

“It’s the little things!”

Championship competitions are just around the corner. Coaches and cheerleaders are working hard to boost their competition scores and figuring out what to do when illness or injury strikes. Here are a few tips to help you along the way.

If your team is new to competition, encourage the team to attend a competition and just observe what the teams do. A team can learn so much from others.

Teach and practice good handwashing technique, and to cover your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing. Encourage the proper disposal of tissues when used. Encourage the athletes not to share food or drink. Keep hand sanitizer available and use it. (It takes everyone to be number one!)

Encourage an athlete to not vomit on the competition floor if possible. Encourage the athlete to cup their hands by their mouth to catch it. Discuss a plan at practice.

If someone becomes ill just prior to a competition, the coach may consider making the change of a team member the day before. At the very least, have a back up plan ready. An early morning phone call with an absence is tough to manage on the day of a competition.

Know your rules for the competition and read the rule book for safety. If a coach receives a legality for something that can be avoided, it is hard to explain that to your team and parents. A coach is accountable for coaching errors and for the safety of the team.

Prior to the competition, perform at least once before a live audience. This builds confidence! If you see an athlete forget the routine or where to go, you can see the fear on the cheerleader’s face. You hope that a strong cheerleader can get the team back on track! Make a plan during practice to handle unexpected mishaps that may occur. If the music does not work, have the team count the music as they would in practice.

If a stunt falls, encourage the flyer to stay as tight as possible to be caught by the spotters or bases.

When you use signs with letters or words, mark them so the letters or words will be right side up!

Listen, really listen, to the cheer in your routine. If it sounds like a nursery rhyme or a song, you may want to change that. Consider saying the words with attitude. Bring the last word up and end strong! When doing a spell out or word call back, always answer back louder!

Jumps are an important category, spend time at practices stretching and work to clean up preps and landings to reach a higher score.

Strong facial expressions are essential; the look of fear or disinterest will not add points on the scoresheet. Look closely at the whole team, look up at the flyers, from the center to the back and sides of your routine. Does everyone look happy? If an athlete makes a mistake, encourage the athlete to smile and go on like nothing ever happened.

Remember that entrances and exits are important too, especially with game day!! Hold heads up high, put shoulders back and be confident. Give this area energy, especially the exit. The officials will remember that excitement. Have fun!!

Practice motions by count or word to make sure they are clean and sharp. Are all members on the same count or word? Make sure thumbs are kept in on your motions.

When moving from position to position on the floor, if there is no choreographed arm work, keep arms held tight next to the torso. This looks much neater than just walking from place to place.

Make sure the music has been tested if possible at the competition and that you know how to start it. Make sure that the music has been timed according to the competition rules and does not exceed the time limit.

When a stunt goes down, encourage the stunt group or team to take a second and think before trying to get back into a stunt sequence. Going too soon can throw off timing and make matters worse.

To prevent falls and penalties, evaluate whether the stunts are hitting at least 90% of the time in practice. If not, consider altering the stunt to something the group can successfully hit.

When tumbling, ensure that the athlete is secure in the skill, or that person may have a frown all the way up to the time of the skill because he or she fears, "messing up." If the landing doesn't hit and all is well, encourage the athlete to stand up with a smile, maybe the official won't notice the mistake.

If a uniform does not fit properly, do everything in your power to figure out how to fix the problem. For example, briefs should not be showing the entire routine. It is distracting to officials and spectators. Consider ordering a larger uniform to have on hand as a backup, just in case you need to move a skirt, pants or a top around. The additional uniform could be used if someone got blood or body fluids on their uniform and you need a replacement in a hurry.

Keep hair out of the athletes eyes for safety reasons, shaking heads to get bangs out of the way is not a part of the routine and is also distracting.

Teach the importance of accepting awards with grace, even if it is not the award the team thought they should have been awarded. This is a life lesson.

Above all, do something fun! As a coach, you are creating memories of a lifetime. All coaches and teams want to win, and a positive experience with laughter will create the best memories. Wishing you the best this competition season!