

MAT TALK



FOUNDATION ACADEMY COMPETITIVE CHEER



hear them roar

LAST YEAR, FOUNDATION ACADEMY'S VARSITY COMPETITIVE CHEERLEADING TEAM CELEBRATED A HISTORIC WIN IN GAINESVILLE. SO, WHAT COMES NEXT?

In the 2021-2022 season, Foundation Academy took home first place in the Class 1A Large-Non Tumbling division. After falling short by mere points two consecutive years, this win was monumental; the athletes celebrated winning the first State title in Foundation's history. However, this season, that first place is nothing more than motivation. Mia Sanders says, "I think winning last year has made us even more hungry to bring home another title. Our routine is more intense, and our division is more competitive than last year. While the win was amazing, it does not mean we are owed anything this year."

The routine Foundation competes is a testament to the athleticism of this team; it is two

minutes and thirty seconds of anaerobic activity, combined with the strength associated with weightlifting and the contact involved in football. In the large-non tumbling division, the routines must include a series of unassisted partner stunts, an assisted pyramid, jumps, dance, and cheer. Between elements, the judges score cheerleaders on their transitions and facial expressions. Unfortunately, most spectators have little understanding of the sport of cheerleading beyond shaking poms at a football game. A goal of the competitive cheer team is to earn recognition around their school for the validity of cheer's standing as a sport.

The FA Cheer season begins in

March with conditioning practices that prepare the athletes for tryouts. Once a Lady Lion-hopeful joins the ranks of the varsity sideline team, they launch into a whirlwind of practices, games, and pep rally performances. "Sideline season is just a precursor for the competitive season," junior Rylan Marion says. The varsity sideline team spent their practices working on new stunts and perfecting their cheers in equal measure. The sideline season, these athletes believe, serves as a warm-up for the larger season ahead.

Once the school's football season is over, the real work begins. Practices ramp up from three days a week to five, with a Wednesday conditioning practice to hone their bodies and gain confidence in their skills. The true transition to the competitive cheer season occurs on the infamous choreography day. Although the girls can work on their skills all season long, they cannot choreograph their routine until early

October. This season the team arrived at Venom Allstars gym at eight 'o'clock in the morning and didn't leave until they memorized their routine. "I love testing out stunts," sophomore Skylar Mullarney says. "One of the season's highlights is creating formations and adding the little details that make the



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routine ours. I also love to imagine competing the new routine on the states floor.”

Foundation Academy cheerleaders, therefore, spend almost seven months preparing for the three-month stretch of competitions, practices, and workouts. To start practice, the athletes typically run laps, work through a series of stretches, and then warm up their skills. From there, they do between two and four “full-outs.” A full-out, junior Erika Kime explains, is “one of the hardest parts of competitive cheer. We perform the routine as we would on the competition floor (executing all skills), but without the adrenaline and crowd participation. Still, any time we complete and hit the full routine is a monumental moment.” The first time the team runs through the entire routine is a cause for celebration. Coach Kristin Johnson

says the thing she wants her athletes to take away from full-outs at practice is confidence. “The more you hit,” she maintains, “the more comfortable you are with competing. This allows them to step onto the competition floor and let their bodies’ muscle memory take over. Mind over matter!”

It was this mindset that followed the team into the week of practice leading up to their regional competition, and eventually, the performance itself. Walking into regionals for the last time was a bittersweet moment for senior Jada Wilson, who has been on the varsity competition team since its inception. “I am so incredibly grateful to have been part of this team for so long. I would not be who I am today if it was not for this team. I am so lucky to be able to grow with these amazing people. I love this program, and my teammates for always standing with

me and being my family.” A struggle on competition day is remaining in the right frame of mind from warm-ups, in which they have around ten minutes to run through the routine, to the mat. Standing in the hallway before they take the floor, coaches Rachel Carey and Kristin Johnson gather the girls together, pray over them, then leave to take their places at the front of the mat. The coaches’ departure triggers a flurry of encouragement and panic as the girls prepare to fight for their spot in the State Championships.

Coach Rachel Carey explains the critical nature of the regional performance. She says, “Regionals is the biggest test before states. I see how the girls truly perform under pressure and I get feedback from the judges on how our routine will be received at states. For the girls, I see that it is a huge confidence boost.” However, from a coaching perspective, Coach Rachel’s goal was for the team to reach their potential. “This team has a lot of talent and experience,” she says. “However, this season their performances have never matched their potential.”

When the wait was finally over, the announcer called Foundation onto the floor and they took their places. As the music started, all other thoughts and worries faded away, leaving only determination and focus in their wake. The first section landed solidly and the crowd went wild. The charged atmosphere afforded the team energy as they moved to jumps. From there, they executed another stunt section perfectly and moved to cheer.

In this cheer, as these athletes explain, it is imperative to engage the crowd and encourage them to yell along with you. Thus, at practices, the coaches focused on cultivating a genuine, exciting performance. When the cheer ended, they paused for a

moment in which the team fought for breath and plastered smiles to their faces. Then, with Skills Coach Tim Arvanetes’ shout of, “Music!” they came alive in a dance and moved to their pyramids. Ella Reuter, a junior and main base in the elite pyramid, fed off the crowd in the final stretch of the performance. She says, “I vividly remember the moment I knew we were going to end the routine with a solid hit. The adrenaline running through me and the crowd’s energy helped me fight through the final moments, long enough to bring my flyer down and hug her. I was so proud of my team for our performance.”

It was this routine that won Foundation Academy their fourth consecutive Regional Championship. The team scored high enough at regionals to qualify for the FHSAA State Championship Finals at the University of Florida on February 3, 2023. In addition, an earlier regional hosted by UCA on December 3rd qualified the Lions for UCA’s Nationals at the ESPN Wide World of Sports. Foundation placed third at Nationals last year, so they are excited to return and compete for the top spot.

Regardless, these cheerleaders are grateful for the chance to grow together as a team and fight for each other on the mat. Freshman Abbey Langhoff says, “When looking back on our season, I can see how all the hard things- the injuries, hard practices, and bad performances- have brought us closer as a team. I am excited to see what the rest of this season holds with this amazing team.” Although the 2022-2023 season is nearly over, Foundation Academy’s competitive cheerleaders are determined to enjoy every moment and leave everything on the floor. ●



one team, one goal

CHEER BY THE NUMBERS

- 4 REGIONAL TITLES
- 3 SENIORS
- 2 STATE RUNNER-UPS
- 1 STATE CHAMPIONSHIP