

# ROOTING FOR THE ORIGINS OF CHEERLEADING

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Male  
Cheerleaders  
1930  
Courtesy of  
Retronaut



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Hollywood has depicted them as superheroes, popular girls, the victims of massacres, and, more typically, scheming and conniving “mean girls” who form a powerful clique which rules a school or college.

In popular culture, the cheerleader is almost always a young woman. Athletic, perky, and pretty, the cheerleader is seen as inseparable from her football playing boyfriend.

But the first cheerleaders weren't women. In fact, the idea of “cheering” originated with a military tradition of “cheering” that dates back to around 1842.

### Earliest Known Cheer

On November 6, 1869, Princeton supporters at the first intercollegiate football game between Princeton and Rutgers created what many regard as the first official cheer when they enthusiastically yelled:

Ray, ray, ray  
Tiger, Tiger, Tiger  
Sis, sis, sis  
Boom, boom, boom  
Aaaaah!  
Princeton, Princeton, Princeton!

This cheer, known as the Princeton Locomotive, was based on a similar call made by

the New York 7th Regiment when it had passed through the town of Princeton during the Civil War.

Although only about two percent of Americans attended college in the early nineteenth century, this period witnessed the emergence of college athletics. The rise of intercollegiate contests in the mid-century further boosted student interest in athletics, as spectators began to express allegiance to their school by attending sports events. Cheering developed as an informal activity at these games.

## Rooter Kings, Yell Leaders, and Yell Kings

Initially, individual students would separate themselves from the crowd and encourage others to yell in support of the team. In fact, fans at the first intercollegiate sporting event, a crew race between Harvard and Yale in August of 1852, recall a young man spontaneously rising from his seat to rally support for Harvard.

Some of the earliest yell leaders were injured or second- and third-string players who organized the crowd. But by the late 1890s, colleges and universities began designating official male cheerleaders. These young men were often referred to as rooter kings, yell leaders, yell kings, yell masters, or yell marshals as well as cheer leaders. Johnny Campbell from the University of Minnesota was one of the earliest designated “yell marshals” in 1898. By the beginning of the twentieth century, football was the most popular sport on college campuses. It had also already become a revenue-producing activity. As growing numbers of colleges and universities participated in intercollegiate games, organized cheerleading evolved still further.



Johnny Campbell,  
Courtesy of Author

Although the first formal cheerleaders had typically been captains of other sports, such as baseball or track, most colleges had organized cheerleading squads by the early 1900s.

These first cheerleaders were either self-selected or chosen by their peers because of their popularity. In a letter written in the fall of 1903, his senior year, Franklin Delano Roosevelt laconically noted, “I was one of the three cheer-leaders in the Brown game.” This was a significant honor as “men of prominence” on campus were

chosen to serve as cheerleaders for each game.

### The Prestige of Cheerleading

A 1911 editorial in *The Nation* promoted cheerleading as “one of the most valuable things a boy can take away from college.” And male cheerleaders continued to hold positions of importance throughout the 1920s. They were often compared to quarterbacks as “symbols of undergraduate leadership which would translate into professional success in adult life.”

Male Cheerleaders, c. 1920s,

Courtesy of Retronaut



The prestige associated with cheerleading meant that the selection process became increasingly formalized during the first three decades of the twentieth century. Cheer squads grew in size and they now began to use tumbling and stunts to increase their visibility; at the same time these squads were forming, intercollegiate athletic contests also increased in popularity and crowds now filled newly constructed stadiums---to watch both the game and the cheerleaders.

### A Move Toward Feminized Cheerleading

Princeton and Yale each had three yell leaders in 1924. In the south, Baylor University had three yell leaders by 1927. A publication from that year, *Just Yells: A Guide for Cheer Leaders*, demonstrates the widespread popularity of cheerleading at the time, as it lists cheers from 143 colleges and universities across the nation. Some schools, such as Stanford University and Purdue University, even offered courses in cheerleading in the mid-1920s.

Although the exact year that marked the beginning of women's participation in collegiate cheering is unknown, historians identify the 1920s as a period of demographic transition. Women were still excluded from most of the private, all-male colleges associated with the rise of cheerleading but state-supported institutions now invited them to enroll

and participate in most, if not all, facets of college life.

Along with this change, a broader shift in American culture, specifically the emergence of beauty pageants and mass media that included advertising and movies, meant that the display of female bodies was now more socially acceptable. In fact, this display came to be associated with many forms of mass entertainment in the 1920s.

During this period, song girls began to provide a form of "feminized" cheering at the collegiate level. Song girls first appeared at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) games in 1929. Originally these young women sang with the band but they eventually expanded their repertoire to include dance routines and the use of pom-poms. These squads were the precursors to the dance teams that are common at the high school and junior college levels today.

Dance was seen as acceptable behavior for these young women, a fact that helps account for the emergence of pep squads and drill teams, both of which emphasized, and still emphasize, dance. But athleticism was still regarded as masculine and therefore inappropriate for women. Girls were thought to be inherently incapable of the athletic stunts and tumbling feats that male cheerleaders performed, and educators expressed concern that yelling would damage their voices. As a result, men continued to dominate cheerleading into the 1930s.

Female Cheerleaders,  
c. 1950s

Courtesy of Retronaut



Women experienced resistance upon entering the male-dominated realm of cheerleading. As late as 1939, sportswriters excluded females from their selection of the national all-American cheer squad, and even in the 1950s head cheerleaders were still typically male.

The mid-1940s wartime mobilization of college-age males inadvertently offered women opportunities from which they had previously been excluded, and this included positions on cheerleading squads. While female cheerleaders found their positions threatened upon the soldiers' return, with many colleges banning women from their squads in the 1950s as a way of facilitating men's re-entry, female cheerleaders struggled to keep their positions in the postwar period and cheerleading squads have been predominantly female since the 1950s.

**Allison Wright holds a Ph.D. in American Studies from the University of Texas at Austin. Her doctoral dissertation examined American media and cultural representations of cheerleaders.**



**Cheerleaders, c. 1950s  
Courtesy of Retronaut**