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ALL-STAR CHEER VS. THE ECONOMY

Despite the economic turmoil in America, all-star cheerleading proves it's here to stay.

BY JOANNA HAUGEN

When times get tough, people assess their spending habits, consider their financial priorities and cut extraneous expenses from their budgets. For those working in the all-star cheerleading industry—a “luxury” sport that has the potential to cost thousands of dollars a year—hard economic times can have a devastating effect on their businesses and livelihood.

Like the families that support all-star gyms financially, gym owners and directors have needed to be creative in retaining students and staying in the black when all signs point toward red. While it's difficult to find complete statistics on the all-star industry itself, Tegan Jenma Reeves, assistant executive director of the American Association of Cheerleading Coaches and Administrators (AACCA) and director of

education and communication for the United States All Star Federation (USASF), says USASF membership numbers have dropped significantly from 2008 to the end of 2009, which is speculated to be due to gym closures and mergers. Despite this decrease, Reeves says that the all-star community is still strong and will withstand the economic downturn.

“When parents’ budgets are slim, they evaluate what’s truly valuable,” Reeves says. “[For many parents], the experiences in leadership, social identity, confidence, work ethic and growth that all-star cheer delivers is just too valuable to cut. Such a return on investment is worth attention, so the programs delivering those experiences will stand strong through any storm.”

Overriding themes expressed by gym owners across the country show that many

programs are decreasing travel, trimming excess costs at their facilities, finding more fundraising solutions and continuing to offer well-rounded value for the dollar. “It’s important that we, as business managers and owners, continue to invest in the certifications and education that legitimize our operations,” says Reeves. “These aren’t consumer products—they’re the backbone of the sport. It’s been repeated through many industries; in a tight economy, those who build their foundations with bricks instead of straw will weather the storm.”

Though gyms are using similar cost-saving tactics, every situation is different. Read on for a sampling of how some gyms across the U.S. are handling the economic crisis, and what they’re planning for the years to come.

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CONTINUED CHEER EDUCATION

EVERYTHING YOU NEED

TO KNOW ABOUT

ADVANCING YOUR CHEER

CREDENTIALS.

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ALL LEVELS CAN PLAY

Eight strategies for making all-star athletes of any level feel valued and driven

BY JENNIFER RENÉE SMITH

Once the division-level system went mainstream in 2005, it didn’t take long for Level 5 and 6 teams to gain industry-wide recognition and respect and for cheerleading celebrities to emerge from the elite, invite-only United States All Star Federation’s (USASF) Cheerleading Worlds, which kicked off the following season. Given this steady exposure and the impressive skill set permitted, to an outsider, it may seem as though competing on a Large Senior Level 5 or an Open Coed Level 6 team is the be-all, end-all of all-star cheerleading. While this may be the case for some, it’s certainly not the reality for most athletes who work hard season after season to be the best they can be on their Levels 1, 2, 3 or 4 teams—teams that make up the bulk of any gym owner’s or event producer’s business. And it’s certainly not the message the industry is aiming to broadcast to the rest of the world, especially when the goal is to continue to attract new kids to give all-star cheerleading a try.

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KC CHEER FAMILY IS THE SECRET TO SUCCESS FOR THIS KANSAS-BASED PROGRAM

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BEATING A CHEER RUT WHAT YOU CAN DO TO RE-ENERGIZE YOUR COACHES

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OPEN HOUSE CHECK OUT ARIZONA HEAT ELITE'S COOL FACILITY

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THE RISE OF MAC'S

Mac's All-Star Cheer from Utah is making its journey to the top.

BY ERIN SKARDA

Among the tall, snowy mountains of Draper, UT, a cheerleading powerhouse is elevating its status as one of the top programs not only in the state, but also in the Western region. Mac's All-Star Cheer has earned a reputation locally as being tough competitors on the mat, but friendly off it. Nationally, the gym has created buzz through its success at national competitions and at The Cheerleading Worlds, where its Small Senior All-Girl Level 5 team has been getting better and better each of the three years they've attended.

“Each year, we have a goal in mind, and we've been fortunate enough to reach it each year,” says owner Mack Hirshberg, half of the husband and wife duo that heads Mac's Cheer. “Our first year, [the athletes] were like deer in headlights. But ever since then, they've been much more confident.”

Overall, competitive cheerleading in Utah remains on the local or regional



Janet and Mack Hirshberg with their daughter, Jessica, 16, and son, Jackson, 8. COURTESY OF MAC'S ALL-STAR CHEER

level. “We're the only gym in Utah that sees itself as a national competitor,” says Janet Hirshberg. “We're trying to make a name for ourselves beyond the local level.”

There's no doubt they've accomplished that. Since the gym's inception in 2000, Mac's Cheer has dominated regional and local competitions year after year. Each season, they travel to a national event in California, where at least one of their

teams has won a national title for the past six years. In addition, their Small Senior All-Girl team surpassed many other programs to make it to finals at the 2009 Cheerleading Worlds. This season, their goal is to break into the top 10—a lofty aspiration, but one that the Hirshbergs feel is well within their reach. “We're one of those programs

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THE RISE OF MAC'S

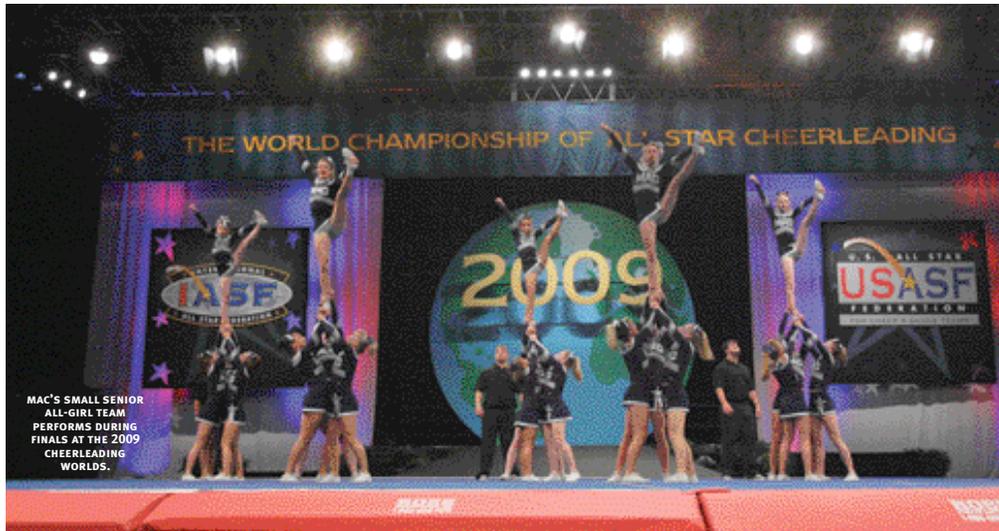
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that gets better each year," says Mack. "Most of our kids have grown up with us and learned their tumbling and cheer skills in our gym, which is why we're becoming more popular on the national circuit. We're anticipating a great season this year."

An additional popularity boost comes from the program's outreach to other gyms in their area and across the country. While Mack claims, "[As a program], I don't think we're that well known," his involvement in the all-star industry tells another story. For years, he's been Utah's state representative for the United States All Star Federation (USASF), and just recently, he was named to one of the three coaches' seats on the board of directors—a position he takes very seriously. "I'm very passionate about this industry," Mack says. "I want to share how I became interested in the USASF with other gym owners and ask them to get involved, as well."

Beyond all this, Mac's Cheer is, first and foremost, a family business. Mack and Janet's three children—Julian, 19, Jessica, 16, and Jackson, 8—have all represented the program as cheerleaders, role models and employees. "We spend all our time together, which makes it feel less like work and more like an activity," Janet says. "This feeling of family extends to all our cheerleaders. We care about each and every participant in our gym as if they were our family."

While it's a long climb to the top of any mountain, it's clear that Mac's Cheer is already on its journey to the peak. Read on for more about how this program got started and where it's headed from here.



MAC'S SMALL SENIOR ALL-GIRL TEAM PERFORMS DURING FINALS AT THE 2009 CHEERLEADING WORLDS.

ACTION MOMENTS PHOTOGRAPHY

TRUE CHEER LOVE

As the saying goes, the best place to start is at the beginning. For Mack and Janet, the beginning of their relationship started where many hopes and dreams are either realized or broken—the competition mat at Universal Cheerleaders Association (UCA) College Nationals. "The first time we met was when I was a competitor at UCA [with the University of Utah], and Mack was a spotter," says Janet. "He'd make fun of me while I was in the middle of my performance." The following summer, the pair found themselves working together at UCA cheer camps in California.

"Cheerleading has always been a huge part of our lives," says Janet, even though their individual paths through the sport were unique. Janet started cheering in high school. After graduating from the University of Utah and working for

UCA, she found herself selling uniforms for Varsity and coaching high school teams, her college alma mater and the Utah Jazz stunt team. "Cheer has been my career choice from the beginning," she says. "And I think it's great that I get to make my life's work something that impacts so many young people's lives for the better."

Mack, on the other hand, "was born to be a cheerleader," he says. "In the late '40s, my father attended veterinary school at the University of Georgia, where he and a group of his diving buddies put together [the school's] first tumbling cheer team. I inherited his love of sports and his tumbling abilities." After playing football in high school, Mack attended the University of South Carolina, where he joined his first cheer team. "I had no formal training other than what my dad had taught me on our

he soon realized there was a market for an all-star team in the area, and he needed Janet on board to get it started. "After seeing their choreography and uniforms, I decided I needed to step in and help," Janet says. "The business took off, and I left [my job] as a high school cheer coach so I could devote more time to our all-star program." In 2000, when the pair moved into their own facility, their business doubled in size from two teams to four. Now, 10 years later, they have nine competitive teams, plus numerous high school programs that practice at their gym—and they're still growing.

ON THE MAP

Besides making the program known as a national competitor, Mac's Cheer is also seeking to change the way people perceive the state of Utah. Mack admits that, when he first moved there, he had many questions. And while it may seem like cheerleading and Utah go together about as well as oil and water, he says that there are many similarities between the ideals the state was built on and the hallmarks of the all-star industry. "I think people outside of Utah think how I did, that it's really different from other areas," he says. "As I become more involved in cheerleading, I see lots of areas that are a lot like Utah. There are a number of gym owners and event producers who are very family-oriented, teach good moral values and have high standards."

These principles, which are the basis on which Mac's Cheer was built, are not only reflected in the way the gym is run, but also in the cheerleaders' appearance. From the beginning, Janet wanted to present their program with a clean-cut image—natural hair and makeup, conservative uniforms and an overall collegiate look. It's reflective of the program's roots and something that seems to have become a trend in the industry, as many more teams are moving away from the glitz and glamour and toward a more classic look.

But still, stereotypes can be hard to break. "One of our competitors once asked us if 'MAC' was short for 'Mormon All-Star Cheer,'" Mack says. "We laughed, as we could see how others might think that being from Utah means all our kids are Mormon. In reality, we have a very diverse customer base, all with one thing in common—they love to cheer."

“THIS FEELING OF FAMILY EXTENDS TO ALL OUR CHEERLEADERS. WE CARE ABOUT EACH AND EVERY PARTICIPANT IN OUR GYM AS IF THEY WERE OUR FAMILY.”

—JANET HIRSHBERG



COURTESY OF MAC'S ALL-STAR CHEER

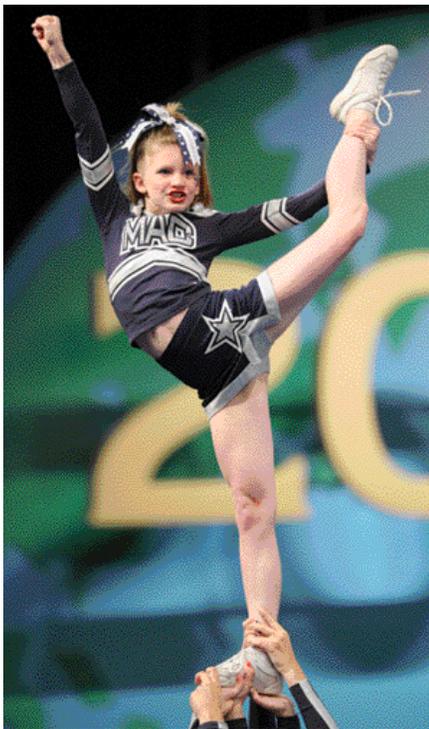
trampoline," he says. "I taught myself how to tumble by checking out old Olympic videos from the university's library."

Both Janet's and Mack's love of cheerleading was quickly and seamlessly passed along to their children. When Julian was 6 years old, they enrolled him in gymnastics lessons, where they'd often stay to watch him practice. "One day I got bored and asked his tumbling coach if I could tumble with my son's team," says Mack. "They all thought it was funny having this old guy tumbling with a bunch of 6-year-olds." After that practice, the owner approached Mack to see if he'd help a few of the gymnasts prepare for their high school cheer tryouts. Every one of them ended up outscoring the rest of the athletes at tryouts. "Word quickly spread about my teaching [tumbling to] girls who wanted to be cheerleaders," he says. Soon after, Mack found himself teaching up to 40 girls in the gym's recreational tumbling class.

As the demand for Mack's cheer skills grew,

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—MACK HIRSHBERG

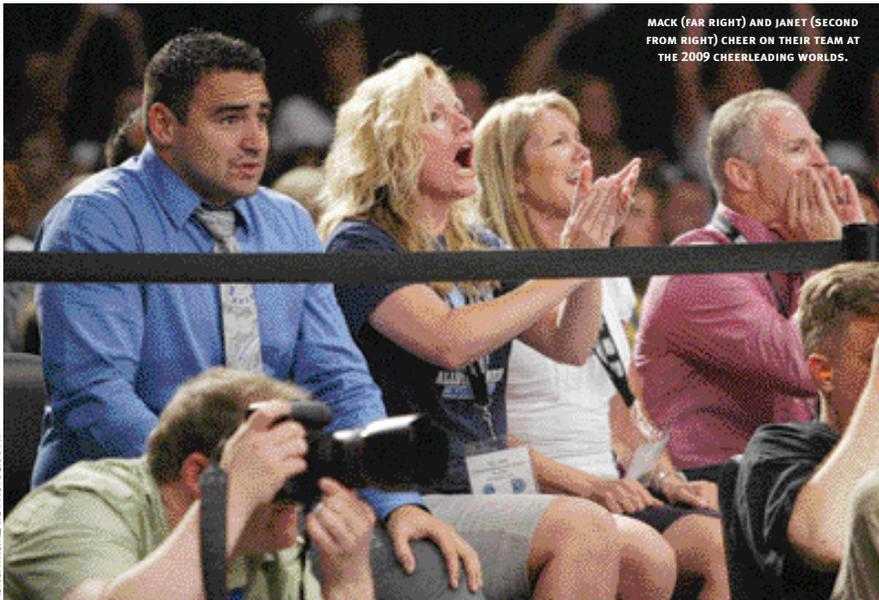


INDUSTRY UP-AND-COMER

Given his dedication to cheerleading, it was only natural that when Mack took on his role as USASF state director, he did so with proaction and verve. After returning from his first USASF Coaches Conference following the 2007 Cheerleading Worlds, he began collecting information on all the gyms in Utah and Idaho. He started a monthly newsletter offering business tips, sharing contacts and providing information about local vendors and competitions. Eventually, he shared these newsletters with Jim Chadwick, president of the USASF, and in doing so, his engagement with the industry grew exponentially.

“Last year, Janet and I read through some proposals that were to be voted on in Atlanta,” he says. “I was able to speak on one of the proposals, and by doing so, got to know a number of East Coast gyms and event producers.” Now that Mack’s on the USASF board of directors, he hopes to do his part to effect positive change in the industry and broaden the appeal of cheerleading to a larger audience. “I love the [USASF] PSA, ‘I’m an All-Star,’” he says. “All-star cheer gives kids self-confidence. I’ve received numerous testimonials from parents thanking us for taking their shy child and making [him or her] shine. There’s no greater gift to give.”

But even though he feels all-star cheerleading is on the right track, Mack sees areas in which improvement can still be made. “The direction of the industry relies largely on those leading it, and I’m impressed with our leadership,” he says. “In respect to creating rules, divisions, training and credentialing, I think we’re on the right path. The area we need to work toward is unity. There seems to be a fear that unity is going to take away individuality. Unity is what will help make our industry succeed and earn the respect of others. If we pool our efforts and share our talents, we can make our industry grow beyond our wildest dreams.” 



MACK (FAR RIGHT) AND JANET (SECOND FROM RIGHT) CHEER ON THEIR TEAM AT THE 2009 CHEERLEADING WORLDS.

ACTION MOMENTS PHOTOGRAPHY



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