



special stars

by Theresa Crouse

I remember the lull, the look of anticipation, the tears that formed in the eyes of attendees across the arena. The familiar chant, "C. A. T. S. - Cats-Cats-Cats." I remember



Mary Fehrenbach, recently named chairman of the special needs committee for U.S.A.S.F. (United States All Star Federation) has experience as a cheerleading coach and as a mother of two competitive cheerleaders. She started the special needs program at Kentucky Elite and is the Showcats' head coach. Mary was heavily involved in the Special Olympics cheerleading teams in Kentucky when she put the two ideas together. "I wanted to allow as many athletes as possible to benefit from a cheerleading program," she told me. "I knew they would have so much support from the other cheerleaders as well as the community."

Bill Presson, the assistant coach of the Bows n Arrows special needs team at Ace All-stars of Alabama was named the vice chairman alongside Fehrenbach.. "Most other sports these kids are involved in are individual sports. [All Star competitive cheerleading] makes them depend on each other to succeed. This develops their work ethic, attitudes and confidence," said Presson.

Unquestionably, it takes a patient,

thinking, 'Was Kentucky Elite taking the floor?' They were, but it was an exhibition routine performed by the Kentucky Elite Showcats. I watched as the Showcats ran onto the mat. Alongside them were cheerleaders who wore black shirts over their uniforms marked as STAFF. I soon realized that this performance wouldn't be like any other I'd seen. This was my first experience watching a special needs All Star team.

There are people across America making a difference in the lives of special needs children. Some who are very accomplished and well respected in the cheerleading community and others who have earned respect by their decision to serve as coaches and volunteers in All Star special needs programs.

driven person to coach such a group of amazing kids. What is it that drives anyone to coach, be it paid or volunteer? Is it the love of cheerleading, competition or the love for kids? It's definitely the latter for Amber Solino. She is founder and head coach of the Catawba Cats in Hickory, North Carolina. Amber was only 16 when she saw the Showcats perform and felt compelled to start her own program. With the help of her mother, she marketed her idea

by asking local radio stations for free airtime and was pleasantly surprised when many agreed to help. She found Foothills Gymnastics and was offered space in its gym for practice free. Her program started with five kids and has now grown to 11. "Our motto is, 'Yes we can.' I wanted these kids to know they are no different than anybody else. This program has helped their self-esteem, motor skills, memory skills even their academic studies! I love them and want everyone else to see what they're [made of]."

Overall, the feedback from special needs parents has been tremendous. Jeri Kyle's daughter, Janie, is in her third year with the Bows n Arrows at Ace. "This program shows if one has the heart and desire to work with kids with special needs, it's all you need to have a successful special needs, All Star program," said Kyle. "Janie loves competition, she is so athletic and driven. It's hard to find athletic programs once they're teenagers, so we were excited to hear about the program at Ace!" Kyle mentioned the improvement Janie has had athletically and socially, as well as mentally. "The year-round program has given her an outlet to have fun with other special needs kids."

Though the reward for coaches and volunteers might not be tangible, it is unquestionably lasting and meanwhile is making a difference in the lives of children. And not

just the lives of the special needs children, but also in the lives of anyone who sees them. I can vouch for that. It affected me. It was only four years ago when I was humbled, watching a group of amazing special needs competitive

cheerleaders perform. Tears streamed down my face as I stood in recognition of a job well done! I realized at that moment, that anything is possible...for anyone.



L TO R: COURTESY: CHEERSPORT; COURTESY: CATAWBA CATS