



# A COACHING SUCCESS STORY

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**S**ix! That's how many days were left, as of this past Monday, before Melissa Duncan's Sylvan Hills High School cheerleading squad will compete in their third consecutive National Cheerleading Association championships. The 23 seniors, juniors and sophomores hit the gym floor every school day — sometimes literally, always purposefully — as they practice tumbling, leaping, dancing and cheering under the crit-



ical eye of the hometown girl who now coaches the squad she once belonged to herself.

But Duncan — who also teaches anatomy and physiology at the school, as well as teaching gymnastics after hours

and raising two sons — isn't merely reliving her youth vicariously through the girls who wear the blue and white uniforms today.

Not a chance, her kids will say.

# Coach

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"She never wants us to sit around, she wants us to work," said junior Brooke Hindman. "She wants the best."

Even on a day of practice with a visitor, a photographer snapping pictures, and on top of that needing to take her son to the doctor, she managed to devote some time to all these things in the 30 minutes she had.

In that half hour, the girls went through their routine twice and Duncan gave them instruction on what they were doing wrong.

"One thing I keep seeing that you will be counted off for is that when you come down off of your jumps, you pull your skirts down," she yelled through the gymnasium over the noisy din of other students. "Do not pull you skirts down."

She also has time to comfort Karrie Holliday, who will be performing at nationals for the first time, substituting at the last minute for an injured squad member.

Feeling unaccustomed to the pressure, Karrie breaks down at the beginning of practice. Duncan takes her aside and talks with her, allaying her fears.

"She does that easily," the junior said.

Members of Duncan's cheerleading squad say she is more than an instructor, she's a surrogate mother.

"We're like her little girls," said Hindman.

"You can go to her with any problem," said Julie Campbell, also a junior.

"I probably know a lot about those girls their mother doesn't know," Duncan herself admitted. And she adds, "I'm probably the one following them around, griping at them like a mother, too."

**K**nowing her girls, Duncan said, is also the key to creating winning cheerleading routines. She tries to take their personalities and capture them in the performance. She even has the girls help design performances; she handles tumbling and stunts while they choreograph dance routines. They have done this for each of the last two National Cheerleading Association championships and did so again this year.

The competition routine consists of a jump with acrobatics, a dance routine and a short cheer, all lasting less than a combined five minutes. "What I try to teach them is if they have the right skills, they can do anything," she said.

This year — her fourth as the school's cheerleading coach — Duncan believes the squad will finish in the top five. But then, she thought last year's team had that potential, too, till they were penalized by judges for throwing their heads back during a move called a "cradle," costing them points. They finished 14th, still a good leap up from 28th place among 80 competitors in 1995, their first time in national competition.

That was Duncan's second year as coach.

Duncan, 38, grew up in Sherwood, attended



Sherwood Elementary and Sylvan Hills Junior High and High School. She had started tumbling and gymnastics at the age of 10 and said her mother once told her, "I never saw your face until you graduated from high school" — a reference to her acrobatic flexibility.

"When I got into junior high, I was more interested in gymnastics because of the cheerleading end of it," she said, thriving on the challenge of competition and creating

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—Melissa Duncan

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routines.

Duncan said when she was a cheerleader at Sylvan Hills they would have liked to have competed at the levels her squad is now, but "we never had a sponsor who would take the time to do it with us."

So there's some real satisfaction in all of this.

"I'm giving these girls the opportunity to do something I wished I would have had the opportunity to do," she said.

After high school Duncan enrolled at UALR in 1978 — before they had a cheerleading squad. But she kept up with it as an instructor for the Universal Cheerleading Association and at different schools around the area. She left UALR when she married her husband, Bryan, 18 years ago; the two now have sons ages 14 and 11.

Several years ago Duncan decided to go back to school. She graduated from the Uni-

versity of Central Arkansas four years ago with degrees in physical education and general science and psychology, and joined the Sylvan Hills faculty as an anatomy and physiology teacher, as well as cheerleader coach.

In order to get on the squad, Duncan puts the girls through a strenuous four-day clinic. From 30 to 35 hopefuls are drawn each spring to the intensive regimen of toe touches, tumbling, jumps, stunts, cheers, chants, run-ons and dance routines. Because Duncan only has, at most, two dozen members on the squad, only a few will succeed.

Since the district will not let Duncan put restrictions on them like having a dance or gymnastics background, she has to work with potential where she sees it, she says.

"I have six girls who were not tumbling at the beginning of the year," she said, "and they're tumbling now."

But with the many talented girls she sees at tryouts, Duncan is now mulling over the possibility of a junior varsity squad.

"If you see someone that is talented, you still want to take them on," she explained. It would provide good training.

"When we were in ninth grade trying out for tenth grade cheerleading, it's scary," said Lauren Ray, a junior. "We were intimidated because we'd seen the girls here."

Lauren said what they were doing in junior high was not nearly as difficult as what Duncan had her girls doing. And Duncan says that's her inspiration.

"I think it's that pushing factor, that thing of seeing how they start and how they grow," she said.

And with nationals on their mind, the girls have no complaints about the rigors Duncan has put them through to get onto the squad and into the ranks of the top competition.

"Everything we are, we owe to Ms. Duncan," Lauren Ray said.