

A chance to be a cheerleader

Oswego group teaches special-needs students how to cheer

By [Kate R. Houlihan](#)

Staff writer

OSWEGO — It's Saturday afternoon at the Extreme All Starzz cheerleading and dance academy, and 16-year-old Sara McGregory is pumped up for one of her favorite weekly events.

"I love to have fun," said the wide-eyed girl in glasses, smiling throughout practice and afterward as she jokes with friends. She's excited to be the girl who starts off her special-needs team's cheer routine with the phrase, "We're No. 1."

At Extreme All Starzz, kids as young as 3 have the chance to learn about cheerleading and dance and participate on recreation or all-star cheerleading teams that compete nationally.

The team is made up of nine kids with challenges including Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, autism and arthritis.

The youngest on the team — and the only boy — is 8, and the oldest is almost 21, the "mother hen" of the team, according to Tammera Lawson, who helps coordinate the team and is the mother of a special-needs child. Lawson's daughter Alexis was on the squad for a while before stepping down to concentrate on Special Olympics practice.

Practice runs for an hour on Saturdays, and the season lasts from September to March. Running the practices are junior coaches who cheer on other All Starzz teams and are at least freshmen in high school.

At the beginning of each season, Lawson said, the junior coaches learn the individual needs, physical limitations and challenges of each child. A five-page medical questionnaire is required of parents with children in the program so the coaches can assess what can and cannot be done.

"We maximize what they can do while still recognizing limitations," Lawson said.

Each person has goals ranging from behavioral to physical. Sometimes those goals are in place to help push an athlete to do what doctors say is physically possible for her but that she might be hesitant to do.

"We tell them, 'Yes, you can,'" she said. "We have very high expectations of them that are set on an individual basis."

Dreams fulfilled



Kristin Hannigan (left) and Erin Kelly play in the foam pit at the Illinois Extreme All Starzz cheer, dance and tumbling facility in Oswego earlier this month.



photos by Jonathan Miano / Staff photographer Tommy Hayden (left) and Ashley Money get a lift into a formation during cheerleading practice at the Illinois Extreme All Starzz cheer, dance and tumbling facility in Oswego earlier this month. Hayden and Money are part of a special-needs team that competes with other teams from around the country.

During a Saturday practice shortly before Christmas, Jeff Money of Plainfield sat near the sidelines watching his 11-year-old daughter, Ashley, rise into the air on the shoulders of her teammates. Ashley is a flier on the squad, thanks to her small frame and shorter height.

"It's been great," Money said of the squad. "She's always wanted to be a cheerleader. About 50 percent of her clothes are cheer-related."

Money said that when Saturday morning rolls around Ashley is ready to go. It's now her favorite day.

"As a parent, you weren't sure they'd ever participate on something like this," he said.

Edie McGregory, Sara's mother, said the program has done wonders for Sara, who also stays busy snowshoeing, bowling, swimming and running track and field through Special Olympics. That's in addition to playing piano, singing in her high school choir and participating in therapeutic horseback riding.

"We always enter things like, 'Well, try it,'" McGregory said. "She fell in love with it."

Focusing on the future

For gym owner Toni Ross, a Naperville teacher, seeing the special-needs team out on the floor having the time of their life is rewarding.

"We just get them on the floor, and they sit there and smile and they're ecstatic," Ross said. "We always make sure they get a trophy at the end of a competition. Seeing their excitement ... in their mind, they won, and that's what's important."

The excitement surrounding the team is growing, as well. Lawson said they've been getting lots of inquiries about the team and may have to talk about enrollment caps in the future. The goal is to not go over 12 kids on a team. If more sign up, they would then consider two teams, perhaps split by age or ability.

Lawson said Kentucky is a model for what special-needs cheerleading can be. That state has had such squads for more than 20 years.

A long-range goal would be to try to get more teams going in Illinois so that perhaps cheerleading could become a Special Olympics event someday, which Lawson said would "just open up a whole variety of opportunities for everyone here."

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