands," "academic conflicts," "constant training," and "family support."

Once open coding was complete, axial coding was used to examine relationships among codes and to begin building broader categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Related codes were grouped under overarching concepts such as "external pressures," "performance expectations," and "emotional exhaustion." For example, "travel demands" and "family sacrifices" were grouped under the theme "external pressures," reflecting how logistical and emotional burdens shaped the athlete experience. NVivo facilitated this process by enabling the researcher to create code hierarchies and easily visualize connections between related data.

Both objective and interpretive dimensions informed this process. While the recurrence of specific phrases or experiences helped highlight prominent issues, the researcher's interpretation played a critical role in contextualizing those patterns and identifying nuanced meanings. This balance allowed for themes grounded in the data and attentive to the broader cultural and organizational context of elite cheerleading.

Throughout coding, analytical memos were written within NVivo to document emerging insights, note questions for further exploration, and reflect on the researcher's evolving interpretations (Charmaz, 2006). Memoing served as a bridge between data and theory, supporting both rigor and reflexivity in the development of themes.

### ***Thematic Development and Analytical Approach***

Theme development was guided by a combination of inductive and deductive strategies. The process began with deductive framing, drawing from the thriving framework (Brown et al., 2017), which emphasizes holistic functioning and sustained performance. This framework provided an initial structure for exploring well-being in high-pressure sport environments. However, most themes emerged inductively from the data itself, ensuring the analysis remained grounded in participants' lived experiences (Patton, 2015).

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final analysis. NVivo was used to support each of these phases, particularly during code consolidation and theme comparison. As themes developed, they were reviewed in relation to the raw data and research questions to ensure alignment and accuracy. Codes related to athlete well-being, for instance, eventually converged into themes such as "coaching dynamics," "athlete demands," and "peer relationships." These thematic

groupings captured both individual experiences and broader structural influences within the gym environment.

Writing served as an additional method of inquiry, allowing the researcher to clarify emerging ideas, reflect on assumptions, and draw meaningful connections between participant narratives and broader patterns (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). This recursive process of coding, memoing, and writing helped ensure that themes reflected the complexity and nuance of the data.

Although NVivo played a central role in data management and analysis, final theme development and interpretation were shaped by the researcher's contextual understanding and ethical responsibility. Themes were grounded in participant voices and supported by thick descriptions, direct quotations, and observed behaviors. By maintaining a consistent analytic lens and engaging deeply with the data over time, the study sought to authentically reflect the lived realities of athletes, coaches, and administrators navigating the culture of elite competitive cheerleading.

### ***Composing the Findings***

The final stage of the analysis involved integrating the analyzed data into a cohesive written account that effectively conveyed the findings. As Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) note, writing is a way of "knowing" and is central to the qualitative research process. Similarly, Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasize the importance of presenting a structured analysis that authentically integrates participant voices, observations, and the researcher's interpretations to convey a nuanced understanding of the phenomena under study. This analysis was organized around the key themes that emerged from the data, ensuring a cohesive and meaningful exploration.

To capture the richness of participants' experiences, direct quotes were used to illustrate central themes and bring their perspectives to life. Observational data, such as detailed descriptions of settings, interactions, and non-verbal cues, provided additional context and depth. By linking these findings to broader theoretical frameworks, such as athlete thriving, the analysis situated the data within relevant contexts, as recommended by Creswell and Poth (2018).

The analysis was organized thematically, with transitions carefully crafted to ensure logical flow between sections. Reflexivity played a critical role, as the researcher acknowledges their positionality and reflects on how their background and perspectives may have shaped the interpretation of data. This transparent approach aligns with Creswell and Poth's (2018) emphasis on enhancing the analysis' credibility and inviting critical scrutiny.

Ethical considerations guided the construction of the written account. Participant identifiers were omitted to protect confidentiality, and their experiences were portrayed with respect and careful attention to accuracy. The researcher remained mindful of the potential impact of the findings on both participants and the broader community, striving to present the data in a manner that was honest, respectful, and nuanced. By integrating these ethical commitments, the analysis sought to engage readers through a compelling, evidence-based account that contributes meaningfully to the discourse on athlete thriving in high-pressure sport environments. To ensure the credibility and reliability of the findings, particular attention was given to establishing trustworthiness and rigor throughout the research process.

### **Trustworthiness and Rigor**

#### ***Managing Insider Status***

The researcher's prior role as a coach and program director at ACE provided a unique vantage point for this study, offering both rich opportunities for data collection and notable

challenges related to insider status. On one hand, insider status granted deeper access to participants, fostered trust, and facilitated a nuanced understanding of the gym's culture and dynamics. Such familiarity should enrich interactions and lead to more meaningful data collection (Johnson & Rose, 2024). However, this same familiarity introduced potential influences and subjectivities that must be thoughtfully managed. The dual nature of insider status underscores the critical need for reflexivity and an acute awareness of positionality throughout the research process.

Reflexivity, a cornerstone of qualitative inquiry, involved the researcher's ongoing critical reflection on their influence within the research context. This practice is intended to ensure a transparent and self-aware approach while deepening the study's trustworthiness (Johnson & Rose, 2024). Engaging in reflexivity allowed the researcher to acknowledge how their history, beliefs, and positionality shape their perceptions and interactions within the gym environment. Rather than viewing subjectivity as a hindrance, it was used as a lens through which more authentic and meaningful insights can be generated.

To effectively navigate insider status, the researcher began by openly acknowledging their positionality. This process involved critically examining and documenting how past experiences as a coach informed their perceptions of gym culture, athlete well-being, and coaching practices. Positionality, as Johnson and Rose (2024) argue, extends beyond a simple declaration; it is a dynamic interplay between one's social identity and the research context. By identifying personal assumptions, the researcher could better distinguish between subjective viewpoints and observations, creating space for a more balanced analysis.

Maintaining a research journal served as another strategy guiding the researcher's practice. Journaling involved recording reflections, assumptions, and emotional reactions

following each data collection activity. This practice is intended to highlight potential influences and track the evolution of the researcher's thoughts, ultimately promoting a more transparent and self-aware research process (Johnson & Rose, 2024). By systematically documenting reflections, the researcher critically evaluated the influence of their positionality and subjectivity on data interpretation.

To further enhance the rigor of the study, the researcher engaged in peer debriefing. Discussions with colleagues outside the gym context provided alternative perspectives and helped identify potential blind spots in the researcher's interpretations. These conversations were conducted with individuals committed to maintaining confidentiality throughout the research process. Peer feedback is expected to illuminate areas where familiarity may lead to uncritical assumptions, ensuring a more comprehensive and balanced analysis of the data (Johnson & Rose, 2024). Additionally, consultation with the dissertation committee provided further support and critical oversight, reinforcing the study's methodological integrity.

Adopting an etic perspective (approaching familiar practices with fresh eyes) was another key component of this reflexive approach. By asking participants to explain routines, traditions, and cultural norms, the researcher avoided relying solely on personal interpretations and instead gained a deeper understanding of the participants' lived experiences (Johnson & Rose, 2024). This strategy, combined with documenting seemingly obvious details, ensured that taken-for-granted aspects of the gym environment were carefully examined. For example, noting the logistical challenges families face during distant competitions and the strategies they employ may reveal underlying themes relevant to athlete well-being.

Given the researcher's previous authority role within ACE, it was essential to remain mindful of power dynamics when engaging with participants to minimize potential negative

impacts. Effective management of these dynamics began with role clarification, explicitly communicating the transition from coach to researcher and emphasizing the academic nature of the study. Participants were reassured that their involvement or responses would not impact their standing within the gym. By clearly defining their role, the researcher aimed to minimize perceived power imbalances and create an environment conducive to open, authentic dialogue.

Participant empowerment was central to this approach. By fostering a space where participants felt valued and free to express themselves honestly, the researcher encouraged open dialogue and respect for participant autonomy. Emphasizing that every perspective is meaningful is expected to create a collaborative atmosphere that enhances the depth and authenticity of data collection.

Sensitivity to participants' reactions, both verbal and non-verbal, guided interview techniques and data collection processes. If an athlete appeared hesitant or uncomfortable discussing certain topics, the researcher offered to revisit the subject later or modify the line of questioning. This adaptive approach was intended to ensure data collection occurs in a respectful and considerate manner, ultimately enhancing the study's quality and integrity.

### ***Additional Strategies for Trustworthiness***

To further ensure the study's trustworthiness, several strategies were employed. Prolonged engagement involved spending sufficient time in the field to build trust and gain a comprehensive understanding of the impacts of the extended season and travel requirements. This extended presence facilitated more authentic interactions and provided deeper insights into the athletes' experiences. By observing changes and developments over time, the researcher captured the full scope of these experiences, offering a more holistic view.

Persistent observation focused on key aspects of the gym environment to identify patterns, such as fluctuations in athletes' performance and well-being throughout the continuous season. This concentrated attention enhanced the depth and accuracy of the findings by ensuring that significant phenomena are fully understood (Patton, 2002). Through persistent observation, the researcher identified recurring themes and trends that informed the study's conclusions.

Triangulation was employed through the use of multiple data sources and methods to cross-verify findings related to the demands of the sport. By comparing data from interviews, observations, and documents, the researcher identified consistencies and discrepancies, strengthening the credibility and robustness of the study's conclusions (Flick, 2017; 2018).

Finally, member checking involved sharing findings with participants for validation to ensure that interpretations accurately reflect their experiences. This collaborative process enhances trustworthiness by allowing participants to confirm or clarify the researcher's interpretations, fostering a sense of shared ownership of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

By embracing reflexivity, maintaining critical awareness of positionality, thoughtfully navigating power dynamics, and employing additional strategies for trustworthiness, the researcher leveraged their insider status to enrich data interpretation while upholding ethical standards and methodological rigor. Through continuous reflection and deliberate strategies, the complexities of insider research became opportunities for deeper, more meaningful inquiry.

## Chapter Four: Results

This chapter presents the findings of the study, which explored how athletes at Allstar Cheer Elite (ACE) interpreted and experienced well-being and thriving within the context of competitive cheerleading. Like many other youth sports, competitive cheerleading has increasingly adopted professional-style practices, including early specialization, intensive training schedules, and an emphasis on competitive success. While research in youth sports such as gymnastics, swimming, and soccer has linked these trends to risks like injury, burnout, and social isolation, little is known about how such pressures are experienced by athletes in competitive cheerleading; a similarly high-intensity sport that remains underrepresented in the youth sport literature.

Guided by the thriving framework (Brown et al., 2017), which conceptualizes thriving as the joint experience of development and success, this study explored how competitive cheerleaders at ACE interpreted and experienced well-being and thriving within their sport. Using a qualitative case study approach grounded in constructionism and symbolic interactionism, the study sought to answer two primary research questions: how competitive cheerleaders at ACE interpreted and experienced well-being and thriving within their sport, and how relationships, expectations, and the organizational culture of the gym shaped those experiences.

The themes presented in this chapter reflect the systemic, relational, and individual-level factors that influenced athletes' interpretations of success, thriving, and well-being. Through iterative coding and thematic analysis, seven major themes emerged from the data, each encompassing a set of subthemes that reflect the layered and often complex experiences of athletes within the program. The first theme, coaching practices and power dynamics, captures

the relational and structural impact of coaching behavior, including subthemes such as inappropriate behavior, fear-based motivation, inconsistent or conditional support, unrealistic coaching expectations, and the broader influence of coaching on gym culture. The second theme, pressure to win and perfectionism, centers on the emotional and physical strain athletes experience in pursuit of competitive success, encompassing both internal and external pressures, the role of high-stakes events like Summit and bid competitions, injury and performance expectations, the normalization of perfectionism, and industry-driven competitive demands. The third theme, athlete demands, highlights the cumulative burden placed on athletes, including overtraining and injuries, the mental and physical toll of cheerleading, identity development, body image concerns, and the challenges of balancing life outside the gym.

The fourth theme, team dynamics and peer relationships, explores interpersonal aspects of athlete experience, with subthemes such as supportive teammate relationships, experiences of cliques and exclusion, challenges associated with mixed-age teams, instances of teammate blame or conflict, and competitiveness between athletes and teams within the gym. The fifth theme, parental and family influence, explores how family dynamics affect athlete well-being, including overinvolvement and athlete burnout, financial strain and return-on-investment pressure, and parental power and unequal treatment. The sixth theme, organizational culture and leadership, reflects the structural forces shaping gym-wide experiences, including a lack of structure and accountability, pressures from market competition and industry expectations, and attempts at culture change and athlete empowerment. Finally, the seventh theme, reflections and meaning-making, encompasses how athletes make sense of their experiences, including personal takeaways and decisions about staying or leaving the sport. These themes and subthemes are organized in Table 1.

**Table 1***Themes and Subthemes Identified*

Themes	Subthemes
Theme One: Coaching Practices and Power Dynamics	Inappropriate Behavior Fear-Based Motivation Inconsistent or Conditional Support Unrealistic Coaching Expectations Coaching Influence on Gym Culture
Theme Two: Pressure to Win and Perfectionism	Internal and External Pressure Summit, Bids, and Hit-Zero Routines Injury and Performance Expectations Perfectionism Culture Competitive Pressures from the Industry
Theme Three: Athlete Demands	Overtraining and Injuries Mental and Physical Toll Self-Concept and Identity Body Image Balancing Life Outside the Gym
Theme Four: Team Dynamics and Peer Relationships	Supportive Relationships Cliques and Exclusion Mixed-Age Team Dynamics Teammate Blame and Conflict Internal Competitiveness
Theme Five: Parental and Family Influences	Overinvolvement and Athlete Burnout Financial Strain and Return-on-Investment Pressure Parental Power and Unequal Treatment
Theme Six: Organizational Culture and Leadership	Lack of Structure and Accountability Pressures of Market Competition and Industry Expectations Attempts at Culture Change and Athlete Empowerment
Theme Seven: Reflections and Meaning-Making	Personal Takeaways from the Sport Decisions about Staying or Leaving

Each theme is presented in the sections that follow, supported by direct quotations from participants and contextualized with relevant observational insights. Together, these findings provide a detailed portrait of the complex realities shaping athletes' well-being and thriving in elite competitive cheerleading at ACE.

## **Theme One: Coaching Practices and Power Dynamics**

This theme captures the deeply influential role of coaches in shaping athlete experience, emotional well-being, and the broader cultural tone of the gym. Participants consistently described a coaching environment that fluctuated between support and intimidation, highlighting both meaningful relationships and patterns of fear, favoritism, and inconsistency. These dynamics not only affected how athletes performed but also shaped how they interpreted their place within the team and their relationship with the gym. Five key subthemes emerged: (1) Inappropriate Behavior, (2) Fear-Based Motivation, (3) Inconsistent or Conditional Support, (4) Unrealistic Coaching Expectations, and (5) Coaching Influence on Gym Culture.

### ***Subtheme: Inappropriate Behavior***

Participants described a range of coaching behaviors they considered harsh, excessive, or inappropriate. These included yelling, emotional withdrawal, threats, public humiliation, and the use of physical intimidation or punishment. Such behaviors were often discussed in relation to the emotional tone of practice and how athletes were treated when mistakes occurred. Several athletes described situations in which coaches would walk out of practice or disengage when the team was not performing well. One said, “There were a couple of practices where our coach would just walk out. Like, if it was going badly or started going badly, they would leave. No explanation, just leave the room or the gym. We never knew if they were coming back or not” (Avery, Athlete). Another athlete stated, “The morale was just... low. A stunt would fall, and we’d get told to stay positive, but then our coach would just walk out, or another one wouldn’t talk to us. It was like, what are we supposed to do with that?” (Jordan, Athlete).

Yelling was commonly reported, particularly when skills were not hit, or athletes were perceived as underperforming. While some participants acknowledged this as part of the sport,

others questioned its necessity, saying, “To scream to the point where you're losing your voice, like some of these coaches do? I don't see a reason that would ever be necessary in cheerleading. It's just not appropriate. All of the coaches, just the way they talk to athletes, could definitely be worked on. It would probably make the environment a lot better” (Skyler, Coach).

Other participants shared more extreme examples, including the use of physical objects or threatening language. One participant stated, “our coach sometimes throws shoes at us,” and another participant stated: “It got to a point where a coach had to have meetings with a parent because they said they were going to throw an athlete through the roof. One time, they also said that if their athletes were going to act like animals, they were going to treat them like animals. I get tough love and everything, but... come on. You should not say that” (Rowan, Coach).

Some athletes described conditioning being used as a consequence for performance or behavior stating their coach loves to “use conditioning as a weapon,” and noted that sometimes, these behaviors were “directed toward athletes who were younger, less experienced, or struggling with skills” (Riley, Athlete). Over time, several participants reported becoming desensitized to the treatment they and others received: “I guess my response should be, like, I felt sad when my coach made fun of me, but I don't remember feeling sad. I think I was just so numb to it. Like, it was just normal. And excuses were always made” (Casey, Athlete). The same participant also recounts that it wasn't just themselves, and that “another athlete would cry the whole way home because he made fun of them for not throwing their tuck” (Casey, Athlete).

These accounts were consistent with field observations made during practice sessions. In one instance, a coach yelled across the floor after a series of mistakes during a full-out routine, stating, “I'm done with you guys tonight,” (Quinn, Athlete) and threw an expo marker before walking away from the group. Athletes continued practicing without further instruction. In

another observation, a coach appeared visibly frustrated, raising their voice repeatedly at the same athlete for a missed skill, while other athletes looked down or turned away. These moments reflected a broader pattern in which the emotional tone was set by coaches and often shifted abruptly depending on their performance.

***Subtheme: Fear-Based Motivation***

Several participants described an environment in which fear was used, whether explicitly or implicitly, as a tool to drive athletic performance. Rather than motivation being built through encouragement or support, some coaches were perceived to rely on intimidation, yelling, or emotional pressure to elicit compliance and effort. One participant stated, “From what I’ve heard from multiple athletes in the gym, that coach really likes their athletes to be scared of them” (Emerson, Coach).

This fear appeared to extend beyond the gym and into the competition setting. Athletes and coaches described heightened anxiety surrounding how certain coaches would react after mistakes were made or routines did not go as planned: “Athletes would get so worked up about what the consequences were going to be when they got back to the gym, or what the reaction was going to be when they came off the floor, I think it made them do worse” (Cameron, Athlete). Younger or less experienced athletes were especially affected. While older athletes appeared to grow desensitized to yelling or dismissive behavior, younger team members often reacted emotionally, sometimes crying during or after practice: “All the older girls are just like, ‘Oh, coach is talking again,’ but the 12-year-olds are over here crying in their stunt because they’re scared. So, I told them... just don’t listen” (Morgan, Athlete). Another coach in the gym stated, “I’ve gotten calls from athletes crying after their practice because of how bad it went. They said

they were being picked on by their coach and that really mean things were said to them” (Leslie, Coach).

Participants also described emotional moments during full-out routines where the pressure to perform intersected with coaches’ reactions. One said, “Some coaches are the ones who yell like, ‘You’ve got this, keep pushing!’ And then there’s others who, like, one thing goes wrong, and they’re yelling at you, and you’re sitting there crying in the middle of your routine” (Quinn, Athlete).

While some coaches or staff members acknowledged these behaviors, their responses were often characterized by hesitation or uncertainty about how to intervene. One participant expressed concern over the coach’s future behavior but felt conflicted about whether or when to act, saying, “It’s hard, because if I do something about it, it’s like... taking their whole life away. And I don’t know if I want to be that person who ruins everything. But also... they probably shouldn’t talk to kids like that. I’m hoping something changes soon” (Leslie, Coach).

Others expressed frustration that the behavior had continued despite repeated conversations or promises that it would be addressed. One coach said, “When we bring it up, it’s like, ‘Oh, I’ll deal with it, I’ll talk to them.’ And I’m like, okay... but are you? Or are you just going to say you’re going to and then do nothing? I don’t know how many chances they’re going to get. Or is it going to be chance one, chance five, chance fifteen?” (Skyler, Coach).

These accounts suggest that fear shaped not only how athletes trained, but how coaches and staff responded to behavior within the gym environment.

### ***Subtheme: Inconsistent or Conditional Support***

Some participants described patterns of support that felt inconsistent or dependent on performance. Athletes expressed that encouragement, or positive attention was more readily

available when outcomes met expectations, while mistakes or difficult practices were often followed by harsh responses that were later reframed as necessary or justified. One athlete stated:

I feel like we were always supported by them, like when we did well. If that makes sense. Like, it was always, like... 'See, I told you, if you did this, then this would be your outcome.' I also feel like they would always do this thing where, like, if they lashed out at one practice, the next practice they'd be like, 'Oh, I'm so sorry, but you guys needed that.' So, yeah. I feel like we always knew that they had our best interests at heart. I just think they sometimes went about it the wrong way. (Avery, Athlete)

This quote reflects the emotional ambiguity that some athletes experienced when navigating relationships with their coaches. The apology following a lashing-out, paired with a justification that the behavior was for the athletes' benefit, was noted as a recurring pattern.

***Subtheme: Unrealistic Coaching Expectations***

Participants frequently described high, and at times unrealistic, expectations placed on athletes by coaches. These expectations were often framed around performance consistency, physical ability, and mental resilience, with limited acknowledgment of athletes' individual limitations or changing developmental needs. One athlete, reflecting on their experience as one of the highest-level performers in the gym, described the pressure to continually meet or exceed expectations while still managing the physical toll of training:

I feel like a lot of coaches in the gym treat me like I'm this robot of an athlete. Which, at times, I definitely am. I'm still the most advanced in the gym... working level 5, getting ready to go be on a Worlds team. So, it's like, they think I'm just this athletic robot that can do anything they give me, which I will, because that's the type of athlete I am. But I also need... it would have been nice if people would have understood, like, hey, I'm still a human being. My body can't work overtime for that long before I start to feel it. I'm not that young anymore. I'm not this 14-year-old just tumbling around the floor. I can push myself, but I need the same care as every other athlete. And I just would never get that from some coaches. Others understood, but they were also holding me to a standard where I had to carry the team. I became like the glue for our team last season. (Morgan, Athlete)

Other participants shared examples where coaches appeared to demonstrate skills or corrections without acknowledging the difference in physicality or perspective between an adult

and a youth athlete. One said, “Sometimes when a stunt group isn’t getting things, a coach will just hop into it and do it, but with really weird grips. So, it wasn’t super helpful. It was like, ‘Oh yeah, look, I can do it,’ and then it felt like, ‘Why can’t you?’ But it’s obviously really different when you’re not in our bodies” (Riley, Athlete).

In some cases, participants noted a pattern where coaches referenced their own past athletic experiences as a way to justify current demands, particularly around conditioning expectations. Athletes expressed confusion and disconnection from these comparisons, particularly when the stories seemed extreme or outdated:

The girls were saying they didn’t like the conditioning, and the coaches’ automatic response is always something like, ‘Oh, you should’ve seen how my coach made us condition.’ They’re comparing how they were coached to how they coach now. But these kids don’t understand that. They don’t know what it was like back then. So, when someone says, ‘My coach chased us with a car and told us to run as fast as we could,’ they’re like, why would a coach do that? It just doesn’t make sense. It’s odd to compare something that shouldn’t really be compared. It was a different time, a different situation. (Sage, Coach)

This pattern was also evident during participant observation. In one practice, an athlete appeared visibly fatigued during the final run-through of a routine. A coach responded by shouting across the mat to “dig deeper” and reminded the team that “you’re expected to hit, tired or not” (Riley, Athlete). No adjustments were made to the conditioning plan or skill demands despite several athletes visibly struggling. In another instance, a coach referred to their own former training experience, saying they used to run laps while carrying another athlete, as justification for an extended conditioning set. Athletes looked confused and did not respond. These moments reflected the consistent emphasis on toughness and performance, often without reference to individual needs or present-day context.

### *Subtheme: Coaching Influence on Gym Culture*

Participants described coaches as central figures in shaping the tone, standards, and values of the gym. Across roles, interviewees emphasized that the behaviors and attitudes modeled by coaches, both in how they treated athletes and interacted with each other, had ripple effects throughout the program. Some noted that coaches contributed to a positive environment, while others highlighted how toxic or divisive behaviors among staff members could set a negative tone for athletes.

A staff member in a leadership role reflected on the challenges of navigating staff dynamics and emphasized the influence that coaches have on the overall gym culture, stating, “They have a huge influence on it. They really do. And that’s both negative and positive, to be quite honest with you. I’ve seen both ends of the spectrum. And then they can have negative and positive influences on each other” (Leslie, Coach).

This individual went on to describe how coaches' interpersonal issues, disengagement, or emotional outbursts could undermine the standards expected of athletes:

The coaches can get really gnarly with each other, I guess is a good way to say it. I get it’s competitive cheer, and it’s okay to have some healthy competitiveness amongst teams. But we rise together, and we fall together, and we can’t independently operate the way that I think a lot of them do. If we’re going to demand higher standards from our athletes, we have to stand in front of them with higher standards. (Leslie, Coach)

This perspective acknowledged that coaching is emotionally demanding, but also cautioned against unchecked behaviors that could escalate into reputational risks or cause harm to athletes and staff:

I know coaching gets really heated, it gets really hard, and we can lose our tempers. But there were some temper losses last season that were completely inappropriate. And it only takes one parent or one kid to have a bad experience and report it. This industry is crazy like that, and I just don’t want to be a gym that anybody can say anything bad about. (Leslie, Coach)

These comments highlight how coaches' individual behaviors contribute to athlete experiences and the cohesion, or division, within the staff culture. Multiple participants described the emotional tone of a practice or the collective energy of the gym as being heavily influenced by how coaches conducted themselves, not just with athletes, but with each other. As one athlete explained:

Two of the coaches fought all the time. Not necessarily always in front of athletes, but you could just tell. Obviously, all the coaches knew. And it was just, like... you could feel the vibe was completely off. As soon as they came into the gym, or if we practiced the same day for whatever reason, you could just feel their energy. And it was just really negative. (Avery, Athlete)

At other times, coaches were observed collaborating constructively and supporting one another during practice. In one session, when a group of athletes was struggling with a new stunt series, one coach called over another for additional support. The two coaches worked together to reconfigure the stunt, offer different verbal cues, and encourage the athletes. Their shared presence appeared to ease tension in the room and helped the group successfully complete the skill. This moment reflected how cooperative dynamics between coaches could create a more positive, productive training environment.

### **Theme Two: Pressure to Win and Perfectionism**

Participants consistently described a gym culture shaped by high performance standards and competitive success. While many athletes took pride in their work ethic and accomplishments, they also reported significant emotional and physical pressure tied to winning, public perception, and the expectation to perform without error. These pressures came from multiple directions, including coaches, parents, teammates, and athletes, and often contributed to fear of failure and perfectionistic thinking. Five subthemes emerged within this category: (1) Internal and External Pressure, (2) Summit, Bids, and Hit Zero Routines, (3) Injury and

Performance Expectations, (4) Perfectionism Culture, and (5) Competitive Pressures from the Industry.

***Subtheme: Internal and External Pressure***

Participants consistently described a performance environment shaped by both internal ambition and external expectations to win. While many athletes valued hard work and personal excellence, they also noted a culture in which success at major competitions, particularly Summit, was framed as the ultimate goal. For some, this created a sense of motivation; for others, it contributed to stress, overtraining, and emotional fatigue. One athlete mentioned, “I feel like now there is pressure to win, more so because everyone is just constantly ring-hungry and jacket-hungry” (Taylor, Athlete).

Several participants pointed to leadership’s emphasis on winning as a central driver of the gym culture. One athlete noted how expectations often escalated as soon as a team showed potential, saying, “Anytime a team in the gym gets somewhat good, it's immediate pressure to be like, ‘okay, well, you can win Summit. It’s possible.’ And then that's all you're thinking about, because that's all anyone wants” (Riley, Athlete).

Athletes described internalizing this pressure, particularly when a team lost or failed to meet competitive expectations. In some cases, early-season losses became a turning point that led to increased training, self-imposed goals, and heightened intensity in the gym:

After that first comp, when we lost because of our deduction, we were like, no. Never again. We will never lose to those teams again. And then we just became super hungry. We were in the gym every single day, doing extra reps before and after practice. Tumbling constantly. Anytime any of us were there, we’d be like, ‘Hey, want to throw this pass really quick?’ We had to make it count. Make it worth something. (Quinn, Athlete)

Other athletes described the emotional toll of being seen as a leader or role model within their team, particularly during high-pressure events:

It was a lot of pressure, especially at the start of the season. We'd go to competitions, and I usually get nervous. But everyone was looking at me to say, 'Don't be nervous, it's going to be okay.' And in my head, I was literally freaking out. I had little kids coming up to me crying before we went on stage, and I didn't know how to help them. I was nervous, too. I just wasn't showing it. (Morgan, Athlete)

This pattern of pressure was also reflected in participant observation. At a national competition, several athletes huddled quietly during warm-ups, barely speaking. One athlete stood off to the side, stretching alone and repeatedly checking her shoelaces. Another stared at the mat without making eye contact while waiting for her name to be called. During the backstage transition area, a coach reminded the team that "this is our shot to prove we're Summit-worthy," (Taylor, Athlete) prompting a few athletes to nod silently while others looked visibly tense. The overall mood was focused but heavy, with minimal joking or chatter.

***Subtheme: Summit, Bids, and Hit Zero Routines***

For many participants, securing a Summit bid was framed as a central goal for the season. However, athletes and coaches described how the type of bid, particularly whether it was a full-paid bid, became a point of tension and hierarchy within the gym. Teams were often evaluated not only on whether they earned a Summit invitation, but on the perceived quality or prestige of the bid itself. One athlete remembers:

I feel like that was our main focus for the first half of the season. It was always, like, 'We're here only for the bid.' That's what we had to do. At our first competition, we were eligible for the full-paid bid, and there was a bobble that shouldn't have been counted, but it cost us. Then at the next comp, we lost by 0.1 to the team in front. It was just like that all year. It sucked. (Casey, Athlete)

Several participants noted that earning an at-large or partial-paid bid could feel diminished if it wasn't celebrated equally or publicly recognized in the same way as a full-paid bid. Athletes recalled situations where bid reveals led to disappointment or interpersonal conflict between teams. One stated, "There was this whole thing after the reveal where people were upset

and weren't letting the other team celebrate their paid bid. That really sucked for those young kids. They worked so hard, and they got that bid. It's a really amazing thing" (Riley, Athlete).

Even when teams secured Summit bids, the lack of full-paid status was sometimes emphasized by coaches, which created uncertainty around whether the accomplishment was enough. During an interview, a coach explained, "One of our teams got a bid, but not a paid bid, and the coach of the team that got a bid but not a paid bid gave this whole speech like, 'This doesn't mean we're done. There are still more chances to get your full paid.' It didn't feel like they just got a Summit bid. It was like... well, you got your bid, but it wasn't good enough" (Rowan, Coach).

Athletes expressed sadness on behalf of first-time athletes, whose milestone moments were downplayed in the pursuit of a higher-level bid:

I remember my first bid. I barely even knew what Summit was, and I called my parents bawling, I was so excited. So, it was really sad to see these athletes go through that and be told it still wasn't good enough. Some of them didn't even know what a full-paid bid really meant. It's more exciting for the parents anyway, since they're the ones paying for it. (Avery, Athlete)

In addition to bid status, several participants reflected on the pressure to "hit zero" – a clean, mistake-free routine – as a prerequisite for winning or being considered competitive. One coach explained, "From a coaching perspective, last season my team struggled with that. We kept saying, 'Your goal this weekend is not to win, it's to hit a clean routine.' Because if you don't hit, you can't expect to win. Everyone's hitting now, that's the expectation. It really just comes down to who's the cleanest and sharpest" (Skyler, Coach).

Together, these reflections suggest that the competitive pathway to Summit, and the emphasis on specific outcomes like full-paid bids and hit-zero routines, added layers of stress and comparison to athletes' experiences throughout the season. At the same time, Summit remained a meaningful milestone for many athletes. During one observation, several athletes

were overheard discussing Summit during a water break. One athlete excitedly said, “I can’t believe we’re really going this year,” (Taylor, Athlete) while another added, “I’ve never been. I’m so nervous. I can’t wait for Disney World!” (Quinn, Athlete). Despite the pressure associated with qualifying, athletes often expressed genuine excitement and anticipation about the opportunity to compete on such a large stage. While competitive goals like Summit bids shaped much of the season’s focus, athletes also spoke about the pressure of trying to meet those expectations, even while injured.

***Subtheme: Injury and Performance Expectations***

Alongside the pressure to win and qualify for Summit, participants also described an unspoken expectation to train and compete through injuries or illness. Whether driven by personal standards, loyalty to teammates, or the looming importance of competition, many athletes expressed that sitting out was only acceptable in extreme cases. One said, “I mean, I feel like... at something like a competition, it’s like... if you’re not feeling great, unless it’s an extreme circumstance where you physically can’t get on the mat, you’re going to go and do it. That’s just kind of the expectation” (Cameron, Athlete).

Some athletes described pushing through pain or sickness not because they were forced to, but because it felt necessary to uphold their role on the team. Even when not feeling well, they remained committed to competing. One athlete remembered, “At that competition, when I was sick, I still wanted to compete. It wasn’t like, ‘I don’t want to.’ I was going to compete regardless. I felt like crap, and it sucked, but I still wanted to do it for my team” (Avery, Athlete). Others mentioned specific injuries that significantly impacted mobility or comfort, but still felt pressure to return quickly or avoid missing practices. In one specific instance an athlete reflected on returning to stunting shortly after injury because of the proximity to Summit:

People say they sprained their ankle and stuff, but I've never seen an ankle look like this with just a sprain. From the knee down, it was purple and blue for like a month. For the first few days, I could barely walk. The personal trainer we work with said, 'You shouldn't do anything on it right now,' but I didn't listen. The first practice back, I was stunting, and it hurt really, really bad. But I just kept going. Then the next night, I thought, 'I can't do this, this is terrible.' But then I started doing it, and it felt a little better than the night before. I think some people would have stayed out longer, but I wanted to come back, because Summit was coming up, so you feel the pressure. You want to be there. (Cameron, Athlete)

In some cases, athletes attributed this mindset to individual personalities, but across accounts, there was a shared understanding that being available, pushing through, and performing when it counts were baseline expectations in the gym's culture.

This pattern was also evident in observation. During the week leading up to a major competition, one athlete attended practice while visibly ill. She wore a mask and later shared that she had a 102-degree fever but didn't want to miss the routine run-throughs. Coaches did not intervene to send her home, and she completed the full practice alongside her teammates. Her presence was not framed as unusual. Instead, it was consistent with the broader expectation that athletes would push through discomfort, illness, or injury to prepare for competition. One coach said to me "you know she's going to do it no matter what, there's no point in trying to stop her" (Jamie, Coach). Beyond the physical expectations to train and compete through pain or illness, many athletes also described a culture of perfectionism that shaped how success was defined and how mistakes were experienced.

### ***Subtheme: Perfectionism Culture***

Many participants described a culture of perfectionism that shaped their behavior, mindset, and sense of self within the gym. This pressure to be flawless was reinforced through scoring systems, coaching expectations, and internalized athlete standards. Even small mistakes were often magnified, leading to extended periods of self-criticism or anxiety about returning to practice:

I think I'm also kind of a perfectionist, so I think... self-criticism for me, I'm a lot harder on myself. If the coaches say something, even in general, I'll be like, 'They're talking to me, I need to fix that.' I remember one comp, I was sick, and I touched down on a pass. And I'm telling you, for the next week, I couldn't stop thinking about it. I was like, 'Why would you do that? You've had a tuck for years.' I didn't want to go to practice after that. I wasn't scared, but I didn't want anyone to say anything. I just felt so disappointed in myself. (Jordan, Athlete)

For many athletes, perfectionism extended beyond the gym. Some reviewed practice videos on their own time and mentally replayed mistakes, pointing out even the smallest technical errors as flaws that needed to be corrected:

Even on my days off, I would go back and watch my videos and be like, 'Hey, that happened, that's not supposed to happen.' Cheerleading is so much about perfection. You need to have locked-out legs, pointed toes, no bent elbows. Small, minor details are going to get picked out by the judges. So, you start to nitpick your own routine because that's what it takes to be in the top ranks. (Casey, Athlete)

Although perfectionism sometimes contributed to technical growth, several participants noted that it also created emotional strain and tension during practices. While coaches occasionally emphasized improvement over outcomes, athletes still felt that the smallest errors could become focal points for criticism. One athlete explained:

Striving for perfection has definitely helped me get new skills and get better technically. But it also made things harder in the gym. Last year our coaches would say, 'This is still a good score, we just need to fix this and this.' But when we weren't performing perfectly, when a stunt fell, for example, that's when everything felt magnified. All the emotions would come out. (Cameron, Athlete)

Coaches also reflected on how perfectionism shaped their own responses, both in how they pushed athletes and how they themselves felt pressured to uphold a standard of excellence. One coach described how repeated full-outs were sometimes driven more by an abstract expectation of flawlessness than by athletes' actual performance:

I'm not saying she's a negative coach, but it's always just about the perfection. Like, 'They need to do another full-out because that one wasn't good.' And I was like, 'The one before was perfect. Did you forget that?' It's 8:45 and practice ends at 9. I think they're just tired. She gets in her head about the expectations coming from the top. This idea that if you're not winning, you're not good. (Jesse, Coach)

In the same interview, the coach emphasized how the culture of constant correction could overshadow moments of real progress or effort, saying, “We don’t do a lot of praise, just in the world. We’re so focused on expectation, where it’s like, that had to be killer, that had to be top 10, that had to be on the news for you to be like, ‘Good job.’ That’s what we’re missing in this gym. We’re not proud of progress. We’re only proud of perfection” (Jesse, Coach).

Across interviews, athletes and coaches described perfectionism as both a motivator and a burden, one that shaped how they approached skills, received feedback, and defined their own worth in the sport.

***Subtheme: Competitive Pressures from the Industry***

Beyond internal team dynamics and coaching practices, participants consistently referenced broader structural and cultural forces within the competitive cheerleading industry that amplified pressure to perform. Athletes, coaches, and leadership alike described how expectations for excellence were embedded in the sport’s design and perpetuated through judging criteria, competition culture, and parent expectations.

Pressure to pursue perfection was not only an internalized belief but was described as a requirement codified in score sheets and institutional standards. One staff member in a supervisory role explained, “Well, the score sheets make you be perfect. That’s what you’re chasing. Perfection. You just are. I mean, there’s no other way to look at it. You can’t say, ‘We’re not looking for perfection,’ because... we are” (Leslie, Administrator)

In the same interview, this individual acknowledged a deep tension between their personal values and the external benchmarks that often defined legitimacy and success in the eyes of the broader cheerleading community:

Well, I would like to say that success is defined by overall growth in the culture and in the teams, and in the athletes, and in the staff. The way we handle things, the way we

communicate. That's where the heart of growth is. But you got to win, because nobody really gives a shit about that other stuff. That stuff's more important to me, but if you're not winning, nobody cares. You have to win. And it's all about winning for a lot of the parents. After all, it is competitive cheer, you know what I mean? (Leslie, Administrator)

Participants echoed this sentiment, suggesting that the sport's broader environment often reinforced a singular emphasis on outcomes. Even when teams or athletes made meaningful progress, the pressure to remain competitive at high-stakes events such as Summit continued to dominate narratives around success. Several athletes referenced how team culture, external rankings, and long-term competitive goals contributed to feelings of both motivation and exhaustion. One athlete described the experience as "layered," with pressure arising from "every direction" (Avery, Athlete).

These observations highlight how institutional norms within competitive cheerleading, not just individual coaching decisions or gym-specific practices, play a critical role in shaping athletes' emotional and physical experiences. The expectation to win, perform perfectly, and continually exceed prior accomplishments was described not as a choice, but as an inherent condition of participation at the elite level.

### **Theme Three: Athlete Demands**

While pressure to win was a defining feature of the gym culture, athletes also spoke at length about the personal demands required to meet those expectations. The physical, mental, and emotional strain of competitive cheerleading extended beyond individual competitions or seasons and shaped how athletes viewed themselves, their time, their bodies, and their overall well-being. The following subthemes reflect the intensity of those demands and how they were internalized and managed by participants: (1) Overtraining and Injuries, (2) Mental and Physical Toll, (3) Self-Concept and Identity, (4) Body Image, and (5) Balancing Life Outside the Gym.

***Subtheme: Overtraining and Injuries***

Participants described training schedules that involved extended practice times, repeated full-out routines, and additional conditioning. Several noted that these demands varied depending on the coach or team but often led to physical strain. One athlete reflected on the intensity of a younger team's training volume, saying, "I feel like with one of the teams, they would do, like, 6, 7 full-outs. Like, often. But, I think they only won maybe once or twice last year, so I don't know how much that actually translated to competing and having confidence on stage" (Jordan, Athlete).

Another athlete commented on how practice length and physical demands differed across teams:

I've sat in on a lot of [one team's] practices. And it's very different from [another team]... Every other team in the gym was pushing, like, 3, 3.5, sometimes even four hours on, like, a regular practice day... Some of them were being pushed so hard that it caused injuries... excessive amounts of bear crawls... [One athlete] tore a muscle across her chest... but because of the dynamic that they have... they're scared to tell their coach anything, so they just keep going with their injuries. (Skyler, Coach)

In some cases, participants recalled moments where they or their teammates returned to practice before fully recovering from injuries. One athlete reflected, "I mean, in reality, the only person that knows what's going on in your body and your head is yourself. But... there's been times where I should not have practiced. Whether that was a broken ankle... or I haven't eaten in a few days from food poisoning" (Morgan, Athlete).

One athlete detailed a specific example related to competing while injured:

I had a broken ankle, and my coaches decided to tell me that I was going to tumble... even though they knew I had a broken ankle, I had shown up to practice in a boot... I wasn't cleared by the doctor... They were just like, oh, like, let it rest, and then in the warm-up room, like, throw your tumbling... I got on stage, hadn't tumbled in, whatever, 3 weeks, and fell on my face in front of everybody...so embarrassing." (Riley, Athlete)

These accounts reflected how participants navigated injuries, practice demands, and communication about physical limitations during the season.

***Subtheme: Mental and Physical Toll***

Athletes described the mental and physical toll of competitive cheerleading as intense, with some referring to it as one of the most demanding experiences of their lives. This strain was particularly acute for crossover athletes, those assigned to multiple teams, who were often expected to perform at full capacity with little rest between routines. One athlete shared their experience, saying, “When I was a crossover on both teams... we practiced on the same days at the same exact times. And I had to go full-out, full-out, full-out, full-out... no water breaks... My body is so tired, and I'm so sore, I feel like my muscles are going to rip apart every single time I do anything” (Avery, Athlete).

A full-out refers to running an entire routine at full intensity, including all physical elements and performance components. Multiple athletes emphasized the difficulty of this demand, explaining that the level of exertion was immeasurable. One athlete explained, “A full-out is basically what you put onto the competition floor... having a smile on your face even when you want to, like, die and throw up... Literally to this day, I don't think I've ever had anything so hard on my body... it literally sends a shock through my body” (Cameron, Athlete).

Another participant likened the experience to sprinting at maximum effort for several minutes with minimal recovery: “It feels like... my heart is going to beat out of my chest... you can, like, feel it in your body... sprinting for 2 minutes and 30 seconds... and then immediately being like, ‘no, you can't take a breath. Do it again’” (Casey, Athlete).

In addition to physical fatigue, athletes described symptoms such as dehydration, dizziness, and nausea. One participant recalled a moment during practice when they were forced

to eat while on the floor just to maintain their energy: “My body was severely dehydrated... I would get dizzy. I was trying to eat as many carbs as I could... There was a time I was literally eating a sandwich on the floor... because I was like, ‘I need food. This is way too much’” (Taylor, Athlete).

Several athletes also spoke about the difficulty of managing injuries and exhaustion in an environment where voicing discomfort was not always welcomed. One participant described feeling caught between conflicting messages from a coach their parents:

I got a lot of pressure from my parents to not do stuff on my ankle, and then I got a lot of pressure from, like, the coaches to do stuff. And I also wanted to do stuff, so I did. Saying no wasn't an option to those coaches though... the thought of, like, me even telling my coaches that I couldn't attend practice for whatever reason literally shot anxiety through my entire body. (Cameron, Athlete)

Over time, this persistent pressure led to emotional fatigue, with some athletes describing a shift in how they felt about the sport altogether. One athlete reflected, “I just want to go home. I'm too nervous. I don't want to do it... It just kind of... took out the enjoyment, and I was more focused on the negative parts of it” (Jordan, Athlete).

These accounts were echoed during a practice I observed, where several athletes appeared visibly fatigued while continuing through repeated full-outs. One athlete, flushed and unsteady, leaned briefly against a wall before being called back to the floor. Although coaches monitored the timing and flow of the practice, extended rest was not observed, and athletes appeared to self-regulate their energy levels while maintaining performance expectations.

***Subtheme: Self-Concept and Identity***

For many athletes, cheerleading was central to their identity. Participants consistently described the immersive nature of competitive cheer, in which time, attention, and emotional energy were oriented around training, performing, and meeting expectations. As one athlete explained, “Cheer is literally my entire life. It takes up all of my time. I spend countless hours in

the gym. And if I'm not in the gym, I'm at a competition. And that's literally my entire life” (Quinn, Athlete).

This degree of immersion shaped how athletes saw themselves both inside and outside of the gym. Some described a deep identification with the sport that became difficult to disentangle from their sense of self. One participant reflected, “When I was in cheerleading, it was, like, my whole life... even my friends at school, like, I'll say something about cheerleading, and they're like, ‘Oh, did you know she did all-star cheerleading?’ Like, it's just, like, what I talked about for a very long period of my life” (Alex, Coach).

In several cases, stepping away from the sport prompted athletes to confront how much of their identity had been tied to cheerleading. One athlete, who had since left the sport, described the difficulty of making that decision even when they knew it was necessary:

I think it was almost like an addiction. Like, I just don't think I knew anything else. I didn't know myself without it... I don't know what I would have done after school without it. Like, you're telling me I would have just gone to soccer, and then come home and eat dinner with my family? I never even ate dinner with my family. I don't know what that life is. (Morgan, Athlete)

Another participant shared how the evaluative nature of the sport shaped their self-perception and sensitivity to judgment: “I think I've made it up in my head that everyone judges me... which, to a certain extent, is true. But I think that comes from being in a sport my whole life where all you are is judged” (Blake, Coach).

These accounts reflect the profound psychological imprint that competitive cheerleading left on athletes, both while they were actively participating and after they stepped away.

### ***Subtheme: Body Image***

Body image concerns emerged as a salient issue across both athlete and staff interviews, particularly among current and former flyers. Several participants described direct experiences or observations of how body expectations, weight stigma, and appearance-related judgments were

embedded into cheerleading roles and coaching feedback. One athlete reflected, “Being a flyer and then, like, literally being told I was too big to fly when I was, like... maybe 105 pounds? And that was underweight for my age at the time. And being told I was too big to fly, like... was just the craziest experience to me. I just remember being like, ‘what do you mean I’m too big to fly?’” (Avery, Athlete).

While participants acknowledged the biomechanical realities of stunting, they also noted how comments about body size were normalized within the gym culture, often without regard for the emotional or psychological impact:

Like... physically, it makes sense. Why would you choose to put a 140-pound girl up in the air versus an 85-pound girl? But... to tell an athlete that you are too big to fly, that's... rude. Like, there's no other way around it. It's just... rude. And... I can't tell you how many times I've even caught myself saying it about other athletes in the gym. It's just so normalized. (Jamie, Coach)

Body image pressures were also linked to more severe consequences, including disordered eating and physical health deterioration. One coach described observing the effects of weight loss and exercise on an athlete's ability to function in the gym: “She was just dwindling in front of my very eyes... She'd lost so much weight. She couldn't get through her routines anymore... She ended up in the hospital. She wasn't eating, her heart was working too hard because she was over-exerting herself. She was hospitalized” (Skyler, Coach).

In this case, the coach reported attempting to intervene by speaking directly with the athlete and her family, emphasizing the importance of health over participation, saying, “If you can't take care of your body, you cannot do this sport, and I'll have to pull you... What can I do as a leader to help show you cheerleading doesn't mean more to me than your health?” (Skyler, Coach).

However, not all attempts at intervention were received with openness. In some cases, coaches reported encountering denial from parents when raising concerns about possible eating

disorders. One coach recalled, “She’s not eating because she wants to fly. Straight up. The mom’s like, ‘No, no, that’s not it...’ and I’m like, okay, I’ll keep checking in with you, but I’m concerned” (Rowan, Coach).

Social comparison, internal pressure, and external reinforcement were described as factors contributing to this culture. In addition to in-gym experiences, one coach pointed to the influence of online content and comparison, stating, “Social media and body imaging is a dark road that kids go down. I have faced it before at the gym. You can’t not address it” (Emerson, Coach).

Others described longer-term impacts, even after athletes stopped cheering. In a follow-up conversation with one parent, a staff member noted the athlete’s apparent improvements in health after stepping away from competition. The coach said, “She looks really good, she looks healthy, she’s gained weight. And the mom was like, ‘Yeah, that’s what happens when you’re not active.’ I’m thinking, no, it’s not just that. She’s not flying. She doesn’t have the stress of flying or the stress of someone taking her spot” (Sage, Coach).

Together, these perspectives reflect how body image concerns and appearance-related pressures are shaped not only by sport-specific roles (such as flying), but also by interpersonal feedback, structural norms, and broader cultural narratives about weight, performance, and success.

One notable moment during participant observation offered a counterexample to the harmful rhetoric athletes described around being told they were “too big to fly.” In this case, a coach made the difficult decision to pull a flyer from her position. Rather than making weight or size the focal point, the coach sat down with the athlete and walked her through the rationale behind the change. She reassured the athlete that nothing was wrong with her and emphasized

that the decision was based on what would work best for the team's routine at that moment, not a reflection of the athlete's value or ability.

The athlete was visibly upset and tearful about being replaced in that role, but Coach Skyler approached the conversation with care and compassion. She also addressed the broader team, reminding them that no position in the routine was permanent. "That's not your spot," she said, "it's a spot." This reframing helped shift the language and mentality away from ownership and personal identity and toward a more team-centered understanding of role flexibility. It also underscored the coach's intent to make decisions based on competitive strategy rather than individual worth.

This moment stood in contrast to other instances in which body-related decisions were delivered more bluntly or left unspoken, allowing athletes to internalize negative assumptions. In this case, the coach's proactive communication offered a more supportive model for navigating the emotional weight of team adjustments around flying.

### ***Subtheme: Balancing Life Outside the Gym***

Athletes and coaches alike described the challenge of maintaining a balanced life outside of cheerleading, citing the time demands, inflexible scheduling, and the social sacrifices inherent to participation in elite competitive cheer. The year-round nature of the sport, with minimal breaks between major competitions and team tryouts, left many participants feeling physically and mentally depleted:

Yeah... there's literally one week between Summit and tryouts. And there's usually clinics going on, there's classes, like, it's not really, like a break. And you can take the week off, but there's kind of no point, because you're coming back for tryouts anyway. We finish our season on a weekend in May, and then tryouts are the next weekend. I know even just for me as a coach, I'm like. I'm exhausted. I'm at the gym every day, like, I just want... a break from the gym. Even if we do have a break from like, practices, kids will still do, like, privates during those times, or, like. On days off from school, they're like, oh, cool, well, we don't have school today, so I'm going to schedule my private for

10 in the morning. Things like that. So, even when there are breaks, I feel like kids are still, like, in the gym. Like, working, no matter what. (Jamie, Coach)

In addition to the physical demands, athletes reflected on the way cheer structured nearly every aspect of their lives, from school and work schedules to social opportunities. Some shared that their closest friendships were formed through cheer, but also noted how difficult it was to maintain connections outside of the gym:

Cheer takes up so much time that I feel like I don't have time for much else. So, like, my, like, work schedule, I schedule around cheer. And, like, my school schedule, I also schedule that around cheer. I'm like, okay, well, I typically have practice this day, this day, and this day, so I'm not going to be able to do stuff at those times. I think a cheer social life is different from, like, a normal person's social life. I think it's hard to have both at the same time because it's hard to juggle. We don't have time for both. (Taylor, Athlete)

These pressures were often especially impactful for younger athletes, who developed friendships almost exclusively within the cheer community. For older athletes, major life events, such as school dances or milestones like prom, often conflicted with cheerleading priorities, creating difficult decisions about what to prioritize.

The older kids... cheer takes away from their social time. So that's, like, another... that's a conflict that they usually have, is, like. Oh, my friend wants to do this, but I have cheer, so I can't go, or there's a birthday party, or... A lot of times Summit Weekend would fall on prom. And that was, like, a hard thing for, like, some kids. They're like, why... It's my senior prom, like, I want to go. But it's Summit. So, it's like, what are you going to prioritize? (Cameron, Athlete)

Another participant shared, “The one great thing is that I did make a lot of friends with cheer, which was really great... it kind of sucks that, like, now that we're out of cheer, like. Doing different things, I feel like I can't reach out to some of those people, just because, like. Things... things get crazy” (Morgan, Athlete).

Taken together, these reflections illustrate how the high-intensity structure of competitive cheer often leaves little room for pursuits or relationships outside of the sport. Athletes and coaches

described struggling to set boundaries, establish routines beyond cheer, and preserve connections with people not embedded in the cheerleading world.

#### **Theme Four: Team Dynamics and Peer Relationships**

Athlete experiences were deeply shaped by the social dynamics within and across teams. Relationships with teammates played a central role in shaping athletes' emotional environments, motivation, and sense of belonging. While some participants described strong bonds, peer support, and team-wide accountability, others recalled the presence of cliques, exclusionary behavior, and interpersonal conflict. Team composition, especially when mixing wide age ranges, sometimes complicated cohesion, while tensions between athletes on the same team, and teams in the same gym, introduced a layer of internal competitiveness. The following subthemes reflect these diverse and sometimes conflicting dynamics: (1) Supportive Relationships, (2) Cliques and Exclusion, (3) Mixed-Age Team Dynamics, (4) Teammate Blame and Conflict, and (5) Internal Competitiveness.

##### ***Subtheme: Supportive Relationships***

Participants frequently described moments of connection, mutual encouragement, and shared responsibility among teammates. These supportive dynamics often became more pronounced as the season progressed and athletes encountered challenges such as injuries, last-minute routine changes, and competition stress. One athlete reflected on how their team came together in response to adversity:

In the beginning of the season, it was definitely... like, pick and choose who you want to support. But towards the middle or end of the season, when we had to face certain challenges, like an athlete going to the hospital, we all came together. People had to step into different spots. That brought everyone closer. We understood anything could happen, good or bad, so we had to be ready. (Jordan, Athlete)

Support also emerged in the form of peer coaching. Rather than treating stunting issues as isolated problems, athletes described a collective approach to improvement, with one

mentioning, “If one stunt group was struggling with a skill, we would all go to that group and be like, ‘Hey, this is how we do it, this is what works for us.’ So that was really cool about our team. We could almost coach each other at times when we were struggling” (Casey, Athlete).

Beyond technical assistance, athletes recalled meaningful interpersonal bonds that enhanced their cheer experience. These included both one-on-one friendships and team-wide communication, which some participants identified as a key to competitive success. One former athlete stated, “I’ve been on teams where it’s dead silent on the floor and no one talks, and those teams aren’t as successful. My last season, we weren’t the closest, but our communication on the floor really helped us, especially in stunts. It was a lot of, ‘you got this, we can do this,’ and those little cues helped us do better” (Cameron, Athlete).

In cheerleading culture, athletes also used “mat talk” (a blend of verbal encouragement and subtle rituals) to support and uplift one another during routines. This included shared hand squeezes before pyramid sections, or affirming physical gestures such as a supportive pat before a stunt. One athlete explained, “Mat talk is words of encouragement, but it’s also the little things. Like me and my flyer holding hands before the pyramid, or a back spot giving their flyer a little slap on the butt going up into a stunt. It’s like saying, ‘you’ve got this,’ without even saying it” (Morgan, Athlete).

This emphasis on emotional presence extended to mental well-being, especially in high-pressure moments. One participant explained, “You really need everyone to be in the right headspace when you’re competing. So, it’s your job to make sure everyone’s okay, comfortable, not stressed, whether that’s because of coaches or anything else” (Sam, Administrator).

Together, these reflections illustrate how athletes co-constructed supportive environments in the

gym and on the competition floor, often buffering one another from external pressures through intentional care, communication, and camaraderie.

This collective encouragement was not just described in interviews. It was also vividly observed in practice and competition settings. During a competition I attended, athletes could be heard shouting cues and encouragement throughout their routines, with phrases like “Let’s go!,” “Push!,” and “You got this!” echoing from both the floor and the sidelines. This display of mat talk created a synchronized rhythm that reinforced timing and boosted morale during high-pressure moments. It reflected what several participants described: a culture in which support and connection were embedded into the routine itself, making verbal and physical cues a vital part of the team dynamic.

#### ***Subtheme: Cliques and Exclusion***

While many participants described supportive team dynamics, others revealed that this sense of unity could be fractured by the presence of cliques, favoritism, and social division. Several athletes acknowledged that, despite a general sense of team loyalty, smaller social groups often formed within the team, which shaped how inclusion and belonging were experienced. One participant recalled, “I think there's a lot of, like, groups within the team, you know? I think, overall, like, we all, like, love each other, because we're on the same team, but I mean... also we're, like, teenage girls, and some people aren't going to like each other. And, like, it's also, like, pretty cliquy sometimes” (Cameron, Athlete).

These social dynamics were not just limited to casual friendships. Several participants reflected on how cliques could impact communication and even trust within the team. One athlete described friendships as “fragile,” suggesting that unresolved tension, especially when fueled by external influences, could erode the sense of cohesion:

Friendships are, like, a loaded subject in the gym, just because they seem so fragile on the team. I feel like conflicting friendships or, like, a lack of friendships made it difficult for, like, the team to actually be cohesive and, like, bonded. I remember a conversation that I had with another athlete at one point, saying how she felt like her relationship with another athlete on the team became really rocky after whatever the coach's input in it was. Like, they were constantly pitted against each other. It was, like, everything was a competition. (Casey, Athlete)

Even routine rituals, such as pre-practice handshakes, sometimes reflected subtle dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. While these gestures were intended to promote unity, one athlete described feeling distanced from the rest of the team due to the limited number of connections she had: "Well, I mean, before the full-out starts, it... I mean, last year, it took us a good, like, 15 minutes to get through all our handshakes as a team and stuff, but... I didn't have that many, I only had, like, one or two that I would do, and then just kind of, like, chill and wait for, like, observe everyone else do theirs, I guess" (Riley, Athlete).

These reflections suggest that social hierarchies and perceived popularity influenced how team members related to one another, sometimes complicating the broader goal of collective unity. During participant observation, I noticed moments that quietly reinforced these dynamics. For instance, during a break between full-outs, several athletes gathered in small clusters, often the same athletes seen walking into the gym together or interacting consistently during warmups. While a few floated between groups or extended conversations across clusters, others sat alone or remained physically distant from the social core. These subtle cues echoed the way cliques and social fragmentation were described by participants.

### ***Subtheme: Mixed-Age Team Dynamics***

Within the team dynamic, age gaps presented both challenges and opportunities for growth. Several participants reflected on the difficulties of navigating team cohesion when older and younger athletes trained and competed together. For some, these differences in maturity, skill development, and communication styles created tension:

That was a weird year, because I was on, like, a team with, like, athletes that were a lot younger than me... I really wanted to, like, do well in, like, all my stunts and stuff, and, like. My flyer was on the younger side... she struggled picking up things as quickly... I want to just get my stuff done quickly, if that makes sense. So that was definitely a challenging dynamic. (Cameron, Athlete)

Others noted that age-related dynamics affected performance and shaped how athletes expressed themselves socially and emotionally. One staff member observed that younger athletes often modified their behavior in response to the older athletes' energy or judgment:

The younger kids are still in their innocence, and they're silly and goofy, which is my favorite... But then I've seen younger kids be closed off and less expressive of themselves when the older athletes get involved... You can tell when they get on the floor around certain athletes, they're not fully themselves... The confidence kind of goes down. (Skyler, Coach)

Despite these challenges, some coaches and athletes described how these age-based divisions could evolve into mentorship opportunities. One coach shared how older athletes initially expressed frustration with younger teammates but eventually grew to respect and bond with them:

At the beginning, the older ones were like, 'there's so many little kids, they're so annoying,' like, they audibly said those things... But as the season went on, the seniors were less and less annoyed with them... They were learning time and place, when to be silly, when to focus... and the seniors started to be goofy and silly and less annoyed... It kind of rounded out their sharp edges. (Alex, Coach)

This transformation highlighted the importance of leadership and team culture. As Coach Alex noted, how these dynamics play out "depends on the athletes, and it also depends on what coaches let slide."

### ***Subtheme: Teammate Blame and Conflict***

While many athletes described moments of camaraderie and support, others reflected on the fragile nature of team harmony, particularly under pressure. When routines faltered or mistakes occurred, frustration often boiled over into blame and interpersonal conflict. These dynamics were especially pronounced in the high-stakes environment of competition. One

athlete recalled how blame was quickly passed among teammates immediately after a routine error: “After one competition I asked someone what went wrong, and they said someone else messed up. Then later, that same person was upset, saying they were being blamed. A lot of blame would happen when things would go wrong” (Morgan, Athlete).

In more extreme instances, mistakes were met with isolation and silence rather than collective processing. One athlete described walking off the floor feeling consumed by anger and resentment toward teammates: “I was just really upset. Everyone was crying, and I was like, ‘why are you crying? We are losing because of choices that were made to let a stunt fall. So don’t make that choice again.’ And then it happened again” (Quinn, Athlete).

In the aftermath of performance failures, some teammates turned on each other. Another participant remembered that after both routines dropped at a major competition, “everyone was just, like, going at each other,” (Avery, Athlete) describing the environment as tense and emotionally charged. Participants also noted that coaches’ communication could influence these dynamics. If feedback was directed toward individuals rather than the group, it could trigger peer criticism or singling out. One administrator said, “If it’s aimed at one person, the team has, in the past, ganged up on that person. When a coach, who is seen as an authority, singles someone out, it feels like they’re showing it’s okay for us to be negative toward that person” (Chris, Administrator).

These experiences suggest that in the absence of strong emotional regulation and inclusive communication, accountability can easily morph into blame, from the coaches and the athletes.

### ***Subtheme: Internal Competitiveness***

While external competition is inherent to the nature of all-star cheerleading, several participants reflected on the more insidious form of internal competitiveness that emerged within and across teams at the gym. These dynamics, often framed as part of the selection or placement process, sometimes created tension, eroded morale, and complicated relationships between athletes. One athlete described how the competitive tone was set early in the season, saying, “Right when the season starts, trying to place stunts or decide routine spots, it’s like, ‘Do these jumps next to each other, and whoever does it better gets the spot.’ It’s common, and sometimes necessary, but last year, I feel like it wasn’t the healthiest” (Riley, Athlete).

The competitive culture extended beyond individual roles and into interpersonal dynamics. As one participant noted, the pressure to stand out sometimes turned teammates into rivals: “You’re always trying to beat other athletes and other teams... even people from your own team. That desire to be the best just kind of gets in your head” (Quinn, Athlete).

This internal competition wasn’t limited to athletes. It also manifested at the organizational level. One athlete shared how the gym’s coaches, particularly those overseeing different teams, often modeled this adversarial energy:

This season felt like we were against our own program. The only time certain coaches were in a good mood was when their team won. And even then, if another team from the gym did better, it was like everyone was in a bad mood. I remember one competition where our team got the highest score we’d ever received, like a 98.6, and instead of celebrating, it felt like the other coaches were mad we’d scored that high before their team did. But it was a different level, different choreography, different athletes. You can’t compare the routines. (Morgan, Athlete)

In this case, even milestone achievements, such as one team earning the gym’s highest-ever score, were met with resentment rather than celebration. From what I observed, the internal competitiveness, rather than fostering collective pride, became a source of division. The gym felt

less like one team with multiple units and more like a collection of silos competing for attention, validation, or dominance.

### **Theme Five: Parental and Family Influences**

While coaching and peer dynamics played a major role in shaping athletes' day-to-day experiences, participants also highlighted the significant impact of parents and families on athlete well-being in the sport. Parental involvement ranged from deeply supportive to overly controlling, with some families contributing positively to the gym culture and others creating tension through favoritism, pressure, or unrealistic expectations. The following subthemes capture the multifaceted role of families in competitive cheerleading: (1) Overinvolvement and Athlete Burnout, (2) Financial Strain and Return-on-Investment Pressure, and (3) Parental Power and Unequal Treatment.

#### ***Subtheme: Overinvolvement and Athlete Burnout***

A consistent concern across both athlete and coach interviews was the level of overinvolvement from parents and the subsequent toll it took on young cheerleaders. Many participants described athletes training nearly every day, often with multiple practices, classes, and private lessons stacked throughout the week. Though this schedule was often fueled by a desire for rapid skill progression, it frequently led to physical exhaustion and emotional burnout.

One coach reflected on how common this had become:

Specifically last season, we noticed with the parents... the parents want their kid to be in the gym. Seven days a week, four privates a week, seven classes. They want them to be on two teams, they want them doing all these things. And by the time they get to practice with us, they are just, like, zombies. Like, they are just, like, 'blah blah, cheerleading, blah blah blah,' like... what am I doing? (Emerson, Coach)

Another coach recalled confronting a concerning shift in an athlete's performance due to exhaustion:

Sometimes the kids would communicate, like, ‘I’m just so exhausted, I can’t...’ Or you could tell. They throw a skill, and I’m like, ‘That’s the most dangerous back handspring I’ve ever seen in my life.’ And they’re usually good at those. But then they tell me, ‘Oh, well, I had a class and two privates, and yesterday I had another practice.’ It’s like seven days a week. (Skyler, Coach)

Athletes also acknowledged how overwhelming this pressure could become, especially when combined with travel and competition schedules, saying, “It’s just exhausting. Like, it’s literally... exhausting. Like, the cheer hangover is... terrible” (Riley, Athlete). In some cases, the intense push to perform led to athletes walking away from the sport entirely. A coach described watching this pattern repeat over time:

We have a lot of kids that do it for two or three years, and then either the parents or the coaches are pressuring them too much, and then they lose all interest. That could have been an amazing athlete. But they got pushed too hard, they got yelled at too much. And they just lost complete interest. They hated the sport after two or three years. And they were, like, 10 years old. It’s so sad. (Jesse, Coach)

Even when parents saw themselves as being helpful or supportive, athletes and coaches suggested that the underlying impact was often harmful. One coach said, “I think a lot of parents think that they are being supportive. Like, I really do. I think maybe they just go about it in a way that’s harmful to the athlete and they don’t realize it” (Skyler, Coach). These patterns of overinvolvement underscore the importance of listening to athletes’ needs, respecting limits, and creating balance between athletic development and well-being.

***Subtheme: Financial Strain and Return-on-Investment Pressure***

Alongside time and energy, families made considerable financial investments in competitive cheerleading. Participants described the high costs of tuition, travel, and competition fees, often amounting to thousands of dollars per season. While many parents made these sacrifices willingly, athletes reflected on how that financial burden created an implicit pressure to perform. One athlete recounted a particularly grueling travel experience that underscored the emotional and financial weight of competition weekends:

I mean... it's expensive to fly from California to Florida every single year. I wasn't the one paying for it by any means, but I'm sure it was a lot. Like, if a flight was \$1,000, that's \$2,000 for me and my mom round trip. Then hotel, Disney World tickets, because you have to get them to compete there... It's a financial burden. I think that took a very big toll on my parents. Not to say we're not financially okay, but it's still a lot. And that affected their well-being, which then led to them being stressed out. Then me and my mom would fight. She was stressed out, I was stressed out. We got to the airport Wednesday... flew through the night, had a layover in Denver, landed at 6 a.m., went straight to Disney World for a team bonding, then practiced right after on the football field... We were exhausted. Then we competed the next two days. (Cameron, Athlete)

Coaches believed that, for many families, the magnitude of the financial investment shifted expectations around performance, with some parents equating their commitment with entitlement to results:

I think they want their money and time and commitment to be worth it. If they're investing... missing this much work, this much time away from other family members, then they feel like the athlete needs to be performing their best at all times. They need to be the best athlete on the team because of how much money and commitment the parents have put into it. (Rowan, Coach)

This mindset sometimes bled into decision-making about where to train, as athletes left local programs like ACE in search of those perceived as more competitive. One administrator said, "Once these kids start throwing tucks and things like that, their parents take them to the more competitive gym across the way. They would rather drive 150 miles each way and put their money toward a program they know is going to win. Even though we have teams that win, they just want to be a part of the bigger gym" (Leslie, Administrator).

While participants noted that families' financial contributions were imperative to an athlete's participation, these examples illustrate how such investment could come with invisible strings attached. Across interviews, participants consistently linked parental return-on-investment to athlete well-being, motivation, and longevity in the sport.

***Subtheme: Parental Power and Unequal Treatment***

Participants described a gym culture where parental involvement extended beyond supportive roles into decisions about athlete placement, coaching responses, and team dynamics. While some parents contributed positively to the program through volunteer work and enthusiasm, others held disproportionate sway, leading to inequitable treatment among athletes. One athlete reflected on the challenges of managing athlete behavior in the context of close parent–staff relationships:

One of my teammates got to do whatever she wanted at practice because her parents and the coach had known each other for so long. If she had a negative attitude at practice, it didn't matter, because her parents were close with the coach. They'd talk in the parking lot for an hour after practice, and her attitude got pushed to the side. But if another kid, who didn't have a parent around, copped an attitude, even once, they were running for the rest of practice. It's not fair. (Jordan, Athlete)

This disparity was also noted by a coach, who said, “So, it's like, the parents do have a lot of say in the gym when it comes to what teams they want their athletes to be on, because the gym is afraid of losing money. So, sometimes the parents get whatever they want” (Blake, Coach). Another staff member echoed this concern, saying, “The gym is afraid of losing money, so parents end up being able to do whatever they please. They push for certain teams, certain placements. And because it's a business, sometimes the gym just gives in because otherwise they will leave and go somewhere else” (Sam, Administrator).

While some parents used their influence to benefit their own child, others contributed positively by giving back to the program. One administrator said, “A dad came in and painted the gym. His wife became a team mom. Another dad donated paint, helped with floors. A lot of parents are just coming in really excited to contribute and help. The energy was really good with some of those people” (Leslie, Administrator).

This range of involvement underscores the complexity of parent roles in the gym. While some created a sense of community, others disrupted it by leveraging personal connections for preferential treatment. These unequal dynamics created tension among athletes and staff and contributed to an environment where fairness was sometimes secondary to favoritism and finances.

### **Theme Six: Organizational Culture and Leadership**

Athletes and staff alike described an organizational culture shaped by inconsistent leadership, blurred boundaries, and intense pressure to remain competitive within a demanding industry. While the gym achieved success on the competition floor, participants painted a more complex picture behind the scenes, one in which a lack of structure, unclear accountability, and strained staff dynamics sometimes undermined the program's values. At the same time, these reflections revealed moments of intentional effort toward reform, with leadership expressing aspirations to build a more empowering, communicative, and supportive environment for both athletes and coaches. The following subthemes highlight the tensions between these competing forces: (1) Lack of Structure and Accountability, (2) Pressures of Market Competition and Industry Expectations, and (3) Attempts at Culture Change and Athlete Empowerment.

#### ***Subtheme: Lack of Structure and Accountability***

Staff and athletes repeatedly emphasized the absence of clear organizational structure and accountability. Leadership often failed to follow through on promises, and a "buddy-buddy" culture among staff blurred professional boundaries. One coach described the systemic inconsistency, saying, "It's not run like a business. There's no consequences. If somebody doesn't do their duties, or they don't fill out an incident report, it's just kind of like, 'oh, that's just who they are'" (Jamie, Coach).

Another participant reflected on the frustrations of repeated, unfulfilled efforts at internal improvement: “We’re in an ugly cycle of [leadership] saying they want to fix things and be better, and then everybody’s like, ‘We’re on board,’ and then nothing happens, so everybody just gets more resentful after every year” (Alex, Coach).

During participant observation, I witnessed how this absence of formal accountability weakened trust and cohesion among both staff and athletes. For example, when clear instructions or follow-through from leadership were missing, coaches often made decisions inconsistently or on the fly, often leaving athletes confused and teammates frustrated. Rather than addressing issues directly, problems were sometimes left unresolved, which contributed to a culture of silence or quiet resentment.

***Subtheme: Pressures of Market Competition and Industry Expectations***

While the gym environment aimed to prioritize athlete development and well-being, coaches and staff described how the broader cheerleading industry, particularly the demands of Varsity events and comparisons to powerhouse programs, intensified internal pressures. The need to keep up often conflicted with efforts to maintain a healthy and mission-aligned culture. One staff member in a leadership role reflected candidly on the relentless pace, saying, “It can feel really suffocating at times... we’re just always chasing. Gotta keep up, got to keep up. Oh, so-and-so’s doing this, oh my god, what are we going to do? We got to do this, we got to do that. I never have time to just stop and enjoy the moment” (Leslie, Administrator).

Others pointed to the way business concerns increasingly dictated operational decisions, often at the expense of staff capacity, family finances, and athlete wellness:

I feel like the industry and Varsity, actually, is so money-hungry that they just keep creating more and more events. It makes our season longer and longer. It’s hard on people’s pocketbooks. It’s hard on their relationships. It’s hard on their bodies. But if you

don't go, you're going to lose customers to the gym down the road that does, so our hands are kind of tied. (Chris, Administrator)

This competitive treadmill created ethical dilemmas for coaches and administrators. Even as they acknowledged the toll it took, they feared that slowing down would drive athletes and families to flashier or more aggressive programs. One participant stated, "We have to keep up with the Joneses, we have to be just as competitive, we have to run with the big dogs... Even though we're scoring the same as these larger gyms, it's just the wow factor of putting [a big name] on your chest" (Leslie, Administrator).

Participants voiced frustration at how these pressures filtered down to athletes, who felt compelled to level up every year, often without adequate support or readiness. One coach said, "I've seen kids get so upset with themselves because they don't level up. And I'm like, 'you don't have to level up every year.' There's so many different things we're looking at. So many different ways to grow" (Skyler, Coach).

Despite these challenges, several participants acknowledged the systemic nature of these pressures. Navigating the business side of competitive cheerleading often meant making difficult trade-offs. In this context, the gym's mission to center athlete experience often clashed with the reality of an industry that rewards nonstop performance, visibility, and growth.

### ***Subtheme: Attempts at Cultural Change and Athlete Empowerment***

Despite the strain of inconsistent leadership and external demands, several participants pointed to efforts, both individual and organizational, to create a more supportive, empowering environment. These efforts reflected a desire to shift gym culture in ways that prioritized athlete voice, relational trust, and personal growth. Staff described moments of intentional self-reflection and reimagined leadership practices. One coach shared their evolving approach to athlete feedback and accountability, saying, "Our job is to lead them, and love them, and build

them up, but also hold them accountable, in a positive way. In a way that we're reaching them, not in a way where they shut down and stop hearing us. The minute you start yelling, they're gone" (Rowan, Coach).

Others emphasized the importance of validating athletes' experiences, creating psychological safety, and fostering open communication. One administrator stated, "Sometimes we're so slammed and stressed out, we don't always have that time to just validate and listen. But that's what I want for our culture. That athletes feel like they can trust us, that they can come to us and not get judged" (Sam, Administrator).

This aspiration extended to efforts at more transparent athlete education and empowerment. One staff member reflected on how knowledge could foster confidence and clarity, mentioning, "The athletes have a job to do... but they have to understand what that job is in order to do it right. So, we have to empower that knowledge. Knowledge is power, and we have to share all of that with our athletes" (Skyler, Coach).

Even within moments of discouragement, coaches and administrators expressed a desire to instill resilience and perspective in athletes. One said, "The pressure they put on themselves, I don't know how to take that away. I try. I say, 'It's just cheerleading. It's not the end of the world. Nobody died.' But I get it. When something goes wrong, we're all upset. Still, the growth is in figuring it out" (Leslie, Administrator).

At times, this push for a more supportive environment also led to staff questioning their own sustainability and leadership role: "I love cheer, but sometimes it's so incredibly stressful. We're constantly having to keep up... you're not good enough, you're not good enough, you got to be better. Sometimes I really wonder, why am I still doing this?" (Sage, Coach).

Taken together, these reflections reveal that while change was not always consistent or sustained, many staff members held strong convictions about the kind of culture they hoped to create. Amid burnout and structural tension, they voiced a clear desire to refocus the gym's identity on empowerment, trust, and care for the athletes.

This desire for cultural change was evident during participant observation as well, particularly through the launch of a new initiative known as the Hot Topics program. Set to begin this season, the program designates time each month to address a different aspect of athlete well-being, ranging from emergency preparedness and mental health to body image and emotional regulation. One coach explained that the initiative was sparked, in part, by a safety scare at a major competition the previous year, and that both athletes and coaches would benefit from clearer protocols and stronger emotional support. The coach expressed genuine enthusiasm for the new format, noting that “we’re taking an hour out of practice time, no matter what, even if we’re preparing for a huge competition” (Jamie, Coach). Beyond logistics, the intent was to create a safe, structured space for athletes to learn, reflect, and engage in open dialogue. For many, including former athletes now on staff, the initiative was long overdue. As one put it, “I wish I had that growing up... that kind of support system would’ve made such a difference” (Jesse, Coach). While structural and systemic challenges remained, the implementation of Hot Topics signaled a meaningful step toward the more supportive and values-driven culture that coaches and athletes alike hoped to build.

### **Theme Seven: Reflections and Meaning-Making**

As athletes looked back on their experiences in competitive cheerleading, many offered deeply personal reflections, highlighting both the fulfillment and disillusionment that shaped their journeys. These accounts illuminated the evolving ways athletes made sense of their time in

the sport, often holding moments of joy and disappointment side by side. Their insights were often layered with gratitude, loss, ambivalence, and growth. The following subthemes explore these reflections through two lenses: (1) Personal Takeaways from the Sport and (2) Decisions about Staying or Leaving.

***Subtheme: Personal Takeaways from the Sport***

Despite the challenges they faced, many athletes emphasized the meaningful life lessons and lasting memories they took away from their time in cheerleading. These reflections often focused on perseverance, relationships, and the unique opportunities the sport offered beyond the mat. One athlete described how cheerleading taught them about discipline and growth through long-term effort, saying, “I think cheer really taught me that if you work really hard at something, you’ll be able to do it. Like, I worked really hard to get a back handspring, and then you work from there. You learn a tuck, then a layout. Just working through it, you can do stuff that you set your mind to” (Avery, Athlete).

Others reflected on the joy of traveling to competitions and spending quality time with loved ones, emphasizing the role of cheerleading in creating shared experiences:

Even though I didn’t like hanging out with the team and stuff a lot at comps, I’m super close to my family, so when we went to competitions, we’d always go out to a nice dinner. When we went to Summit, my grandparents came, my dad came, my brother came. We stayed at Animal Kingdom Lodge with a savannah view. We went to Disney World for a few days. The trips around comps were always so fun. (Casey, Athlete)

For some, the friendships formed through the sport stood out most vividly. One athlete reflected, “I mean, I met probably my future maid of honor. My bestest friend on the planet. I made a lot of awesome connections, and I learned a lot from coaches, too. Even though there were a lot of negatives, there were definitely a lot of positives. A lot of learning experiences” (Cameron, Athlete).

In moments of accomplishment, athletes described the pride that came from mastering difficult skills and celebrating team achievements: “After we won NCA... everyone was just on a high for a few weeks. Just super excited. And each time you get a new tumbling skill. Like I remember when I got my layout. I was so excited. You just get a video of it, and you’re like, ‘Grandma, look what I did!’ Showing it to everyone. It feels really good” (Quinn, Athlete).

These personal takeaways highlighted the complexity of athletes’ experiences and revealed that even amidst stress, pressure, or burnout, many carried forward lessons, relationships, and moments that mattered in their lives.

***Subtheme: Decisions about Staying or Leaving***

As athletes reflected on their cheerleading careers, many described a shift in their relationship with the sport; one marked by growing ambivalence, internal conflict, and ultimately, decisions about whether to continue or walk away. While some expressed gratitude for staying, others shared feelings of disillusionment or fatigue that led to their departure. For some athletes, staying in cheer was ultimately worthwhile, despite the challenges. Others, however, described a gradual loss of passion and joy. In many cases, social dynamics and anxiety surrounding performance contributed to their decisions:

I just felt like I didn’t love it as much as I used to when I was younger. I didn’t really enjoy competitions last year. I would get super nervous, and I felt like I didn’t have a lot of people to hang out with. One of the things that might’ve contributed to me deciding I wasn’t going to do it again is I would get super anxious before full-outs. At competitions, I’d always be super nervous. I didn’t remember getting that nervous when I was younger. I think the fun might’ve been partly taken away by the pressure to perform well. (Quinn, Athlete)

The emotional toll of reflection also surfaced in some responses. One participant, now removed from the sport, described the complicated mix of nostalgia and disappointment:

Three years ago, I would’ve told you cheerleading is the best thing that ever happened to me. God put me on this earth to cheer. Now I’m like... I don’t know if I’d even send my future kids into cheerleading. I hate to say that, because I had so many good memories,

but when you really reflect, it's hard not to focus on the bad. I didn't even know I felt this way until I started talking about it. These people caused me so much anger, people I spent 50 hours a week with, that my parents spent countless dollars for, and now I look back and think... wow, this sucks. (Cameron, Athlete)

These narratives reveal how leaving the sport was not always a simple decision. For many, it was the product of accumulated stress, shifting priorities, and unresolved disappointment, yet still tinged with moments of appreciation and pride. Together, their stories reveal how meaning is constructed not just through performance outcomes, but through evolving self-awareness, personal growth, and the lasting impact of both positive and difficult moments in the sport.

### **Summary of Findings**

This study revealed how individual, relational, and structural factors intersect to shape the lived experiences of athletes in elite competitive cheerleading. Participants reflected on both the joys and challenges of the sport, including the thrill of skill progression, close friendships, and moments of personal growth, as well as the impact of burnout, favoritism, and persistent pressure to perform. Themes such as training intensity, coaching behavior, and peer relationships illustrated the complex emotional landscape of daily gym life. Parental involvement emerged as a double-edged sword, providing resources and support for some while exacerbating stress, inequity, and exhaustion for others. Gym leadership and organizational culture further influenced athlete well-being, as efforts toward reform were often constrained by unclear accountability and commercial pressures. Reflections on what athletes gained and lost through their involvement in cheerleading underscore the evolving nature of athletic success and well-being within this high-pressure environment.

The following chapter will interpret these findings in light of existing research and theoretical frameworks related to youth sport and athlete development. By situating these themes

within broader scholarly conversations, the discussion will explore their implications for athlete well-being, coaching practice, organizational leadership, and systemic reform in high-performance youth sport contexts.

## Chapter Five: Discussion

This chapter presents a synthesis and interpretation of the study's findings within the broader context of existing research, theoretical frameworks, and the participants' lived experiences. The purpose of this study was to explore how youth athletes in elite competitive cheerleading interpret and experience well-being and thriving, as well as how the organizational and social context of their gym environment shapes those experiences. Drawing on a constructionist epistemology, symbolic interactionism, and the thriving framework developed by Brown et al. (2017), this qualitative case study examined the lived experiences of athletes at Allstar Cheer Elite (ACE), a high-performing, private cheerleading gym in the United States. The study was guided by two central research questions concerning athlete experience at ACE: how competitive cheerleaders interpret and experience well-being and thriving, and how relationships, expectations, and organizational culture within the gym shape those experiences.

As youth sport becomes increasingly professionalized and commercialized, concerns about athlete well-being have come to the forefront (Coakley, 2016; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008). In elite cheerleading, where training begins at an early age, participation is year-round, and scoring is rooted in technical precision, athletes are often subjected to extreme physical and psychological demands. Despite the risks, the sport continues to grow in popularity, largely due to its competitive prestige, social media visibility, and promises of future opportunity (Knight et al., 2018). Yet within this environment, there remains a lack of research on how athletes themselves interpret their experiences, particularly in terms of how they make sense of success, health, and well-being.

This study, as revealed in Chapter Four, presented seven overarching themes derived from in-depth interviews and participant observation: coaching practices and power dynamics, pressure

to win and perfectionism, athlete demands, team dynamics and peer relationships, parental and family influences, organizational culture and leadership, and reflections and meaning-making. Together, these themes revealed a complex, and at times contradictory, picture of what it means to “thrive” in competitive cheerleading. While some athletes experienced deep fulfillment, belonging, and personal growth, others described burnout, injury, identity foreclosure, and emotional distress. Often, thriving was narrowly defined by external outcomes, such as earning Summit bids, or winning national titles, rather than holistic well-being. In many cases, athletes equated sacrifice with strength and internalized pain or pressure as necessary for success.

These interpretations were not formed in isolation. They were shaped by, and in turn helped reinforce, the cultural norms, power structures, and performance expectations embedded in the gym environment. The symbolic meanings athletes attached to their roles, behaviors, and relationships emerged from their continuous interactions with coaches, teammates, parents, and organizational leadership. By applying symbolic interactionism, this study illuminated how athletes negotiated meaning in a social world saturated with expectations of perfection, discipline, and loyalty. At the same time, the thriving framework provided a lens to examine whether and how athletes experienced the joint outcomes of high performance and holistic well-being, as originally conceptualized by Brown et al. (2017).

This chapter proceeds by interpreting the findings in light of the research questions, existing literature on youth sport well-being, and the theoretical framework introduced in Chapter Two. The thematic analysis discusses each major theme in relation to the athletes' interpretations, contextual influences, and relevant scholarship. Next, the implications section addresses the study's broader potential for theory and practice. The chapter then continues into discussion of methodological and conceptual limitations, as well as directions for future research. It concludes

by synthesizing the study's contributions and offering final reflections on how competitive cheerleading, and elite youth sport more broadly, might better support athlete thriving.

### **Thematic Analysis**

This section presents an interpretation of the study's findings in relation to the thriving framework (Brown et al., 2017), symbolic interactionism, and the existing literature on athlete development, well-being, and competitive youth sport. The goal is to move beyond description by analyzing how athletes made sense of their experiences and how those interpretations were shaped by the interpersonal and organizational context of ACE.

The analysis is guided by a theoretical framework and a theoretical perspective. First, the thriving framework (Brown et al., 2017; 2018) conceptualizes well-being as the intersection of personal and contextual enablers, emphasizing that athletes thrive when they experience both high performance and holistic well-being. Second, symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1986) provides a lens to understand how athletes construct meaning through social interaction, shared language, and cultural norms. These frameworks help illuminate the deeper processes by which athletes interpret their well-being.

To maintain continuity with Chapter Four, the analysis is organized by theme and subtheme. Each subtheme is examined to uncover how participants interpreted their well-being and performance experiences, how those interpretations were influenced by their environment, and how the data align with or extend existing scholarship. This structure enables a layered discussion that bridges participant narratives with broader theoretical and empirical insights.

The section begins with Theme One: Coaching Practices and Power Dynamics, which explores the influence of coaching behaviors, emotional control, and leadership style on athletes' psychological experiences, meaning-making, and ability to thrive within the gym.

## **Theme One: Coaching Practices and Power Dynamics**

Coaches held substantial power in shaping athletes' day-to-day experiences and long-term interpretations of success, safety, and worth. Across all subthemes, participants described how coaching behaviors, ranging from overt aggression to subtle emotional manipulation, influenced not only their well-being, but their beliefs about what it meant to thrive in competitive cheerleading. While some athletes reported positive relationships, many described their interactions with coaches as inconsistent, conditional, or fear-based. These dynamics were reinforced by the broader gym culture, which often excused or justified inappropriate conduct in the name of competitive success.

### ***Subtheme: Inappropriate Behavior***

Athletes frequently recalled incidents of verbal aggression, public humiliation, and emotional volatility from coaches. While some participants labeled these experiences as harmful, others hesitated to use the language of abuse, instead framing them as “part of the sport” or “just how they coached.” This normalization illustrates how emotional mistreatment became intertwined with performance expectations. Athletes learned to interpret yelling, shaming, or being ignored not as violations of personal dignity, but as markers of coaching intensity or signs that they had failed to meet expectations.

These interpretations were shaped by the gym environment, which lacked formal accountability structures and often portrayed aggressive coaching as necessary to ‘toughen up’ athletes. In this context, athletes’ silence or acceptance became a survival strategy. The absence of institutional checks, alongside the valorization of emotionally intense coaching, redefined inappropriate behavior as acceptable, or even desirable.

These findings challenge the conditions necessary for athlete thriving as described by Brown et al. (2017), particularly the need for emotional safety and authentic support. When athletes experienced constant tension or walked into practice anticipating verbal attacks, their capacity for motivation, learning, and growth was undermined. Symbolically, the meaning of well-being became distorted: athletes did not associate well-being with stability or affirmation, but with enduring harm in the pursuit of validation.

This theme is consistent with research from Kerr et al. (2009) on emotional abuse in sport, as well as Coakley's (2010) critique of the adultification of youth athletes in performance-driven environments. It adds depth to existing literature by showing how emotional mistreatment is often rebranded as passion or discipline in private cheer gyms, where coach power goes largely unchecked.

***Subtheme: Fear-Based Motivation***

Many athletes described fear, not love for the sport or intrinsic desire to improve, as a primary motivator. Fear of being yelled at, benched, or humiliated created a climate of emotional vigilance in which athletes performed not to grow or succeed, but to avoid punishment. This fear extended beyond physical practices to athletes' internal monologues, as they replayed past mistakes or worried about how a coach might respond in future routines.

This fear was not an isolated feeling; it was reinforced by team norms and organizational responses. When fear-based coaching led to success, it was celebrated. When it led to emotional breakdowns, it was often dismissed as part of the athlete's learning process. Over time, athletes came to associate fear with structure, mistaking anxiety for discipline and compliance for commitment.

From a theoretical perspective, this climate undercut both autonomy and relatedness, two essential components of the thriving framework. Athletes were not free to fail, take risks, or express vulnerability. Symbolic interactionism helps explain how fear became a shared language within the gym. Athletes used it to interpret cues, evaluate self-worth, and justify both coach behaviors and their own silence.

These experiences are supported by Tamminen et al. (2017), who identified a link between fear-based coaching and athlete anxiety and burnout. The data also align with Knight et al. (2018), who emphasized the emotional complexity of coach-athlete relationships in youth sport and the risks of authoritarian coaching styles.

***Subtheme: Inconsistent or Conditional Support***

Athletes consistently reported that praise, attention, and emotional support were contingent on performance. When athletes hit routines or did well in competition, they were praised, hugged, or invited into private conversations. When they made mistakes or struggled with skills, they were often ignored, excluded, or spoken to only in a corrective tone. This conditionality created a pattern in which athletes tied their value and sense of belonging directly to how well they performed.

The inconsistency extended beyond practices and into athlete-coach relationships more broadly. Some coaches would lash out emotionally and later justify their behavior as “just having a bad day” or being “overwhelmed.” While some athletes found ways to rationalize these patterns, others described feeling constantly uncertain about how their coaches would react, which fueled emotional dysregulation and self-doubt.

This relational instability contradicts the thriving framework’s emphasis on consistent, reliable support and psychological safety. The conditional nature of praise disrupted athletes’

ability to develop confidence and a secure sense of identity. Symbolically, athletes internalized a belief that affection and mentorship were things to be earned, not given.

These findings build on Fraser-Thomas et al. (2005) and Knight et al. (2018), who noted that inconsistency in adult feedback can erode athlete well-being. The current study adds nuance by showing how these dynamics were perceived differently across age and experience level. Older athletes were more likely to critique the inconsistency, while younger athletes absorbed it as normal.

***Subtheme: Unrealistic Coaching Expectations***

Participants described coaching expectations that often felt unrealistic, excessive, or developmentally inappropriate. Athletes were expected to train through injuries, perform under extreme fatigue, or stay silent about personal struggles to avoid appearing weak or dramatic. Coaches framed these expectations as non-negotiable, and athletes came to interpret them as part of the job, or something to be endured to show commitment or prove worth.

These expectations were modeled and reinforced by the coaching staff, some of whom invoked their own past experiences as athletes to justify the high demands. This generational cycle reinforced the idea that “pushing through” was a badge of honor, while rest or self-advocacy was a sign of weakness.

This subtheme illustrates a clear conflict with the eudaimonic aspect of thriving. Instead of supporting identity development and balanced growth, these expectations often pushed athletes into burnout, overtraining, and emotional suppression. Symbolically, athletes absorbed the idea that thriving meant minimizing needs, avoiding vulnerability, and aligning themselves with unrealistic standards.

These findings echo the work of DiFiori et al. (2014) and Jayanthi et al. (2015) on the health consequences of overtraining in youth sport and contribute to Brown et al.'s (2021) research on the tipping point between challenge and harm. They also resonate with literature on identity foreclosure in sport (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017), as athletes narrowed their sense of self to fit the mold expected by coaches.

***Subtheme: Coaching Influence on Gym Culture***

Finally, athletes emphasized that coaches did more than direct practices. They shaped the emotional and cultural climate of the gym. When coaches were tense, distracted, or frustrated, athletes mirrored that energy. When coaches were engaged, communicative, and consistent, athletes felt more secure and motivated. Yet across participants, descriptions of emotional volatility far outweighed stability.

Coaches' interpersonal conflicts, power struggles, and inconsistent behavior did not exist in isolation, but filtered down into athlete experiences and team dynamics. Coaches set the tone for how conflict was handled, how blame was assigned, and what behaviors were tolerated. Their influence extended to parents and assistant staff, reinforcing a culture that often lacked transparency and accountability.

This subtheme reflects the thriving framework's emphasis on contextual enablers. Without a stable, emotionally safe organizational climate, athletes struggled to sustain motivation and well-being. Symbolic interactionism helps explain how athletes read coaches as signals, interpreting moods, reactions, and silence as messages about their value, role, or success.

The findings build on Wagstaff's (2016) work on emotional labor in sport organizations and Passaportis et al.'s (2022) emphasis on leadership's role in shaping athlete thriving. In this

case, coach behavior did not merely reflect personal style, it created the symbolic and structural conditions that defined the athletes' lived realities.

### ***Summary of Theme One: Coaching Practices and Power Dynamics***

Theme One illustrates how coaches played a central role in shaping not only athletes' day-to-day experiences, but also their long-term interpretations of success, safety, and self-worth. The power coaches held extended beyond skill instruction to influence the gym's emotional climate, cultural norms, and athlete motivation. Athletes described a pattern of conditional support, emotional inconsistency, and fear-based motivation that became normalized within the cheerleading environment. Rather than fostering thriving, these dynamics often eroded athletes' autonomy, confidence, and sense of psychological safety. While some athletes found ways to rationalize or endure harmful behaviors, many internalized the belief that emotional mistreatment was part of the sport. These findings challenge the assumptions of the thriving framework, particularly its emphasis on consistent support, autonomy, and relational security. The data also reinforce existing literature on authoritarian coaching and the consequences of adult-centered sport environments, while offering new insight into how these patterns are experienced and interpreted within the context of elite competitive cheerleading.

### **Theme Two: Pressure to Win and Perfectionism**

This theme captures how the athletes' interpretations of success and well-being were deeply intertwined with a gym culture that prioritized winning, flawless performance, and external recognition. While many participants spoke with pride about their work ethic and accomplishments, their narratives also revealed a heavy emotional and physical toll associated with maintaining perfection and meeting expectations. These pressures, both internal and

external, shaped not only their behavior in the gym, but also their self-concept, emotional resilience, and motivation over time.

***Subtheme: Internal and External Pressure***

Athletes described a competitive environment saturated with both self-imposed standards and explicit expectations from coaches, teammates, and the broader gym culture. This dual-pressure dynamic contributed to a pervasive sense of urgency and emotional vigilance throughout the season. While some athletes interpreted this pressure as motivating, others experienced heightened anxiety, burnout, and identity entanglement. Many developed internal narratives equating success with flawlessness and failure with personal inadequacy, regardless of effort or circumstance.

These experiences illustrate how interpretations of thriving were often distorted. Rather than defining well-being through balanced growth or enjoyment, athletes came to associate thriving with winning, control, and emotional containment. Symbolic interactionism helps explain how these meanings were constructed: phrases like “ring-hungry” and “you can win Summit” became shared cultural symbols that shaped collective behavior and personal belief systems.

This theme echoes Sagar and Stoeber’s (2009) research on fear of failure and its consequences in achievement-oriented youth sport settings. They found that when young athletes base their self-worth on success and perceive mistakes as sources of shame or disapproval, they are more likely to experience anxiety, emotional distress, and avoidance behaviors. In the present study, athletes frequently expressed these dynamics, describing fear of letting others down, ruminating on errors, or avoiding communication after a failed performance. Their sense of competence and value was tethered not to effort or resilience, but to whether they met externally

defined standards. This suggests that the environment at ACE fostered maladaptive perfectionism, in which the fear of not meeting expectations outweighed the desire for growth or enjoyment.

In the context of the thriving framework, this environment created significant barriers to key enablers such as psychological safety and intrinsic motivation. Instead of pursuing excellence through self-determined goals, athletes felt pushed by external narratives that framed failure as unacceptable. Sagar and Stoeber's (2009) findings reinforce how such environments can shift athletes' motivation from mastery to ego-orientation, making them more vulnerable to burnout, disordered coping, and disengagement over time.

***Subtheme: Summit, Bids and Hit-Zero Routines***

Athletes described Summit as the pinnacle of the competitive season – a singular event that shaped how success, effort, and team value were perceived. More than just a goal, Summit bids functioned as a form of symbolic capital. Teams that earned full-paid bids were afforded greater recognition and coach attention, while those who did not were viewed as less competitive or less deserving. Athletes internalized these rankings as reflections of personal and collective worth, often evaluating their season not by growth or connection, but by the type of bid received and the team's hit-zero rate.

Through the lens of symbolic interactionism, the bid system and hit-zero expectations became meaning-making tools. They shaped how athletes interpreted their role within the gym and how they understood the broader narrative of their season. A bid was more than an outcome. It was a symbol of legitimacy, visibility, and value. Even when athletes were proud of their effort, failing to secure a bid (or earning one considered "lesser") led many to question their place or potential.

Within the thriving framework, this fixation on outcome-driven benchmarks runs counter to the idea that thriving emerges from supportive environments that emphasize long-term growth and personal development. Instead, success was framed in strictly binary terms: either you hit, or you didn't, either you earned a bid, or you failed. These rigid interpretations constrained athletes' ability to view mistakes as opportunities or to appreciate incremental progress.

These findings closely align with McArdle and Duda's (2004) work on motivational climates, particularly in high-performance youth sport. They found that when athletes operate in environments that emphasize normative comparison and externally evaluated success, their self-worth becomes conditional. Similarly, the current study reveals how constant referencing of bid status and hit-zero metrics created a culture where perfection was not just preferred, but required to feel competent, valued, or even safe.

### ***Subtheme: Injury and Performance Expectations***

The demand for perfection extended into how athletes responded to physical pain, illness, and injury. Participants routinely described pushing through injuries without complaint. This was not necessarily because coaches explicitly required it, but because of the unspoken norms that equated rest with weakness. Athletes recalled attending practice with fevers, competing on sprained ankles, or delaying medical treatment until after Summit. This pattern was reinforced by praise from coaches, peers, and even parents for being "tough" or "pushing through."

These experiences highlight how interpretations of thriving were shaped by sacrifice. Athletes learned to associate resilience with self-denial and to interpret physical suffering as a badge of honor rather than a warning sign. Symbolically, they constructed a version of success that required invisibility of pain and unquestioning dedication to the team. The decision to compete while injured became a moral statement about their commitment, not a medical one.

Within the thriving framework, this mindset is particularly problematic. Brown et al. (2017) emphasize the need for environments that support sustainable development and protect athletes' long-term well-being. At ACE, however, thriving was often equated with performing at all costs, even when doing so risked future health. The environment reinforced these values by failing to establish safeguards or normalize recovery. In some cases, athletes shared that injury disclosure was met with disappointment or subtle withdrawal of support, which discouraged future openness.

These findings resonate with Coakley's (2016) critique of adultified youth sport, in which young athletes are expected to adopt professional standards of toughness and availability without corresponding autonomy or agency. They also extend Malina et al. (2010) and DiFiori et al. (2014), who warned about the long-term health implications of early sport specialization and year-round training demands. What distinguishes this study is the insight into how athletes made meaning of these decisions, not as coercion, but as necessary steps to prove themselves and preserve their place.

### ***Subtheme: Perfectionism Culture***

A pervasive theme across interviews was the internalization of perfectionism, not just as a behavioral standard but as a defining feature of identity. Athletes described obsessively reviewing footage, ruminating on small mistakes, and feeling disproportionate guilt or shame for imperfection. While some acknowledged that this perfectionism drove improvement, many shared that it also contributed to anxiety, social withdrawal, and a distorted sense of self-worth.

This subtheme illustrates how the culture of cheerleading, and the symbolic environment of ACE in particular, positioned flawlessness as the baseline expectation. Mistakes were not framed as part of the learning process but as threats to legitimacy. Athletes internalized these

expectations through repeated exposure to coach feedback, team norms, and scoring systems that penalized deviation. Over time, many developed hyper-critical inner dialogues that persisted even outside the gym.

The thriving framework differentiates between challenge and threat. While high expectations can facilitate growth, they must be matched with support and self-compassion. In this environment, perfectionism was rarely balanced by emotional reinforcement. Instead, athletes described a cycle of striving and shame, where praise was fleeting and errors led to intense self-scrutiny.

This theme strongly reflects the distinction between adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism. While a drive for excellence can fuel engagement, maladaptive perfectionism, characterized by fear of failure, chronic dissatisfaction, and conditional self-worth, undermines well-being. The athletes in this study repeatedly demonstrated signs of the latter. Their experience of well-being was often dependent on outcomes that were often outside of their control.

***Subtheme: Competitive Pressures from the Industry***

Finally, athletes and coaches alike pointed to structural features of the cheerleading industry that intensified perfectionist norms and constrained autonomy. The emphasis on score sheets, rankings, social media exposure, and year-round competition created a landscape in which rest, experimentation, and even joy felt secondary to execution. Coaches described struggling to balance development with the constant pressure to produce winning routines. Athletes interpreted these demands as unchangeable facts of the sport.

Symbolic interactionism helps clarify how these meanings were constructed and maintained. Athletes absorbed messages from industry trends, judging systems, and digital

comparison spaces that reinforced perfection as the default. They saw themselves not just as performers, but as representatives of their team, gym, and brand. The pressure to meet these industry standards became deeply personal, shaping identity and reinforcing the belief that anything less than perfection was failure.

This subtheme reveals the macro-level constraints on individual thriving. Even when coaches wanted to support athlete well-being, they operated within a system that rewarded only narrow definitions of success. This reflects Curran and Hill's (2019) findings that rising societal and institutional perfectionism is associated with increased mental health challenges in youth.

### ***Summary of Theme Two: Pressure to Win and Perfectionism***

Pressure to win and be perfect was not simply a personal trait. It was a structural and symbolic feature of the environment at ACE. Athletes made meaning of their experiences through constant exposure to evaluative systems, implicit messages from adults, and comparisons with peers. While many derived pride from meeting high standards, the emotional and physical cost was often significant. These findings suggest that thriving in this context required not only skill and discipline, but also a suppression of vulnerability, rest, and even individuality. The cumulative effect of these pressures left little room for holistic well-being, calling into question whether thriving, as defined by Brown et al. (2017), was genuinely possible within the existing system.

### **Theme Three: Athlete Demands**

This theme reflects the complex and often overwhelming demands placed on youth athletes in competitive cheerleading, particularly within the high-performance environment at ACE. Athletes described physical exhaustion, emotional strain, identity struggles, and ongoing difficulties balancing their cheerleading commitments with other areas of life. These challenges

were not always the result of explicit pressure from adults. In many cases, they stemmed from the symbolic and structural norms that defined what it meant to be a “dedicated” or “successful” athlete. Athletes’ interpretations of thriving were deeply shaped by these demands, often equating success with endurance, sacrifice, and self-suppression.

***Subtheme: Overtraining and Injuries***

Athletes frequently described physical exhaustion as an expected part of cheerleading at ACE. Many noted that they trained through pain, rarely took rest days, and struggled with cumulative fatigue from participating on multiple teams or in overlapping roles such as classes, privates, and clinics. While some acknowledged pride in their toughness, others reflected on how the constant demand for output wore down their bodies and left little time for recovery. Overtraining was often interpreted not as a problem to be addressed, but as a signal of dedication and strength.

This normalization of overtraining reveals how athletes made sense of their physical experiences through the lens of symbolic reward. Feeling sore, sick, or injured was seen as part of the process. In some cases, participants indicated that rest or complaint was implicitly discouraged or even shamed. As one athlete put it, “You don’t want to be that person who can’t handle it” (Morgan, Athlete). These interpretations suggest that athletes constructed meaning around resilience that favored persistence over preservation.

Within the thriving framework, these findings raise concerns. Brown et al. (2017) emphasize the importance of environments that protect athletes’ long-term well-being and promote sustainable development. At ACE, however, the demands of training frequently compromised athletes’ ability to recover or advocate for their physical needs. Thriving was

associated not with health or balance, but with the capacity to push through discomfort without expressing vulnerability.

The findings are consistent with prior research on overtraining in youth sport. DiFiori et al. (2014) and Jayanthi et al. (2015) caution against excessive load, early specialization, and insufficient recovery, which they link to increased injury risk and burnout. The current study extends this conversation by illustrating how overtraining was interpreted by athletes themselves. Rather than seeing it as harmful, many viewed it as necessary to keep up, protect their role on the team, or meet coach expectations. This internalized framing of overtraining reflects a broader system in which performance demands consistently outweigh considerations for health.

***Subtheme: Mental and Physical Toll***

Beyond physical strain, athletes described the cumulative mental and emotional toll of their cheerleading commitments. Many expressed feelings of exhaustion, irritability, and emotional fatigue that built steadily over the course of the season. Some shared that they would cry after practice, experience heightened anxiety before competitions, or feel unable to fully relax even during designated breaks. Despite these signals of strain, few felt comfortable voicing their concerns. Instead, the mental toll was often interpreted as a natural, unavoidable part of striving toward high-level success.

This pattern reflects a broader cultural narrative within ACE in which emotional regulation and sacrifice were normalized. Athletes reported learning, both implicitly and explicitly, that their mental state was secondary to performance outcomes. Emotional well-being was not openly discussed, and in some cases, athletes worried that expressing stress or burnout might be seen as weakness or lack of commitment. These perceptions shaped how athletes

interpreted their emotional responses, often leading them to suppress or minimize them rather than seek support.

Symbolic interactionism helps illuminate how this meaning-making process unfolded. Emotional strain was not just a private experience but was interpreted through interactions with coaches, teammates, and institutional norms. When emotional displays were ignored or subtly discouraged, athletes learned that composure and containment were valued more than honesty or self-care. Over time, these patterns contributed to a narrow definition of what it meant to be a “good athlete,” one that left little room for emotional needs.

Within the thriving framework, this environment failed to meet several key conditions for athlete flourishing. Brown et al. (2018) emphasize the need for both performance support and psychosocial support. However, in the present study, emotional demands were routinely overlooked. Thriving was defined almost exclusively by output and resilience, rather than by holistic well-being. The idea that athletes could feel fulfilled, energized, or balanced was often seen as incompatible with competitive success.

This theme is consistent with research by Gustafsson et al. (2011), who found that high training loads and psychological stress often intersect in athlete burnout. The findings also reflect Vealey and Chase’s (2016) discussion of emotional labor in youth sport, particularly in environments where athletes feel they must manage their affect to be perceived as strong or coachable. At ACE, emotional regulation became a silent expectation, one that athletes internalized as part of their identity and necessary to maintain their status within the team.

### ***Subtheme: Self-Concept and Identity***

Athletes in this study reflected on how their involvement in cheerleading at ACE shaped, and in many cases consumed, their sense of identity. From an early age, many had been known

as “the cheerleader” in their schools, families, or friend groups. Over time, the role of athlete became more than just an activity; it became a central feature of their self-definition. For some, this identification was empowering and gave them a sense of purpose. For others, it created pressure and confusion, particularly when their experiences in the sport became emotionally or physically harmful.

This entanglement between identity and athletic role shaped how participants made meaning of both positive and negative experiences. When things were going well, such as earning a Summit bid or getting praise from a coach, athletes felt validated and confident. However, when they were injured, left off a roster, or underperforming, their self-worth was often shaken. Because so much of their identity was invested in their performance, any setback felt deeply personal. Several athletes shared that they were unsure who they were outside of the gym, especially after stepping away from the sport.

Symbolic interactionism provides a useful lens for interpreting this subtheme. Athletes constructed their identities through repeated social interactions that reinforced the cheerleader role. Coaches, teammates, and even family members often reflected back messages about their value being tied to their athletic performance. As these messages accumulated, athletes began to internalize success or failure in the sport as indicative of their broader worth. The boundaries between personal identity and athletic identity became blurred, especially in an environment that offered little opportunity for exploration outside of the gym.

Within the thriving framework, a stable and flexible sense of identity is a key enabler of long-term development and well-being. Brown et al. (2017) note that athletes are more likely to thrive when they have space to develop multiple aspects of their self-concept and feel valued beyond their athletic achievements. At ACE, this flexibility was limited. The demands of

training, competition, and social belonging within the gym left little time or support for identity development beyond cheerleading. As a result, athletes struggled with transitions, confidence, and future planning.

These findings reflect earlier research by Brewer et al. (1993) on athletic identity and its relationship to adjustment difficulties when sport participation is interrupted. More recent studies, such as those by Lavalley and Robinson (2007), have emphasized the risks of identity foreclosure in elite youth athletes, particularly in high-pressure environments. The current findings extend this literature by showing how athletes themselves made sense of these identity challenges. They often viewed their narrowing identity not as a problem, but as a necessary tradeoff for success

### ***Subtheme: Body Image***

Body image emerged as a powerful and often painful dimension of athletes' experiences at ACE. Several participants shared concerns about their physical appearance and described feeling scrutinized, both by others and themselves. While no formal weight or physique standards were explicitly communicated by the gym, athletes nonetheless internalized messages about how their bodies were supposed to look in order to succeed or belong. These messages came through uniforms, coach comments, social comparisons, and the sport's highly visible nature.

Athletes interpreted these body-related pressures in various ways. Some mentioned that they felt "too big" for certain positions or worried about how they looked in uniforms or photos. Others reflected on being praised or criticized for their size in ways that affected their confidence and eating behaviors. Even when body image concerns were not discussed openly, they were present in subtle cues and reinforced through team culture. Several athletes shared that they

avoided eating before practice or compared themselves to others constantly, even if they were aware that this behavior was harmful.

These experiences highlight how body image was shaped by ongoing social interaction and symbolic reinforcement. In a sport where visual presentation is central to performance and evaluation, the body became both a tool and a site of judgment. Athletes learned to monitor and manage their appearance in ways that reflected internalized expectations, even if no one explicitly required them to do so. Symbolic interactionism helps explain how these meanings were absorbed and enacted. The way others responded to their appearance, whether through compliments, side comments, or silence, shaped how athletes viewed themselves and their place in the sport.

The thriving framework calls attention to the importance of self-acceptance, self-esteem, and autonomy in fostering well-being. However, the findings suggest that athletes at ACE often struggled to view their bodies with neutrality or appreciation. Instead, their physical selves became tightly linked to their sense of value and visibility. Brown et al. (2017) emphasize that thriving environments should promote body confidence and reduce appearance-based comparison. In contrast, ACE presented an environment where physical scrutiny was embedded into the fabric of performance and peer interaction.

These findings echo work by Krane et al. (2004), who documented the harmful effects of body surveillance and weight pressures in aesthetic and judged sports. They also align with Reel and Gill's (1998) research on female athletes' experiences of disordered eating and body dissatisfaction in cheerleading and gymnastics. The current study extends this scholarship by showing how athletes interpreted these pressures not as isolated incidents, but as an ongoing, normalized part of their daily experience. Although some athletes developed strategies to cope,

others described long-term struggles with body image that extended beyond their time in the sport.

***Subtheme: Balancing Life Outside the Gym***

Many athletes described how their commitment to cheerleading at ACE made it difficult to maintain balance in other areas of life. Long training hours, travel demands, and overlapping team responsibilities left little time for school, social relationships, hobbies, or rest. Several participants shared that they often missed birthdays, school events, and family vacations. While some accepted these sacrifices as part of being a high-level athlete, others expressed regret or frustration over the parts of their lives they felt they were missing.

This subtheme highlights how athletes interpreted time scarcity and social imbalance as inevitable, and in some cases, as a marker of seriousness or commitment. Some wore their overfull schedules as a badge of honor, believing that if they were not constantly busy, they were not doing enough. Others admitted that the imbalance left them feeling isolated, academically overwhelmed, or emotionally depleted. Despite these challenges, few felt they had the agency to step back or restructure their routines without risking their place on the team.

From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, athletes constructed their understanding of balance, or the lack thereof, through the cues and norms of their environment. When peers were also overextended, and when coaches framed time off as optional or discouraged, the idea of setting boundaries felt unrealistic. Athletes interpreted their limited free time as necessary for success, not as a potential threat to their well-being. In many ways, imbalance became part of what it meant to be committed.

According to the thriving framework, access to rest, autonomy, and opportunities for holistic development are critical for well-being. Brown et al. (2018) argue that thriving requires

not just achievement, but also sustainability. At ACE, however, the structure of the gym and the expectations placed on athletes made balance difficult to achieve. Even during scheduled breaks, athletes often described being in the gym for private lessons, conditioning, or preparation for the next season. As a result, recovery was limited and life outside of cheerleading often became secondary.

These findings are consistent with work by Wiersma (2000), who noted that high levels of time commitment in youth sport can interfere with social development, academic engagement, and mental health. The current study deepens this conversation by showing how athletes themselves interpreted this imbalance. Many viewed it as part of the cost of high-level sport and only questioned it in hindsight. Their reflections suggest a need to reconsider what it means to be “dedicated,” particularly in a developmental context where identity formation, relationships, and rest are equally vital to thriving.

### ***Summary of Theme Three: Athlete Demands***

The demands placed on athletes at ACE were not limited to physical training. Participants described ongoing strain across physical, emotional, and social domains, often interpreting these challenges as unavoidable and necessary. Through the lens of symbolic interactionism, these interpretations were shaped by ongoing interactions with coaches, teammates, and gym culture. Thriving was often defined narrowly, tied to endurance, output, and external validation.

The findings challenge the idea that high-level youth sport inherently supports development. Within the thriving framework, the conditions at ACE often fell short of what is needed to foster long-term well-being. Although some athletes adapted and found meaning in the experience, others left the sport questioning their identity, self-worth, and priorities. These

reflections suggest that without structural and cultural shifts, the demands of elite cheerleading may hinder rather than support athlete thriving.

#### **Theme Four: Team Dynamics and Peer Relationships**

Team relationships at ACE played a central role in shaping athletes' motivation, emotional well-being, and overall experience in the gym. While some participants recalled deep connections, shared accountability, and team-wide support, others described fractured relationships, cliques, and peer conflict. These dynamics were not simply byproducts of adolescence. Rather, they were influenced by structural decisions, communication practices, and cultural norms that shaped how athletes made meaning of their roles within the team. The following subthemes explore both the positive and problematic aspects of these dynamics: supportive relationships, cliques and exclusion, mixed-age challenges, teammate conflict, and internal competitiveness.

##### ***Subtheme: Supportive Relationships***

Many participants emphasized the importance of mutual support and camaraderie among teammates. These relationships often became stronger in response to shared challenges, such as last-minute changes, injuries, or competition pressure. Athletes described rallying around one another when needed, stepping into roles without complaint, and offering emotional and physical encouragement on and off the floor. This support took many forms, from "mat talk" during routines to pre-stunt hand gestures and casual check-ins before competitions.

Athletes often viewed this peer support as critical to success. They described environments where teammates coached one another, celebrated small wins, and maintained strong communication during routines. These behaviors were not simply team rituals, but expressions of care and accountability that helped athletes feel grounded in moments of stress.

Through the lens of symbolic interactionism, these interactions reflect how athletes co-constructed meaning and community. The repeated use of verbal and nonverbal cues became shared symbols of unity. These gestures affirmed the values of the group and reinforced belonging. Importantly, these forms of support helped buffer athletes from the external pressures of competition and performance, allowing them to feel more emotionally safe within the team context.

From a thriving perspective, supportive peer environments play a critical role in helping youth athletes manage stress, build resilience, and experience fulfillment. Brown et al. (2017) emphasize that social support is a key element of athlete thriving, particularly in environments where external demands are high. The presence of peer encouragement and emotional connection at ACE reflects this potential, even if it was not consistent across all teams or athletes.

***Subtheme: Cliques and Exclusion***

Although some teams exhibited strong cohesion, others were marked by social fragmentation and exclusion. Several participants described the presence of cliques within their teams, often based on age, popularity, or alignment with coaches. These cliques shaped athletes' daily experiences, affecting everything from communication during practice to how supported they felt emotionally. Some athletes described feeling sidelined or unseen during shared rituals such as pre-practice handshakes, noting that limited social ties led to isolation.

These dynamics were further complicated by perceived favoritism or social hierarchies that mirrored coaches' preferences. When athletes felt pitted against one another or treated unequally, relationships became tense, and trust eroded. Friendships within the gym were often described as "fragile," especially when interpersonal conflict was amplified by coach input or team-level competitiveness.

From the standpoint of symbolic interactionism, cliques and social fragmentation reflected a failure to create inclusive meanings around team identity. Rather than reinforcing belonging through shared rituals and roles, athletes were often left to interpret their social position based on exclusionary cues. These meanings were constructed through subtle acts, such as who got talked to first, who was paired up in stunts, or who was publicly recognized.

The literature reflects the damaging effects of peer exclusion in sport. Smith and McDonough (2008) found that team cohesion is undermined when peer relationships become competitive or exclusionary. Likewise, Fraser-Thomas and Côté (2009) highlight the protective role of inclusive social climates in promoting youth development. In this study, the lack of consistent inclusion limited athletes' access to social support and undercut the potential for thriving.

***Subtheme: Mixed-Age Team Challenges***

Age differences introduced another layer of complexity to team dynamics. Some athletes described challenges in communication, patience, and skill level when working with much younger or older teammates. These mismatches occasionally led to frustration, especially when older athletes felt that younger ones were slowing down progress or lacked maturity. Conversely, some younger athletes became more withdrawn in the presence of older teammates, adapting their behavior in response to perceived judgment or expectations.

Despite these challenges, mixed-age teams also created space for mentorship and leadership development. Coaches shared that older athletes eventually began to model positive behavior and support their younger peers. In some cases, these relationships softened initial tensions and helped bridge generational gaps within the team.

These experiences illustrate how symbolic meaning is shaped by age-related roles. Athletes were often assigned social meaning based on their age, with older athletes perceived as leaders or role models, even if they were still developing those capacities themselves. The tension between expectation and readiness sometimes created discomfort but also opened opportunities for growth when navigated effectively.

Within the thriving framework, age diversity can enhance development when paired with intentional support and cultural alignment. However, as Petitpas et al. (2005) suggest, without structured mentoring and guidance, age gaps can lead to disengagement or role confusion. At ACE, outcomes depended largely on team culture and coach mediation. When handled well, mixed-age dynamics became a strength. When left unaddressed, they introduced barriers to connection and cohesion.

***Subtheme: Teammate Blame and Conflict***

In high-pressure settings, athletes frequently described a shift in team tone, where frustration and blame emerged when routines did not go as planned. Errors were sometimes met with silence, eye rolls, or outright confrontation. One athlete recalled that after a failed routine, the team environment became emotionally volatile, with teammates “going at each other” rather than focusing on collective growth.

This blame culture was often reinforced by how coaches framed performance feedback. When individuals were singled out or corrections were public, athletes learned that mistakes had social consequences. In turn, teammates mirrored these behaviors, creating a dynamic where accountability became punishment rather than support.

Symbolic interactionism helps explain how athletes learned to interpret error through the reactions of others. A fall in a stunt was not simply a technical failure; it became a socially

charged moment that affected peer relationships. Over time, these interactions shaped how athletes viewed vulnerability and communication. Many became less likely to ask for help or admit fault, fearing social backlash.

These findings resonate with Shields et al. (2016), who warn that in highly evaluative environments, peer conflict can escalate when not buffered by strong culture or communication norms. Within the thriving framework, psychological safety is essential for athlete well-being. When conflict becomes personalized or unresolved, it undermines confidence, trust, and the ability to grow from setbacks.

***Subtheme: Internal Competitiveness***

While competition is a natural feature of sport, internal competitiveness at ACE often created unintended harm. Athletes described situations where they were directly compared to teammates in skill evaluations or placement decisions. Coaches sometimes positioned athletes against one another to “earn” spots in the routine, which elevated pressure and introduced interpersonal tension. In some cases, this competitive mindset extended beyond individuals and affected entire teams within the gym, fostering a sense of rivalry rather than collaboration.

Athletes interpreted this culture in mixed ways. Some believed it motivated them to improve, but many shared that it disrupted team unity and created an atmosphere where personal success was celebrated at the expense of others. Even record-breaking performances could be met with resentment if they eclipsed another team’s achievement. These dynamics reflected a broader gym culture where status, recognition, and hierarchy were tied closely to results.

This subtheme illustrates how symbolic meanings around competition were shaped by the gym’s structure and leadership. Athletes learned that being successful required outperforming

their peers, not just other teams. This created a zero-sum mindset that weakened empathy and team-wide morale.

From a thriving perspective, the issue lies not in competition itself, but in the way it is framed and internalized. Curran and Hill (2019) argue that environments focused on comparative achievement are more likely to foster maladaptive perfectionism and social disconnection. At ACE, internal competition often undermined collective identity and contributed to individual stress, even in moments of apparent success.

#### ***Summary of Theme Four: Team Dynamics and Peer Relationships***

Relationships among teammates played a powerful role in shaping athletes' experiences at ACE. Supportive dynamics helped athletes manage stress, build confidence, and feel a sense of belonging. At the same time, the presence of cliques, age-based tension, blame, and internal competitiveness created fractures that limited trust and cohesion. These dynamics were not incidental but shaped by the structure and values of the gym. Through their interactions, athletes constructed meanings around loyalty, worth, and leadership that reflected the culture in which they trained.

Within the thriving framework, these findings highlight both the promise and the risk of peer relationships in youth sport. When nurtured intentionally, team dynamics can protect athletes from external stressors and support healthy development. When mismanaged or ignored, they can become sources of anxiety, exclusion, and burnout. Ultimately, the social environment at ACE was one of the most powerful forces shaping how athletes made meaning of their sport experience and whether they believed thriving was possible.

## **Theme Five: Parental and Family Influences**

While much of the athlete experience at ACE was shaped by coaches, peers, and the structure of training, parental involvement played a critical and multifaceted role in athlete well-being and motivation. Parents were often seen as both facilitators of opportunity and, in some cases, contributors to stress, exhaustion, and inequity. The ways athletes interpreted their parents' behaviors were deeply influenced by the meanings attached to success, sacrifice, and support in the competitive cheerleading world. This theme explores how parental behavior influenced athlete thriving through three subthemes: (1) Overinvolvement and Athlete Burnout, (2) Financial Strain and Return-on-Investment Pressure, and (3) Parental Power and Unequal Treatment.

### ***Subtheme: Overinvolvement and Athlete Burnout***

Many athletes and coaches described a pattern of excessive parental involvement that contributed directly to athlete burnout. Parents often booked extra privates, encouraged multiple team memberships, and signed their children up for classes or clinics nearly every day of the week. While these efforts were frequently motivated by good intentions or a desire to help their child "get ahead," the outcome was often physical exhaustion and emotional disengagement.

Athletes shared that they rarely had time to rest and often showed up to practice already depleted. Some described feeling like "zombies," while coaches recounted observing clear declines in skill execution and attentiveness, particularly when athletes were overscheduled. Even when athletes wanted a break, they felt pressure to comply with the training expectations established by their parents. In some cases, this pressure became so overwhelming that athletes chose to walk away from the sport entirely, describing burnout or resentment toward cheerleading as the result of years of unrelenting demands.

Symbolic interactionism provides insight into how athletes made sense of these experiences. Parents were often seen as reflections of the athlete's worth, with their involvement interpreted as a sign of care and pride. At the same time, this high involvement came with implicit expectations to perform and improve. Athletes learned that parental attention was often tied to achievement, reinforcing the idea that constant effort was necessary not just for competitive success but for continued validation at home.

The thriving framework emphasizes the importance of balancing challenge with support, and autonomy with structure. Brown et al. (2017) highlight that when adult involvement overrides athlete agency or rest, it undermines psychological safety and limits the potential for growth. In this study, overinvolved parenting disrupted the conditions needed for sustainable motivation and long-term well-being. Although the parents may have intended to support, the athletes often experienced this dynamic as suffocating, particularly when it left no room to recover or set personal limits.

These findings echo prior research by Harwood and Knight (2015), who caution that excessive parental control in youth sport can lead to stress, identity foreclosure, and early dropout. In the context of ACE, overinvolvement not only drained athletes physically, but also sent clear messages about what it meant to be committed. As a result, athletes often internalized a version of success defined by constant effort, even when it came at a personal cost.

***Subtheme: Financial Strain and Return-on-Investment Pressure***

In addition to time and emotional investment, families devoted substantial financial resources to cheerleading. Athletes described their awareness of the high costs associated with uniforms, travel, competition fees, and extra training. For many, this financial burden created a sense of pressure to justify their parents' sacrifices. Even when these expectations were not stated

outright, athletes internalized a sense of obligation to perform well and make the investment “worth it.”

One athlete explained how the financial stress on her parents directly affected their relationship. The cumulative weight of airfare, hotels, and lost wages contributed to tension and emotional volatility at home, especially during travel weekends. Coaches also noted that some parents viewed their financial contributions as entitling them to a certain level of athlete performance or preferential treatment. These expectations added another layer of stress for athletes, who felt they needed to consistently prove their value.

These dynamics are important through both theoretical lenses. Symbolic interactionism helps explain how athletes interpreted financial investment as a signal of their own value and responsibility. The unspoken message was clear: if someone is spending thousands of dollars for you to participate, then you had better deliver results. These interpretations shaped how athletes evaluated their own effort, outcomes, and relationships, both within the gym and at home.

Within the thriving framework, financial pressure undermines key components of healthy development, including autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and emotional safety. When athletes feel beholden to others’ sacrifices, they are less likely to feel free to make decisions in their own best interest. Brown et al. (2017) note that thriving requires not just access to opportunity, but also a sense of agency within it. At ACE, financial strain and return-on-investment expectations restricted that agency, creating a performance-focused environment even outside the gym.

These findings reinforce research by O'Rourke et al. (2014), who found that athletes who perceive high parental investment often feel increased pressure and reduced enjoyment. In this study, athletes were not oblivious to what was being spent on their behalf. On the contrary, many

were acutely aware and tried to shoulder the emotional cost in ways that impacted their well-being and long-term commitment to the sport.

***Subtheme: Parental Power and Unequal Treatment***

Beyond involvement and investment, some parents held significant influence over gym decision-making and athlete treatment. Participants described situations where athletes whose parents had close relationships with coaches or owners received preferential treatment. These athletes were less likely to face consequences for negative behavior and were more likely to receive favorable team placements or avoid accountability for performance issues.

This perceived inequality created frustration and disillusionment among other athletes. Some shared that they felt invisible or unfairly punished for behaviors that were overlooked in others. Coaches acknowledged that gym leadership often prioritized parent satisfaction out of fear of losing business, resulting in decisions that privileged the loudest or most well-connected families.

Through the lens of symbolic interactionism, these dynamics shaped athletes' interpretations of fairness and value. When they saw rules inconsistently applied, they began to question their place in the hierarchy and what, if anything, their effort could guarantee. Inconsistent feedback and discipline sent confusing messages about what was truly expected and who was really in control.

From a thriving perspective, equity and predictability are essential components of psychological safety and motivation. Brown et al. (2018) emphasize that athletes thrive in environments where expectations are consistent and fairness is upheld. At ACE, however, the gym's business model and parent relationships often compromised these values. When parents

were perceived as “calling the shots,” athletes felt disempowered and skeptical about whether their hard work mattered.

These findings are consistent with Knight et al. (2010), who note that parent–coach dynamics can significantly shape youth sport environments, particularly when boundaries are blurred. While some parental contributions created community and enthusiasm, others disrupted athlete trust and created a culture of uneven access and inconsistent standards.

### ***Summary of Theme Five: Parental and Family Influences***

The role of parents at ACE extended far beyond logistical support. While many families provided meaningful encouragement and resources, others contributed to patterns of burnout, pressure, and inequity. Athletes made sense of these experiences through daily interactions, interpreting parental behavior as both a signal of love and a source of stress. Through symbolic interactionism, we see how meaning was shaped in relation to power, validation, and responsibility. Within the thriving framework, the findings highlight how well-being is affected not just by what parents do, but by how athletes experience and internalize those actions.

Ultimately, athlete thriving requires environments where adult involvement empowers rather than overwhelms. The findings from this theme suggest that for many athletes, parental behaviors, however well-intentioned, sometimes constrained autonomy, increased emotional burden, and contributed to long-term disengagement. Creating healthier conditions for youth athletes will require not only changes in coaching and gym leadership, but also intentional reflection and boundary-setting among families.

### **Theme Six: Organizational Culture and Leadership**

Athletes and staff at ACE offered a nuanced view of organizational culture that was shaped by inconsistent leadership, professional boundary issues, and the intense demands of the

competitive cheer industry. While the gym found considerable success in competition, participants revealed deeper concerns about how that success was sustained. Many described a lack of structure, unclear accountability, and burnout among staff. Still, there were also signs of intentional effort to reform the culture, with coaches and administrators expressing growing awareness of the need for change. The following subthemes explore these tensions in depth.

***Subtheme: Lack of Structure and Accountability***

A common thread across participant accounts was the absence of formal systems and reliable accountability within the gym. Athletes and coaches alike pointed to a lack of consistency in leadership follow-through, unclear roles, and a staff culture where personal friendships often interfered with professionalism. Coaches described a “buddy-buddy” dynamic that made it difficult to enforce rules or expectations. In many cases, when responsibilities were ignored or mistakes were made, there were no consequences.

One coach explained the issue plainly: “It’s not run like a business. There’s no consequences” (Jamie, Coach). Others spoke to the emotional fatigue that came from repeatedly engaging in improvement efforts that never materialized. This cycle of broken promises fostered resentment, with coaches reporting that initial buy-in would quickly erode when proposed changes were not implemented. These frustrations were echoed during participant observation, where staff often appeared unsure of next steps or operated on a reactive basis in the absence of leadership direction.

Symbolic interactionism helps explain how these patterns shaped meaning for both athletes and coaches. When concerns were dismissed or inconsistently addressed, participants internalized the message that their voices carried little weight and that certain behaviors would

be tolerated depending on who was involved. Over time, this eroded trust in the system and undermined the belief that change was possible.

From a thriving perspective, consistency and structure are essential to athlete development. Brown et al. (2017) emphasize that thriving is supported by clear expectations and psychological safety. At ACE, the lack of organizational alignment disrupted this foundation, leaving athletes and staff vulnerable to confusion, frustration, and disengagement.

***Subtheme: Pressures of Market Competition and Industry Expectations***

Even when gym leadership wanted to prioritize athlete well-being, many coaches described feeling overwhelmed by the demands of the broader cheer industry. The need to maintain status and visibility in a market dominated by large programs and Varsity-sanctioned events left little room to slow down or reflect. One staff member summarized the feeling as “suffocating,” noting that they were always “chasing” to keep up with what other gyms were doing.

These pressures did not exist in the abstract. Participants reported that season calendars were extended to accommodate more competitions, that financial stress was felt by families, and that coaches were stretched beyond their capacity. Athletes, in turn, felt pressure to level up each year, even when they were not emotionally or physically ready. Coaches acknowledged that the business demands of cheer often forced decisions that conflicted with athlete-centered values. As one participant put it, “If you don’t go, you’re going to lose customers to the gym down the road” (Chris, Administrator).

Symbolically, this environment reinforced the idea that external validation and high performance were more important than athlete sustainability. Even moments of success were

clouded by the fear of falling behind. This created a treadmill effect in which neither athletes nor staff could pause or celebrate without worrying about what came next.

Within the thriving framework, this cycle is especially problematic. Brown et al. (2017) and Curran and Hill (2019) both highlight how perfectionistic environments contribute to burnout, especially when development is measured only by performance metrics. The findings here suggest that the industry's structure constrained ACE's ability to fully align with its own mission, despite the best intentions of some leaders.

***Subtheme: Attempts at Culture Change and Athlete Empowerment***

Despite these structural and systemic challenges, several participants pointed to meaningful efforts to improve the gym culture. Coaches shared how they were reevaluating their leadership practices, working to validate athlete experiences, and shifting toward a more relational style of accountability. One coach described a change in their communication approach, saying, "The minute you start yelling, they're gone" (Rowan, Coach). Instead, they focused on building trust, listening, and fostering open dialogue.

Participants emphasized the importance of psychological safety, transparency, and knowledge sharing. They believed that athletes needed to understand not just what was expected of them, but why. This pedagogical approach reflected a move toward empowerment rather than compliance. Coaches also spoke candidly about their own struggles with stress, often questioning their sustainability in the field and using those reflections to guide more compassionate approaches with athletes.

One notable example of this cultural shift was the implementation of the "Hot Topics" program, a new initiative aimed at addressing issues such as mental health, body image, emotional regulation, and safety preparedness. Coaches committed to setting aside practice time

each month, regardless of competition schedules, to engage athletes in conversations about well-being. This structural change marked a significant departure from the gym's traditional focus and demonstrated a clear prioritization of athlete development over competitive urgency.

These efforts illustrate the power of symbolic interactions in reshaping culture. When coaches modeled vulnerability, created space for dialogue, and followed through on reforms, they sent a different message; one that centered care, reflection, and mutual growth.

From a thriving lens, these micro-level efforts show promise. While the larger organizational system may not have fully transformed, these intentional actions by staff created pockets of safety and support where athletes could begin to reframe their own experiences. As Gould et al. (2002) suggest, meaningful coach-athlete interactions can buffer against environmental stressors and create openings for personal development even in high-pressure contexts.

### ***Summary of Theme Six: Organizational Culture and Leadership***

The culture at ACE was shaped by instability at the leadership level, external market pressures, and emerging efforts to re-center athlete well-being. While participants expressed deep frustration with the lack of structure and the demands of the cheer industry, they also described a growing desire to shift the culture from one of survival to one of support. Through symbolic interactionism, we can see how daily interactions conveyed powerful meanings about care, value, and accountability. And through the thriving framework, it becomes clear that true athlete development requires environments that balance ambition with consistency, and performance with empathy.

The path forward for ACE, and other programs, will depend not just on what leaders hope to change, but on whether those hopes are supported by sustained, intentional action. Initiatives

like Hot Topics, paired with reflective leadership practices, suggest that transformation is possible when cultural values align with organizational structure.

### **Theme Seven: Reflections and Meaning-Making**

As athletes reflected on their time in competitive cheerleading, many shared layered and complex insights. Their stories revealed not just what they experienced, but how those experiences shaped their identity, values, and long-term perspective on sport. Some participants expressed deep pride and gratitude for the lessons and relationships forged through cheerleading. Others, especially those who had since left the sport, conveyed disappointment, emotional fatigue, and uncertainty about how to reconcile the good with the bad. These reflections offered a unique window into the meaning-making process that occurs after the fact, once the practices are over, the uniforms are retired, and athletes are left to evaluate what it all meant. Two subthemes emerged in this domain: (1) personal takeaways from the sport and (2) decisions about staying or leaving.

#### ***Subtheme: Personal Takeaways from the Sport***

Despite the challenges discussed throughout the study, many athletes emphasized the positive, enduring lessons they carried forward from their time in cheerleading. These included values such as perseverance, discipline, and commitment. Several participants described how the process of setting and achieving goals, such as learning new skills or working through team setbacks, helped them build confidence and a sense of resilience. One athlete reflected on the incremental nature of skill development, explaining how success required both patience and hard work. Others shared that cheer taught them how to navigate setbacks and manage pressure, lessons they anticipated applying in future academic, professional, or personal domains.

Many also highlighted the relational aspects of cheerleading as especially meaningful. Some formed deep friendships that extended beyond the gym, with one athlete sharing that they met their future maid of honor through the sport. Others found value in the shared experiences of travel, family time, and team bonding. Even participants who felt socially isolated within their team still reflected positively on family memories tied to competitions, such as dinners with parents or trips to Disney with relatives.

These reflections illustrate how athletes constructed meaning through their relationships, achievements, and personal growth, even when those moments were interspersed with difficulty. Symbolic interactionism provides a helpful framework here, as the athletes' interpretations of their experiences were shaped not just by what happened, but by how they made sense of those experiences in hindsight. For many, cheerleading symbolized hard work, shared memories, and formative growth, even if the environment was at times overwhelming or dysfunctional.

From a thriving perspective, these personal takeaways represent important indicators of well-being. Brown et al. (2017) emphasize that thriving is not defined solely by comfort or ease, but by a sense of purpose, self-awareness, and connectedness. The positive reflections offered by athletes, particularly those related to relationships and skill mastery, reflect moments when conditions for thriving were present, even if they were not always sustained.

***Subtheme: Decisions About Staying or Leaving***

While some participants spoke about cheerleading in terms of personal growth and satisfaction, others described a more complicated or ambivalent relationship with the sport. For many, their decision to stay in or leave competitive cheerleading was shaped by an evolving sense of identity, shifting priorities, or the accumulation of stress and fatigue. Athletes who had recently stepped away from cheer shared that the decision was not always planned or

straightforward. Rather, it emerged gradually, as the emotional weight of the sport began to outweigh the benefits.

Performance anxiety, social challenges, and a loss of intrinsic motivation were frequently cited as contributing factors. Athletes who once looked forward to competitions began to dread them. Some noted that the pressure to perform perfectly took away the joy they had once felt on the mat. Others pointed to exclusionary team dynamics or the emotional toll of constant comparison as reasons they began to question their involvement. Even when athletes stayed, some admitted that their passion had diminished and that they were continuing out of obligation rather than excitement.

One of the most poignant narratives came from an athlete who described how their view of cheerleading had shifted dramatically over time. What had once felt like a defining and beloved part of their identity eventually became a source of unresolved anger and disappointment. They spoke candidly about the financial and emotional sacrifices their family had made and questioned whether they would encourage their own children to pursue the sport.

Symbolic interactionism again offers a powerful lens for understanding these reflections. As athletes stepped back from the sport, they reinterpreted past events through a new frame, one less influenced by in-the-moment expectations and more grounded in reflection and emotional honesty. Their revised meanings often centered around disillusionment, lost time, and unmet emotional needs.

From a thriving standpoint, these decisions reveal what happens when the conditions for development are eroded over time. While some athletes initially thrived within the sport, the cumulative impact of high pressure, inconsistent support, and social isolation eventually undermined their motivation and well-being. Brown et al. (2017) suggest that thriving is not

static; it must be supported continually through care, autonomy, and a sense of purpose. When these elements were compromised, athletes began to disengage, not only from the sport but from the self-concepts they had built within it.

### ***Summary of Theme Seven: Reflections and Meaning-Making***

Athletes' reflections revealed the lasting emotional and psychological impact of their cheerleading experiences. Whether they left the sport or remained, they engaged in a deep process of sense-making, reconciling what they gained with what they lost. Their stories speak to the complex realities of growing up in a high-pressure sport environment. Moments of achievement and joy existed alongside exhaustion, disappointment, and identity confusion.

Through symbolic interactionism, we see how athletes constructed and reconstructed the meanings of their experiences over time, often reframing their stories as their perspective evolved. Through the thriving framework, we see how these reflections offer insight into what helped athletes flourish and what ultimately pushed them away. Together, these perspectives underscore the importance of creating environments where athletes can thrive not only in performance, but in identity, relationships, and long-term well-being.

### **Implications**

The existing literature on youth athlete well-being includes important contributions across areas such as motivation, overtraining, body image, burnout, and athlete development. More recently, frameworks like thriving have provided a deeper lens to evaluate how athletes function and grow within sport environments. This study highlights the complex ways in which elite competitive cheerleaders interpret and navigate the conditions around them. Key findings include the impact of coaching behaviors, the culture of perfectionism and conditional support, the influence of family involvement and leadership inconsistency, and the structural burdens

embedded in the cheerleading industry. While these environmental forces shaped many aspects of athletes' experiences, what often mattered most was how athletes interpreted them. Their personal meaning-making processes influenced motivation, self-worth, and decisions about continued participation. These interpretations held power over both how athletes engaged with the sport and how they saw themselves within it.

In relation to the thriving framework, this study supports and extends the idea that thriving is not guaranteed by performance success or skill development alone. Many athletes in this study met external definitions of excellence, but still described exhaustion, confusion, and emotional fatigue. Thriving depended on factors like autonomy, consistency, relational safety, and time for recovery. These conditions were present for some athletes in fleeting ways but rarely sustained. The findings underscore that thriving is not a fixed outcome but a dynamic state that can be disrupted by instability in coaching, leadership, or team culture. They also suggest that the thriving framework must account for how systemic and cultural forces influence whether athletes can access the support they need. Thriving in elite youth sport requires more than internal resilience; it requires external care and structural alignment.

Practically, this study calls for clearer leadership structures, more intentional coaching education, and a rethinking of training schedules to support athlete well-being. Coaches and gym owners should establish consistent policies, model respectful communication, and allow for meaningful recovery throughout the year. Parents must be aware of how involvement can cross into control, and how their expectations influence athlete stress and identity. At the industry level, organizations should evaluate how the competitive calendar, team placements, and financial models contribute to burnout and pressure. Reform cannot rely solely on individuals

making better choices. It must include structural safeguards that prioritize athlete flourishing over external results.

This research contributes to a growing movement that challenges traditional definitions of success in youth sport. It calls for an approach that values development, safety, autonomy, and connection as much as performance. In doing so, it offers a vision for what youth sport could look like when thriving becomes the goal, not just the outcome.

## Chapter Six: Conclusion

### Overview

This study set out to explore how athletes in elite competitive cheerleading experience and interpret well-being, thriving, and personal development within a high-performance gym environment. Guided by the thriving framework, the research examined the interpersonal, intrapersonal, and organizational factors that shape athlete experiences in a youth sport culture marked by perfectionism, conditional support, and industry pressure. Using qualitative methods and a case study design, I conducted interviews with athletes, coaches, and parents, and supplemented those accounts with participant observation data collected throughout a full season of training and competition.

The research was driven by two central questions: (1) How do competitive cheerleaders interpret and experience well-being and thriving at ACE? and (2) How does context play a role in shaping athletes' interpretations and experiences of well-being and thriving at ACE? Through thematic analysis, seven core themes emerged: coaching practices and power dynamics, pressure to win and perfectionism, athlete demands, team dynamics and peer relationships, parental and family influences, organizational culture and leadership, and reflections and meaning-making. Together, these themes painted a picture of an environment in which thriving was possible, though it was often conditional upon the presence of autonomy, psychological safety, and consistent support.

This study contributes to existing literature by offering a detailed, athlete-centered account of how youth athletes make sense of their sport experiences in a context that prioritizes competitive success. It extends the thriving framework by showing how external pressures and

internal factors interact to either support or inhibit holistic development in high-pressure youth sport settings.

### **Reflections on the Research Process**

Conducting this research deepened my understanding of what it truly means to engage in qualitative inquiry. While I entered the study with a decent understanding of qualitative methods, the process challenged me to move beyond technical competence and into a space of ongoing reflexivity, listening, and ethical responsiveness. Interviewing young athletes, some of whom were still actively navigating the very dynamics they described, required not only methodological rigor but also relational care. I had to constantly check in with myself, monitor power dynamics, and remain aware of the emotional impact the study might have on participants and on me.

One of the biggest challenges was navigating my own dual role as both researcher and insider. My background in cheerleading gave me cultural fluency and access, but it also required me to critically examine my assumptions. I found myself at times defending the sport internally, particularly when participants shared painful or disillusioning experiences. Holding space for both celebration and critique was difficult, but it helped me remain open to the full complexity of athletes' narratives and to avoid the trap of romanticizing or pathologizing their experiences.

Another challenge was managing the emotional labor of the work. Listening to stories of burnout, mistreatment, or confusion from adolescents who wanted so badly to succeed was often heavy. I kept detailed reflexive memos and sought support from peers and mentors to process these emotions constructively. These practices helped me stay grounded and maintain clarity in the analytical process.

## **Personal and Professional Growth**

This study changed my perspective in many ways. First of all, the athletes I interviewed were insightful, honest, and deeply thoughtful in ways I did not expect. Many of them spoke with a level of clarity and complexity that challenged assumptions I had about youth development. They taught me that thriving is not a static state to be achieved, but an ongoing negotiation between identity, context, and care.

On a personal level, though, this project sharpened my ability to listen deeply and hold space for discomfort. I became more comfortable sitting with ambiguity and more aware of the ethical responsibilities I carry as a researcher, mentor, and leader in youth sport. Professionally, this work has shaped how I think about coaching, athlete development, and sport systems. I now view structural and cultural context as central, not peripheral, to the athlete experience. I am more committed than ever to advocating for environments that support the full humanity of athletes, not just their performance potential.

## **Future Research**

While this study contributes to growing scholarship on athlete well-being and thriving, it also opens several new areas for continued investigation. One important direction involves examining the psychological toll of conditional support, inconsistent communication, and fear-based coaching practices. Participants frequently described environments in which emotional responses from coaches were unpredictable and athletes felt unsure about their standing on the team. Future research could explore how these interpersonal stressors impact athlete motivation, identity development, and willingness to advocate for themselves in high-pressure settings.

Another opportunity for future inquiry lies in the role of family dynamics, particularly around financial and emotional investment in elite youth sport. Several athletes described feeling

obligated to continue participating, not because of personal desire, but because of the significant sacrifices their families had made. Investigating how financial pressures, parental expectations, and cultural narratives around “return on investment” shape athlete decision-making could deepen our understanding of the long-term costs of privatized sport participation.

Additionally, this study suggests value in exploring the experiences of athletes who choose to leave the sport. Many participants who had stepped away from cheerleading reflected more critically and holistically on their time in the gym, often with clearer insight into the effects of burnout, identity loss, or relief. A longitudinal or narrative inquiry approach could illuminate how athletes’ meaning-making processes evolve during and after transitions out of sport. This line of research could also include a focus on athlete re-engagement, recovery, or reintegration into other activities post-departure.

Finally, future studies may benefit from evaluating the effectiveness of reform efforts within gym culture. Initiatives such as athlete-led discussions, peer mentorship programs, or trauma-informed coaching workshops were mentioned by participants, but little is known about how these programs are implemented or whether they achieve lasting impact. Future research should assess not only the presence of such efforts, but their depth, sustainability, and actual influence on athlete well-being and retention. These studies could help identify evidence-based practices for cultural change in youth sport environments.

### **Next Steps**

The findings from this study will continue to shape my work in sport and performance psychology, education, and leadership. As I transition into roles that include teaching, mentoring, and program development, I plan to embed athlete-centered, trauma-informed, and

developmentally appropriate approaches into all facets of my work. Whether leading a classroom or designing sport programming, I intend to center thriving as both a goal and a process.

I also aim to disseminate these findings beyond academic circles. I hope to share this work with coaches, parents, sport administrators, and athletes themselves through workshops, coaching education programs, and practitioner-focused writing. My aspiration is to help others see what I now see more clearly: that the conditions we create around athletes matter deeply, and that meaningful change is not only possible, but urgently needed.

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## APPENDIX

**Athlete Interview Protocol****Opening: Rapport + Consent (0–5 min)**

1. Full IRB briefing and permission to record.
2. “Can you tell me how you first got into competitive cheer?”
3. “Can you walk me through your progression to where you are now?” (Consider framing as: ‘Tell me your abbreviated story’.)

**Mechanics of Cheer (5–20 min)**

1. “Walk me through a typical training session.”
2. “Walk me through a typical week during the season.”
3. “What’s a competition week like? Physically? Mentally?”
4. “What’s your off-season like?”
5. “What does progress look or feel like for you? How do you know you’re improving?”
6. “What kind of goals do you set for yourself? Where do those goals usually come from— you, your coaches, or both?”

**Relationships & Culture (20–35 min)**

1. “Tell me about someone in the gym who’s had a big impact on you. What did they do or say that stuck with you?”
2. “How would you describe the vibe or culture of your gym and team?”
3. “Have there been times when you felt especially supported by coaches or teammates?”
4. “What about times when you felt on your own, even within the team?”
5. “What role do coaches, teammates, or parents play in shaping your good or bad days?”

**Goals, Growth, and Meaning (35–50 min)**

1. “How do you handle tough stretches during the season, when things aren’t going well? What do you do? How do you deal with your emotions during those times?”
2. “Do you feel like you get to make your own choices in cheer? Are there times when you don’t?”
3. “How are big decisions made on your team? Who usually has the final say? How do you feel about that?”
4. “Are there parts of cheer that feel meaningful to you, beyond just competing or winning?”
5. “What’s something you’ve learned about yourself through cheer?”
6. “Has cheer helped you in other areas of life like school, friendships, or family?”

#### **Closure & Thriving (50–60 min)**

1. “When you see athletes succeed in cheer, do you notice anything they tend to have in common?”
2. “If a younger athlete, parent, or college recruiter asked you what success looks like in cheer, what would you say? Do you apply that same idea to yourself?”

#### **Optional "Money Questions" if not organically addressed earlier:**

1. “Have you ever seen a focus on winning hurt athletes’ well-being?”
2. “Do you think Coach X’s behavior affects athlete health or well-being?”
3. “If you could change one thing about how cheerleading is structured or run, what would it be?”
4. “Who else do you think I should talk to? Maybe someone who’s seen a lot or has a unique perspective?”
5. “Is there anything we didn’t cover that feels important for me to hear?”