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Bring On The Bonding

Build your trust and togetherness as a team with these bona fide bonding ideas!

by Jen Jones

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When we feel **comfortable** around each other outside of cheer practice, we know we can **rely on** each other in competition and on the mat.

Quick word association game:—when you hear the words “cheer camp,” what comes to mind? Most cheerleaders would immediately respond “hard work” or “learning tons of new cheers and stunts.” But it’s important to remember that, above all, cheer camp is supposed to be fun! It’s also a prime opportunity to get to know your fellow teammates; after all, if a new squad is selected in the spring, cheer camp is often the first opportunity for the new team dynamic to take shape. To seal the deal for a tight-knit team, there are plenty of icebreakers and activities that make for a great camp bonding experience. To find out what has worked for other squads, AC checked in with two cheer teams that have spirit to spare: Cornerstone Christian High School in Wildomar, CA, and Oak Harbor High School in Oak Harbor, WA. See what they had to say.



Oak Harbor's Team-Building Tricks

It's no coincidence that NCA camp veterans Oak Harbor HS placed in the top 10 last year in the Super Large Varsity category at USA Nationals. As they say, the team that plays together stays together—and this team definitely personifies togetherness!

Third-year squad member Lauren Acton says the squad takes full advantage of cheer camp as a way of getting to know each other better. The squad picks a new theme every year that will define their camp experience, such as “Cats Gone Wild” or “Bob the Builder.” Every day while at camp, the squad receives motivational gifts tied in with the theme. The cheerleaders also pick a day





to don themed outfits, i.e. animal masks à la “Cats” or construction hats and tool belts à la “Bob.” Lauren says the silliness helps to unite the

squad: “It’s just a fun day because we put on things no one else would wear. We go all-out when it comes to dressing up and we take tons of pictures!”

Oak Harbor also selects “camp captains,” four or five squad members who will lead the team through the potentially overwhelming camp experience. The captains hold a nightly team meeting at camp, in which a motivational word is selected to guide everyone through the following day. They then put their heads together with the team members to make an acronym out of the motivational word that summarizes team goals (i.e., “Success” could stand for “Stamina, Unity, Courage, Challenge, Energy, Stunts, Spirit”). “We really go out of our way to unite the squad in the beginning so that they feel like a team,” says Pam Headridge, who has been coaching at Oak Harbor for 14 years. “By doing that at camp, it helps keep them going throughout the season when we get into the activities we have to do for the teams we support.”

Other fun camp bonding activities that Oak Harbor engages in include a daily newsletter featuring encouraging quotes and squad news, and a nightly awards ceremony (by the end of camp, every cheerleader has received an award ranging from “Most Improved” to “Best Smile”).

Motivation runs rampant with this super-spirited team, and Coach Headridge believes it has a direct effect on their performance: “When the squad members are motivated by their peers, it reinforces the value of teamwork.”

Cornerstone’s Best-Kept Secrets

Having attended FCC camps for the last five years, the Cornerstone Christian squad has no shortage of ideas for building team unity. One of their tried-and-true traditions is assigning “Secret Sisters,” says Cornerstone’s cheer advisor and coach, Tina Jasso.

Secret sisters have a blast slipping encouraging notes under each other’s doors and leaving tiny gifts and surprises. On the last night of camp, secret sisters reveal their identities in a fun party atmosphere. Says Coach Jasso, “It’s a way to be thoughtful and encouraging without having to spend a lot of money.”

Getting closer to your teammates also builds trust, a valuable commodity for any squad. “When we feel comfortable around each other outside of cheer practice, we know we can rely on each other in competition and on the mat,” says Breanne Johnson, a junior and varsity captain.

According to sophomore Michelle Jasso, the Cornerstone team relies heavily on certain icebreakers to help build a stronger squad rapport while at camp. One such icebreaker is called “The Chain” and involves everyone on the team getting in line and wrapping her ankles right over left. If the team can get from point A to point B without unlinking their feet, mission accomplished! Michelle also recommends the “Tablecloth Challenge,” which involves several cheerleaders standing on one tablecloth and having to flip it over without anyone getting off of it. Holding each other and stunting is allowed in order to make it happen!

Squad member Jessica Loft believes these icebreakers are crucial to hitting the competition floor in stride: “You learn to trust each other more. You’re closer with each other and you have faith that everyone is doing their job.”



Got Game?

Motivational techniques and icebreakers have a crucial place at camp, but don’t forget to lighten it up a little bit while you’re at it! These goofy games will teach you everything there is to know about your teammates: the good, the bad, the ugly, the weird and the wonderful! Check ’em out:

Cheer “Idol:”

Rip-offs of “American Idol” permeate the airwaves, so why not hop on the bandwagon? Appoint three of your most outspoken squad members as the judges for a talent show that no one will soon forget. The squad member with the most obscure or ridiculous talent emerges the victor! Perfect for blowing off steam after a grueling day at camp. Eat your heart out, Simon Cowell.

What’s the 411? Bingo:

The head coach draws up a quiz with questions pertaining to each squad member (for example, “Which cheerleader has gone skydiving?” “Which cheerleader has 10 siblings?” “Which cheerleader is double-jointed?”). Cheerleaders have to mingle, finding out which answers pertain to the correct squad member and collecting signatures in the box that contains the correct answer (i.e., “Skydiving”). First player to hit Bingo wins!

The All-Nighter:

The power of the spirit stick is perhaps best illustrated in the notorious Bring It On scene when Kirsten Dunst's character drops it, leaving her cursed forever! To bring your squad good luck, why not have a slumber party vigil dedicated to making sure the spirit stick stays well above the ground? Split the squad members up into groups who can take shifts throughout the night guarding the spirit stick. A guaranteed slaphappy, spirited time!

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