

Shelby's Story:



High Rates of Head Injury Lead to National Rule Change in High School Cheerleading

“By the end of the week, we knew something wasn’t right,” Shelby’s mother explained. “Shelby’s ear was swollen and bruised. Her head was spinning, she was tired, and she just didn’t feel like herself.”

During a practice her junior year, Shelby, a competitive high school cheerleader, sustained a concussion when the side of her head collided with her teammate’s while performing a “double down.” A “double down” is a stunt where a cheerleader is tossed, and goes through two full rotations in the air, then lands in the arms of other cheerleaders.

After 5 weeks away from practice, Shelby healed and was cleared to return to cheerleading. A few months later, Shelby sustained a second concussion cheering at a basketball game when her head hit the ground in a failed stunt. Her symptoms this time were more severe. She was sensitive to noise and light and experienced fainting spells, seizures, anxiety, depression, and excessive drowsiness.

After 4 weeks away from school, Shelby returned to schoolwork on a reduced schedule and a 504 plan that allowed her to have extra time on tests. A Section 504 Plan is implemented when a student has a temporary or permanent disability that affects performance.



“People used to say, ‘you’re so lucky you can skip school,’” Shelby recalls, “But it was the opposite. It was hurtful.”

She was diagnosed with post-concussion syndrome, which Shelby describes as difficult for others to understand. “I just wanted to get better. I wanted to get good grades.” As her grades dropped, Shelby struggled with multitasking, focusing, and short-term memory – a challenging transition for a former honor student.

Four years later, Shelby is working hard to recover from the effects of her concussions. However, her story, and similar stories for other young cheerleaders, caught the attention of Jim Lord, executive director of the American Association of Cheerleading Coaches and Administrators (AACCA).

“We have been growing increasingly concerned about double twisting dismounts [‘double down’] in high school cheerleading over the past few years,” says Jim Lord.

Concussion is a type of traumatic brain injury—or TBI—caused by a bump, blow, or jolt to the head or hit to the body. This sudden movement of the brain can cause the brain to bounce around or twist in the skull, stretching and damaging the brain cells and creating chemical changes in the brain. These chemical changes can lead to short- or long-term problems with thinking, learning, language, and emotions, until the brain recovers.

In July 2011, CDC and AACCA and USA Cheer announced a new partnership to bring CDC “Heads Up” concussion education to cheerleading coaches, parents, and athletes to help them recognize the symptoms of a concussion and take appropriate action when an athlete shows signs of a concussion.

“We felt like we were seeing more of them being attempted and a lower percentage performed properly. In conversations with parents who have kids in cheer who sustained concussions, the overwhelming stunt being performed during the injury was the ‘double down’ or some form of it.”

According to data presented to AACCA and the National Federation of State High School Associations, the overall injury rate in cheerleading was low; however, the head injury rate during practices ranked third of 20 sports, behind football and wrestling. The data also showed that the majority of head injuries was not from contact with the floor but from body-to-body contact—similar to Shelby’s first concussion.

AACCA reviewed data on head injury in cheerleading, realized the risks, and ultimately decided to eliminate “double downs” from high school cheerleading in order to make the sport safer for their athletes.

Although Shelby can no longer be a cheerleader, today she coaches cheerleading and is still involved in the sport she loves. “Everything happens for a reason,” she explained. “I love cheerleading, and I know I’ve touched other people’s lives through coaching.”

Shelby continues to struggle with the noise level at cheerleading practices and finds that she gets frustrated and gives up on tasks quickly.

“I feel like I’m never going to find myself the way I was. If I knew then what I know now, I would have waited longer to go back to cheerleading after my first concussion. After

my second concussion, I wouldn’t have gone back at all. For others who are going through this, I want them to understand that concussion can affect your whole life.”

Shelby and her parents hope that athletes take time to recover, and that coaches are sensitive to the pressures young athletes face to return to cheerleading.

Brain injury is complicated, and every person responds differently to concussion. It is critical for coaches to recognize signs of concussion and for athletes to report their symptoms. Until a health care professional experienced in evaluating for concussion says an athlete is symptom-free, athletes who have experienced concussion should stay out of play and practice.

CDC partners with AACCA every summer to distribute CDC “Heads Up” concussion safety materials to cheer coaches and camps, reaching approximately 450,000 middle, high school all star, and college cheerleaders with the “Heads Up” message through various cheerleading camps and through membership with USA Cheer. Learn more about concussion safety and what other sports organizations are doing to make their sports safer for athletes on the “Heads Up” Facebook page at www.facebook.com/cdcheadsup or at www.cdc.gov/Concussion.

