

Cheerleaders bid for OVAC crowns

By BRIANNA SADLER
Times Leader Staff Writer

THE 17TH Annual OVAC Cheering Competition will be in full swing Saturday at the WesBanco Arena in Wheeling where 34 teams from schools throughout the Ohio Valley are competing for first-place honors.



"(The teams) seem pretty excited to compete. We always have a good turnout," Libby Shepherd, director of the event, said.

Each year, the crowd pours into the arena excited to cheer on the cheerleaders. The doors opened to the public at 8:30 a.m.; the event began at 9:30 a.m. with a performance by Warwood Middle School, the winner of this year's Junior OVAC Competition.

"This is their time to shine," Co-director Mary Kay Zitzelsberger said. "Out on the field (the cheerleaders) have a big job of bringing the crowd into the game. This is their competition."

Zitzelsberger, who originally got involved in the competition

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● Cheer

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as a cheering coach for Buckeye Local, has been working along side Shepherd for approximately 11 years.

"I've always enjoyed watching the competition," Zitzelsberger said. "It's fun to see how the squads have developed."

The competition is fierce as teams go head to head to out do the champions of previous years and win against old rivals. Last year's defending champions are Linsley in class A division; Wheeling Central in the class AA division; Martins Ferry in the class AAA division; and Brooke in the class AAAA division.

"Cheerleading is very subjective," Zitzelsberger said. "It's very difficult."

Judges make their decisions based on the teams' precision, formation, choreography, and degree of difficulty. Each team has three minutes to perform their cheer and combination dance routines.

The teams competing this year in the class A division include Madonna, Bridgeport, Bealsville, Valley, Paden City, St. John, Bishop Donahue, and Toronto high schools.

The class AA competitors include Catholic Central, Shenandoah, River, Shadyside, Cameron, Linsley, and Monroe Central high schools.

Class AAA competitors are Wheeling Central, Magnolia, Union Local, Martins Ferry, Oak Glen, Tyler, Barnesville, St. Clairsville, Bellaire, and Harrison Central high schools.

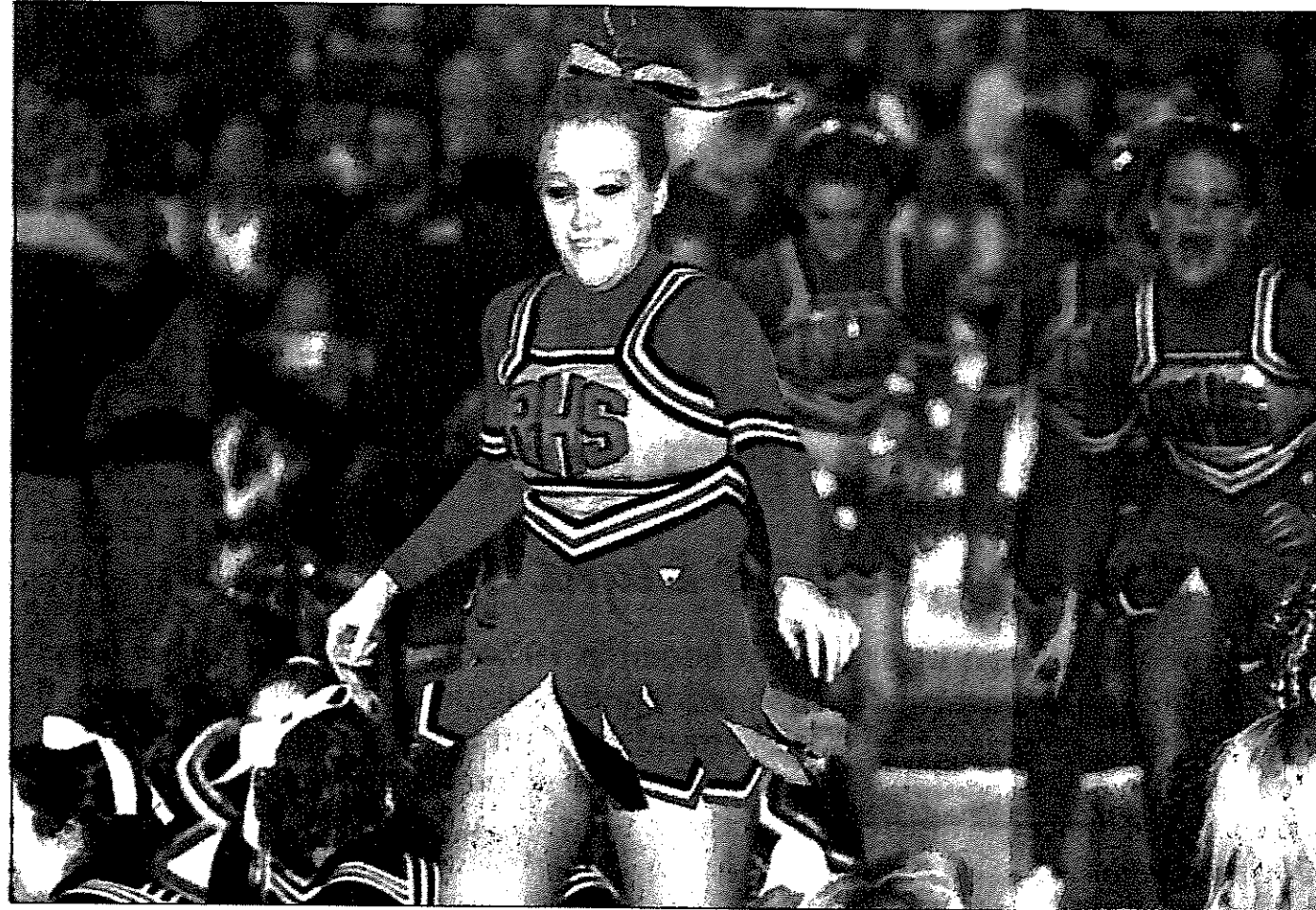
And the class AAAA competitors are Edison, Buckeye Local, Weir, John Marshall, Brooke, Zanesville, East Liverpool, Indian Creek, and Wheeling Park high schools.

The tentative scheduled times are:

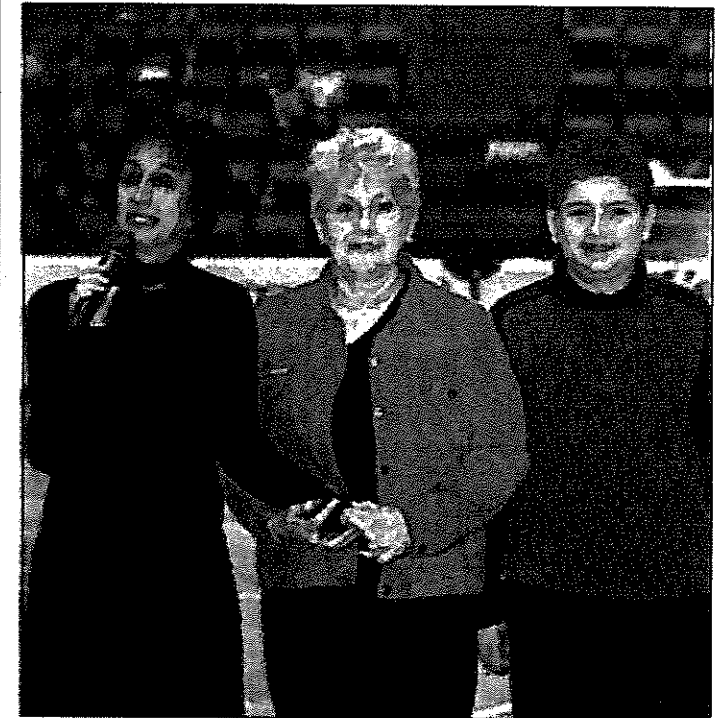
- 9:33 a.m. class AA competition
- 10:20 a.m. class A competition
- 11:15 a.m. awards presentation for classes A/AA
- 1 p.m. class AAAA competition
- 2 p.m. class AAA competition
- 3 p.m. awards presentation for classes AAA/AAAA

The event is open to the public. Admission is \$6 for adults and \$4 for children.

Sadler may be reached at bsadler@timesleaderonline.com



Cheers to all!

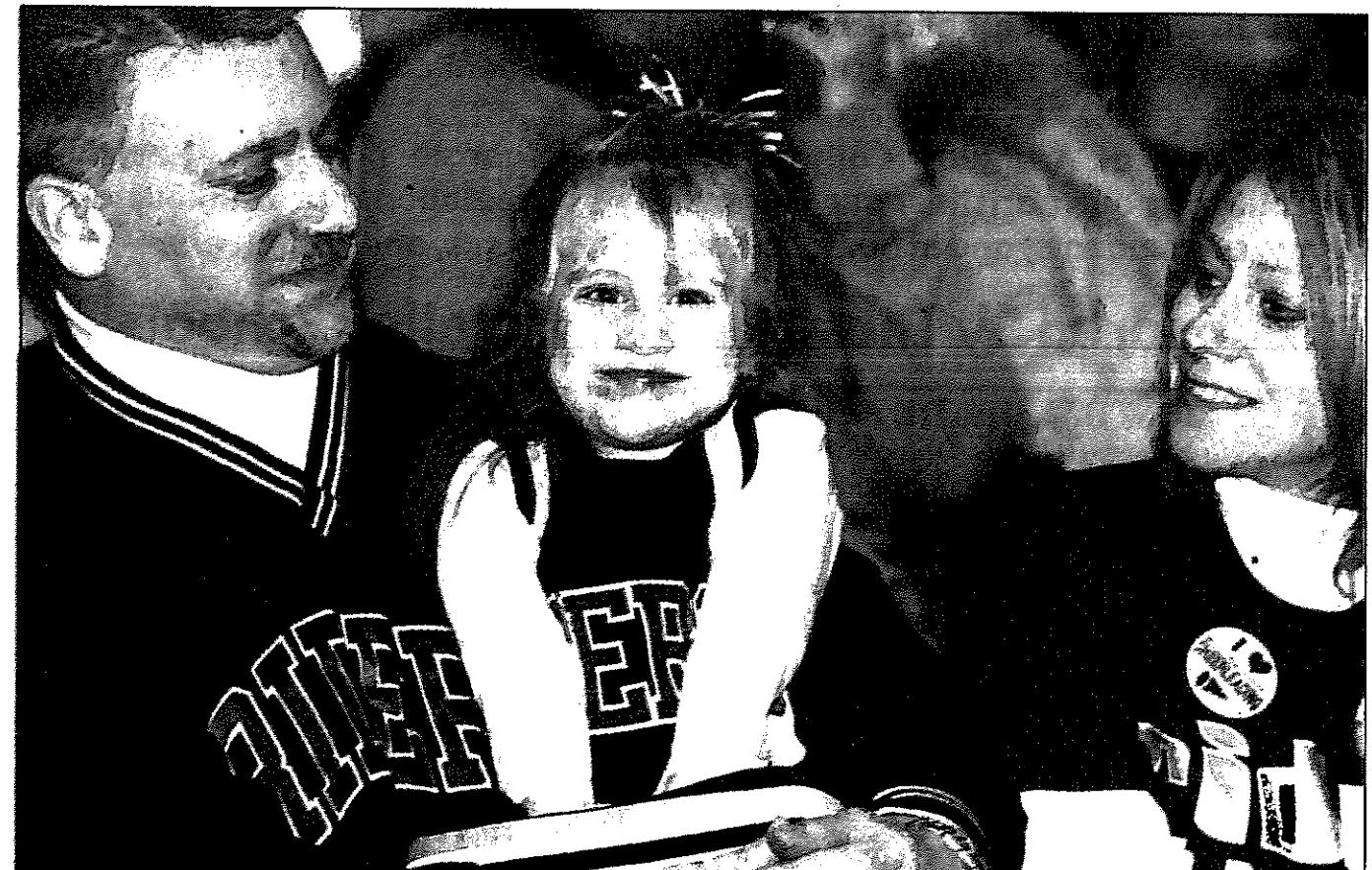


The Ohio Valley cheerleaders squared off for the 17th annual OVAC Cheering Competition at WesBanco Arena in Wheeling Saturday night.

ABOVE: The girls of River High School celebrate after claiming second place in AA division.

ABOVE RIGHT: OVAC President Diane Vargo, left, congratulates Nancy Mumley, center, along with her grandson, Evan Elliott, during a special recognition ceremony during the event.

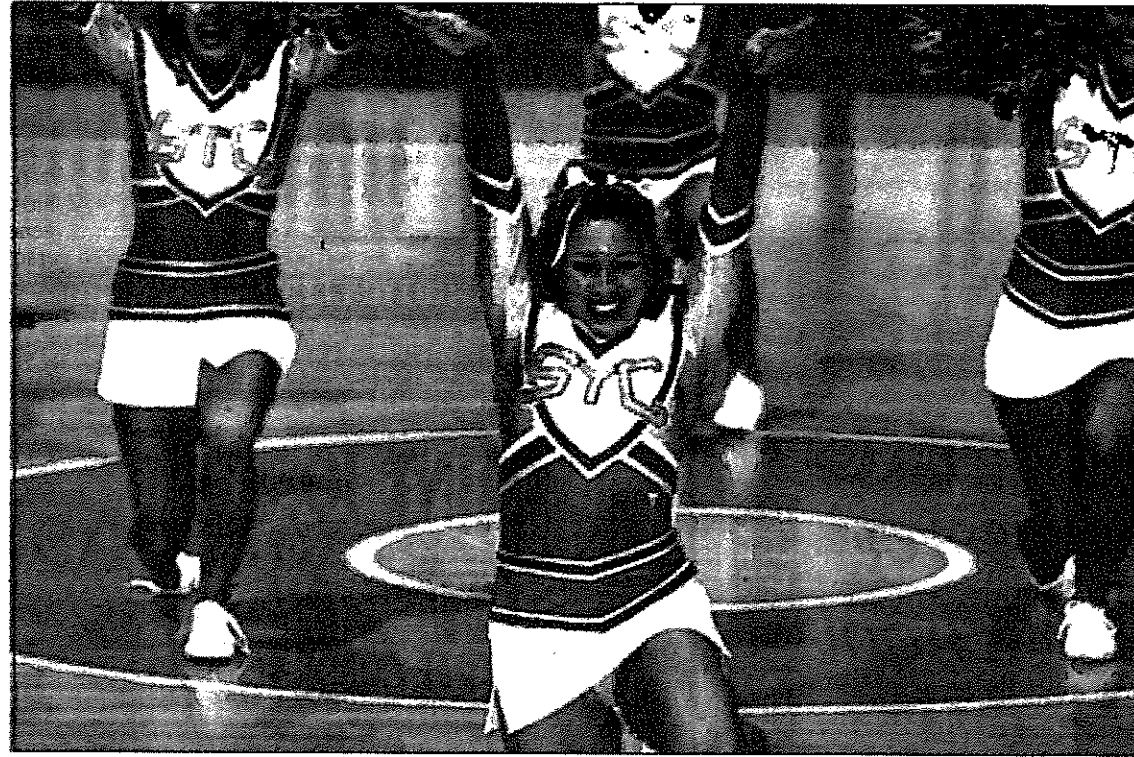
AT RIGHT: Alissa Hadorn, 3, obviously of Martins Ferry, is dressed to support her sister, Taylor Kuminkoski, of the Purple Rider's cheering squad. Sister Kayla Kuminkoski cheered last year for the OVAC Championship squad.



Evan Elliott, during a special recognition ceremony during the event.

AT RIGHT: Alissa Hadorn, 3, obviously of Martins Ferry, is dressed to support her sister, Taylor Kuminkoski, of the Purple Rider's cheering squad. Sister Kayla Kuminkoski cheered last year for the OVAC Championship squad.

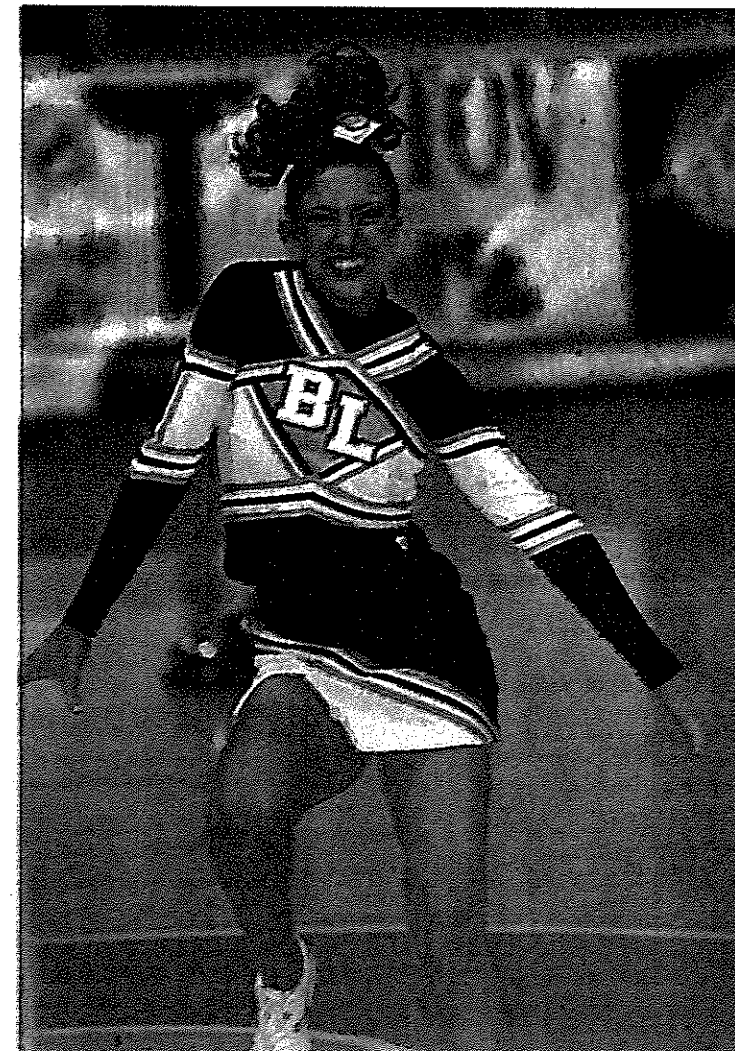
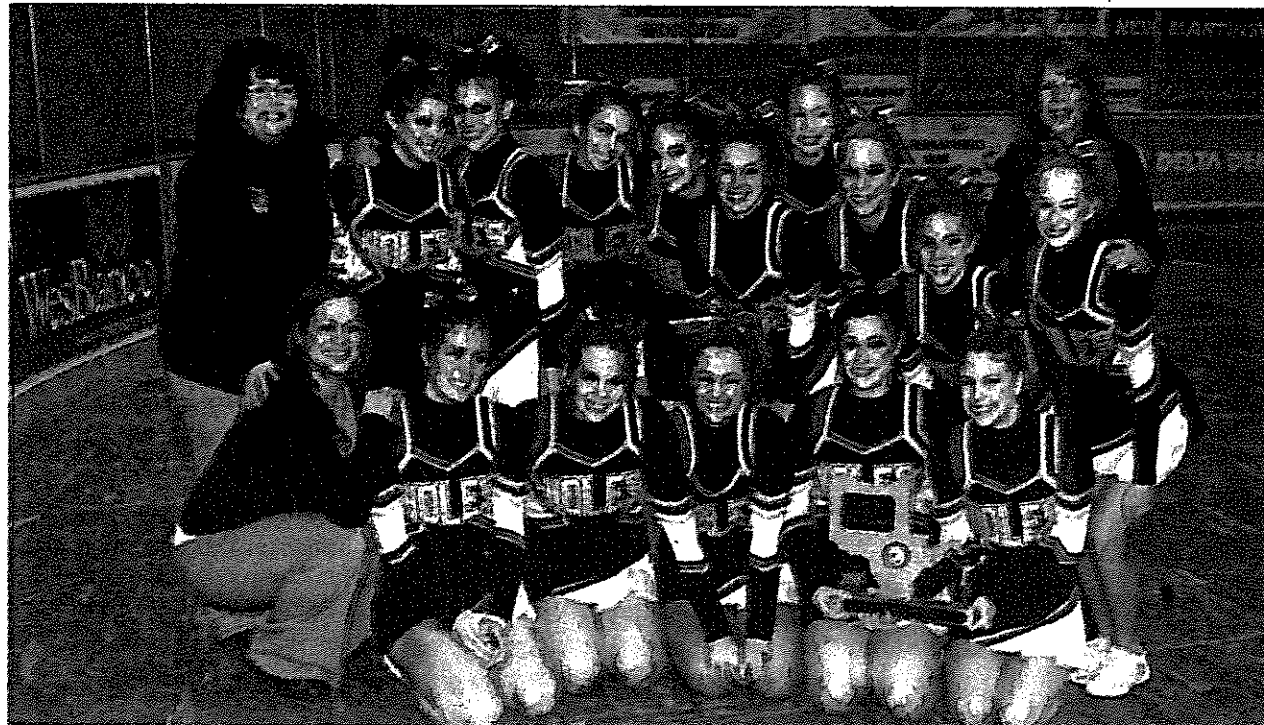
T-L Photos/JOEL JOSEPH



AT LEFT: Emily Carlton and the team from St. Clairsville wowed the crowd with a performance that secured them the AAA championship.

BELOW LEFT: The Monroe Central Squad poses with their championship trophy.

BELOW RIGHT: Megan McKim of Buckeye Local struts her stuff.



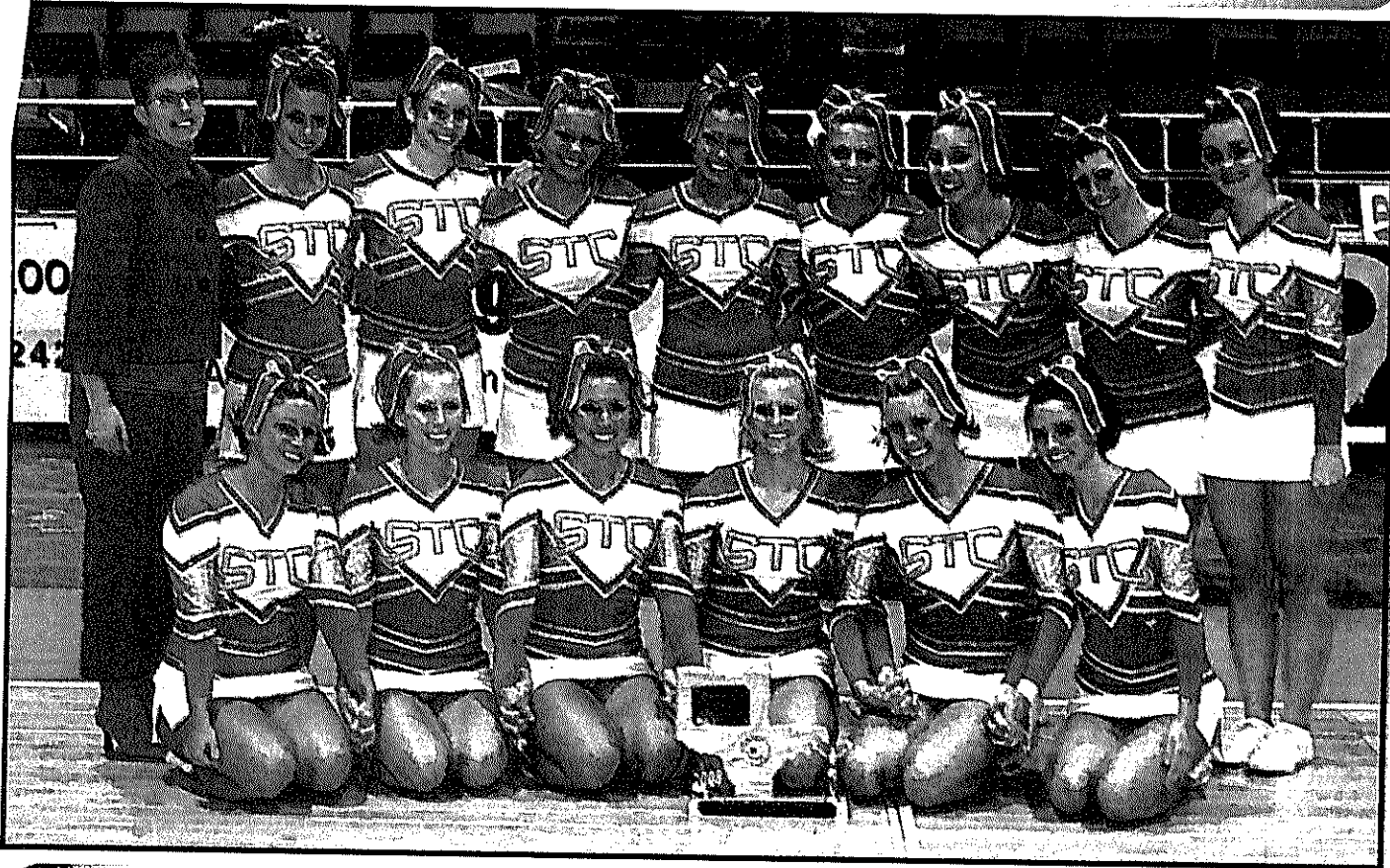
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CHEERLEADERS

OVAC CLASS AAA

CHAMPIONS



WINNING THE OVAC 3-A Cheerleading championship at WesBanco Arena Saturday was this team of Red Devils from St. Clairsville High. Pictured, front row, from left, are, Mallory Cooper, Stephanie Mattern, Emilee Carlton, Lindsey Neavin, Megan Campbell and Brooke Hays. Back row, from left, are, Coach Shawn Tomlan, Emily Tennant, Jamie Matkovich, Lauren Cencula, Cassi Baugh, Cheryl Vicker, Stephanie Verba, Erica DeFilippo and Taylor Martin.

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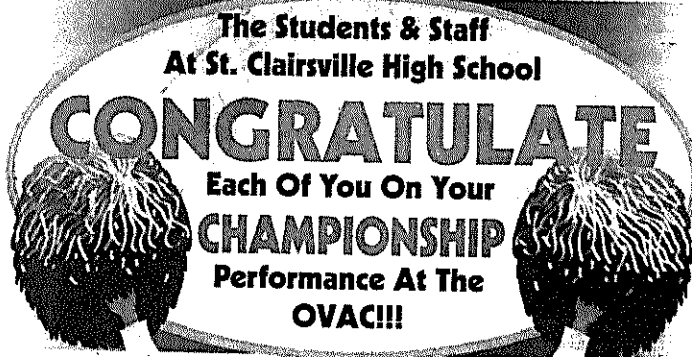
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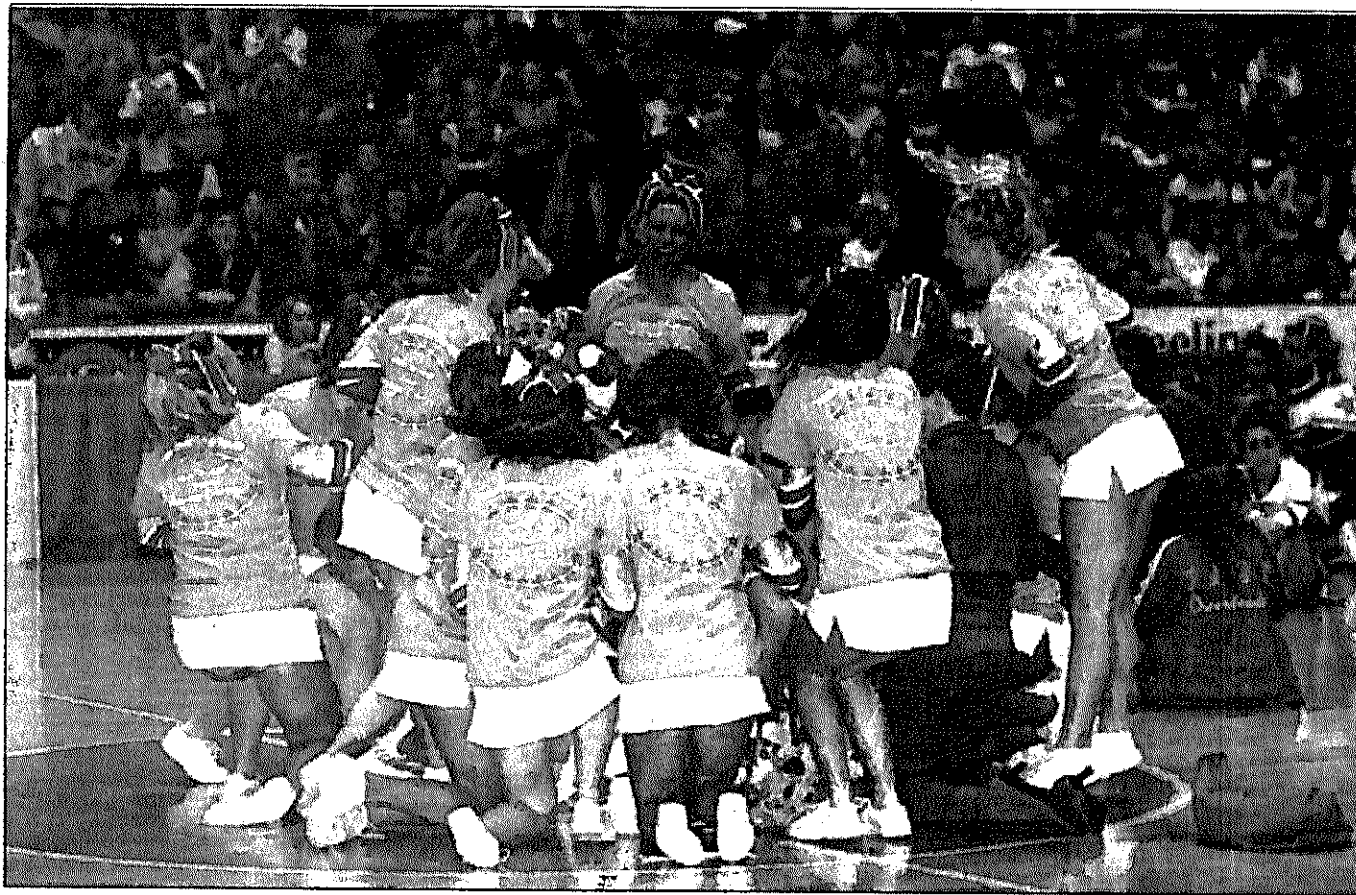
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T-L Photos/JOEL JOSEPH

CHEERLEADING SQUADS from across the valley flocked to WesBanco Arena in Wheeling Saturday to give it their best shot at the 17th Annual OVAC Cheering Competition.

ABOVE: Members of the St. Clairsville Red Devils' cheering team react after their victory in the AAA division was announced.

AT RIGHT: Monroe Central's Ashton Bondy and crew deliver a performance that helped the Seminoles take the AA division crown.

SEE YOU - VIEW additional photos of this event on page C8 in today's paper and online at cu.timesleaderonline.com



Champions of OVAC cheering take their titles

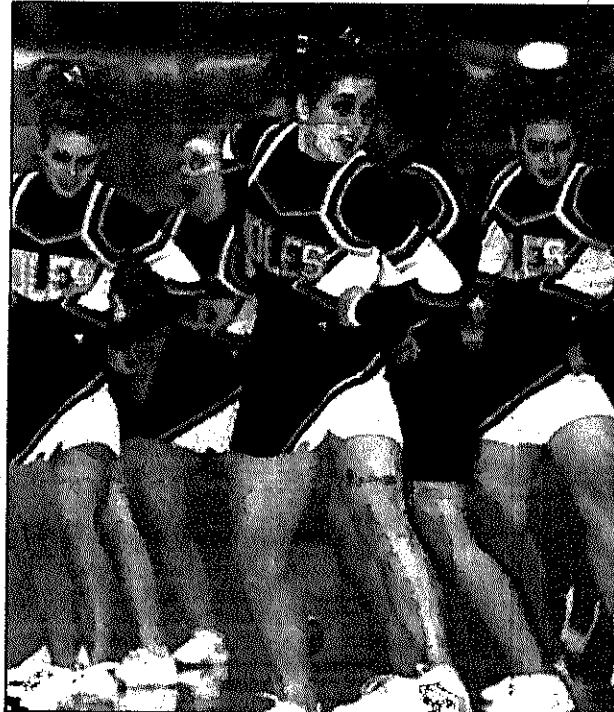
By **BRIANNA SADLER**
Times Leader Staff Writer

THE 17TH Annual OVAC Cheering Competition at WesBanco Arena in Wheeling finished with a bang Sunday when three local teams took home winning trophies from the highly competitive tournament.

Going head to head in the class AAA division, the St. Clairsville Red Devils took home the first-place honors, and the Martins Ferry Purple Riders finished with a third-place win. Taking home the first-place honors in the class AA division was the Monroe Central Seminoles.

The Martins Ferry Purple Riders entered the competition this year as the defending champions, but completed third after runners up Magnolia Blue Eagles and first-place winners the St. Clairsville Red Devils.

With so many changes that have occurred for the squad during the past year, first-time head coach Michelle DeGasperis



said that she felt her squad entered the tournament more as the "underdogs."

"It's been a long road," DeGasperis said.

With the Martins Ferry School District's completion of the new school complex, DeGasperis said that it was difficult for the girls to find a place to practice. But for three hours a day, the girls worked on their jumps, tumbling and dancing as well as exercises at the gym.

Each girl on the competing squad was also required to enroll in a tumbling class at the Ohio Valley Gymnastics twice a week. And for up to three weeks before the tournament, all practices were required.

"The girls are a little sore, but it comes with it," DeGasperis said. "My girls are fighters."

Another reason DeGasperis said the girls had to work especially hard this year was because of how young the squad is.

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"We only have three seniors," DeGasperis said. "But my three seniors are really great. They've shown great leadership skills and have encouraged our girls and showed them what needs to be done to win at the OVAC."

"Martins Ferry has always had that drive to win. It's instilled in every girl that comes through the program. They've been forced to work hard this year. The routine was faster and included more tumbling."

"We know we did the best we could do," Senior cheerleader captain Amy Hammerquist said.

To her underclassmen teammates, Hammerquist added, "(For next year) just keep doing exactly what we've been doing. Work hard and practice, and don't let anyone tell you you can't do it."

Having taken the OVAC title in 2006, the St. Clairsville Red Devils returned to the floor this year and finished with, not only another first-place title, but also a standing ovation from the crowd.

"They really had that 'wow' factor," onlooker Suzy Hawthorne commented. "They put a lot of work into it; you can tell. They took control."

Between practicing at basketball games, veteran head coach Shawn Tomlan said the girls also put in other practices four to five times a week leading up to the competition.

"We learned our routine in November, and we've been working on cleaning it up a lot," Tomlan said. "We spent a lot of time on accuracy, and they're always working on their tumbling skills and their jumping. They have great showmanship."

After coming in second by 1.3 points to Martins Ferry last year, Tomlan said that her squad was really working on reclaiming their 2006 first-place title.

"There's a lot of talent in the Ohio Valley. There's so many strong squads," Tomlan said.

Upon hearing the announcement that the Red Devils had won, tears started to fall from the faces of the very enthusiastic winning team.

"We were so nervous," senior team member Brooke Hays said. "We worked really hard. We felt it with the whole season."

"I feel amazing. All of that practicing and practicing and practicing paid off," freshman team member Taylor Martin said. *Sadler may be reached at bsadler@timesleaderonline.com.*

Hard work pays off for cheering squads

By BRIANNA SADLER
Times Leader Staff Writer

ENERGY, FOCUS, determination and adrenaline combined with a strong team and a precise routine are what it takes to compete each year at the OVAC Cheering Competition, and the 34 teams which competed on Saturday at the WesBanco Arena for the 17th annual competition brought nothing short of just that.

In no more than three minutes, each squad had to do its best to earn a combined score of up to 100 points. Judges made their decision based on cheering and dancing fundamentals such as precision, formation, variety, rhythm, music interpretation, voice, execution, and synchronization as well as format, choreography, degree of difficulty and over all effect.

Having taken the OVAC title in 2006, the St. Clairsville Red Devils returned to the floor this year and finished with, not only another first-place title, but also a standing ovation from the crowd.

"We learned our routine in November, and we've been working on cleaning it up a lot," Head coach Shawn Tomlan said. "We spent a lot of time on accuracy, and they're always working on their tumbling skills and their jumping."

Tomlan said that by the time the girls get to be seniors, their showmanship really starts to "shine." The girls who were sophomores in 2006 had the opportunity as seniors to reclaim their

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crown.

"We were fighting to get it back," Tomlan said. "They're fun to watch. They have great showmanship. I'm very fortunate that I have a real good group of dedicated girls. People don't know how tough this sport is."

The Monroe Central Seminoles took the first-place title in Class AA division, and Head coach Susan Bondy said that it was their reward for "hard work paying off."

"Our goal was to place in the top three," Bondy said. "We had some technical difficulties when our music stopped

during the routine, and I think the girls had given up thinking that they could win after hearing who placed second. When they heard them call our name for first place their reaction was just over all joy and disbelief."

Because Monroe Central lacks a full gymnasium, Bondy said the girls were limited to three practices a week as well as one hour of gymnastics training a week; they had to travel between three locations and only practiced on a full floor a few times before the competition.

"There's not a bad attitude in the bunch," Bondy said. "I have good cheer-

leaders. Good students. Good Girls."

Other place winners included, in class AAAA division, Brooke in first with Wheeling Park in second and Buckeye Local in third.

Second and third-place winners in AAA were Magnolia and Martins Ferry, respectively.

Placing second and third in AA were River and Linsly, respectively.

And placing in the class A division were Toronto in first, Bishop Donahue in second and Bellaire St. John in third.

Sadler may be reached at bsadler@timesleaderonline.com



Day of Champion

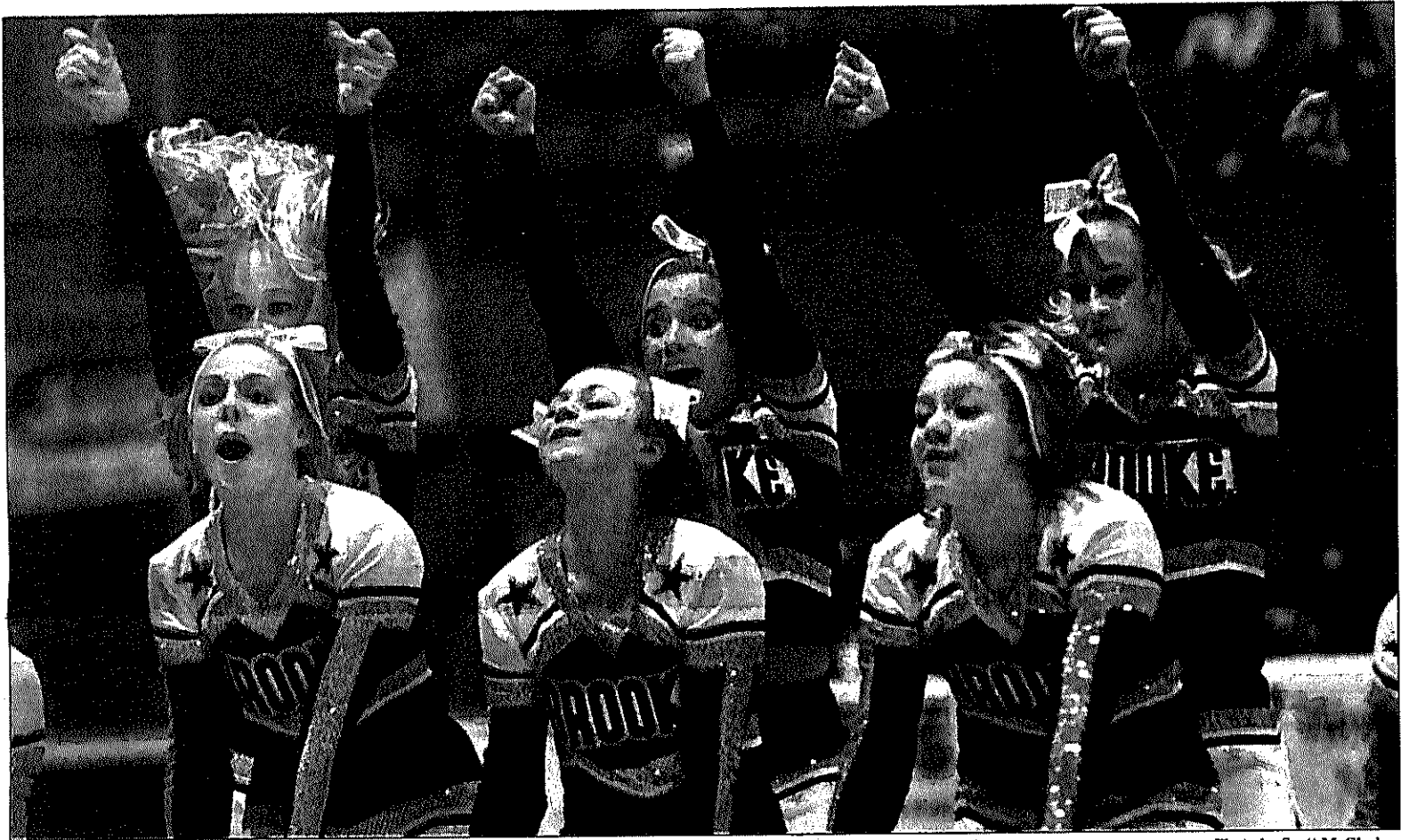


Photo by Scott McCloskey

Members of the Brooke High School cheerleading squad perform their routine during Saturday's OVAC Cheerleading Championships at Wheeling's WesBanco Arena.

Brooke Defends Cheering Title

Bruins, St. Clairsville, Monroe Central, Toronto victorious at WesBanco Arena

By LISA KENZORA
For the News-Register

In any competition, there's pressure, then motivation, followed by an adrenaline rush and, as always, a drive to be the best.

More than 350 cheerleaders crowded into WesBanco Arena on Saturday for the OVAC Cheerleading Competition with no less than that inspiration that accompanies any athlete.

Some squads felt the pressure to defend their title. Others came in motivated to take back a first place crown. Most teams hoped for the adrenaline rush to take home the trophy for the first time. And all of them had 3 minutes to be center stage and prove they could be the best.

The majority of the squads incorporated standing tucks, difficult tumbling passes, timely jump sequences, sharp motions and fast

**"They compliment one another
and they practice 3-4 hour days, six
days a week. We have a dynasty."**

Christine Stucin

dances to grab the judges attention.

After the scores were tallied, the Brooke Bruins defended their AAAA title with at least 20 twists throughout their time on the floor.

St. Clairsville in AAA regained the crown it held in 2006.

Monroe Central in AA, and Toronto in A, grabbed the first place trophy for the first time.

The Brooke Bruins wowed the crowd. Most girls pulled off two twists each. Their precision and synchronization in tumbling, dance and cheer took home the title for the fourth time in the last five years for Brooke.

"It's the drive that they have," Brooke coach Christine Stucin. "They compliment one another and they practice 3-4 hour days, six days a week. We have a dynasty."

Despite the 10 state titles the Brooke Bruins have earned, Brooke's Cara Gaich notes, "I think we always have pressure, no matter what competition we go to. It's never a sure shot we are going to win."

St. Clairsville's routine was marked by strong tumbling passes and "energy and enthusiasm" as Coach Shawn Tomlan said.

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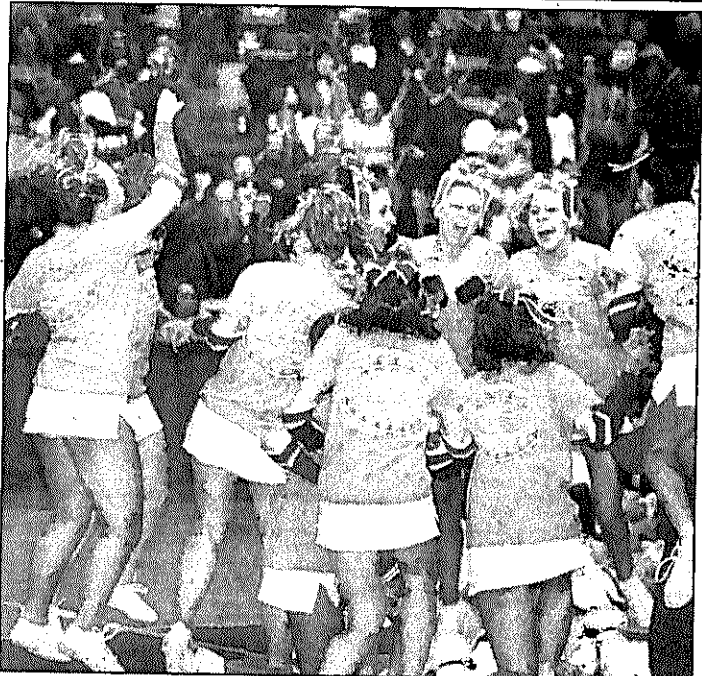


Photo by Joel Joseph

St. Clairsville cheerleaders show their excitement after being announced as the Class AAA winners.



Photo by Scott McCloskey

Monroe Central captured its first OVAC cheering championship Saturday in Class AA.

TITLE

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"We had a little bit of everything in our routine."

"We worked seven days a week and put all of our heart and effort into it," Red Devils cheerleader Brooke Hays said.

Monroe Central overcame a technical difficulty and still came out on top in Class AA.

"Our music stopped but our drill and practice helped us recover," Seminoles coach Susan Bondy said.

"Our routine was fast paced and we have precision."

Monroe Central freshman Liz Schuerman added: "It was exciting and an adrenaline rush."

Toronto won A without any senior leadership.

"We have no seniors, two juniors, three sophomores and five freshman," Toronto coach Mary Beth Takacs said. "My girls have been together since they were 7-years-old. They work well together. They give 100 percent."

Toronto cheerleader Rachael Stone noted that the girls all rely on one another, while Taylor Sneathen added "we're one big family."

En route to both victory and defeat, numerous cheerleaders are injured throughout the season.

The strength training, vigorous exercise, and practice tumbling wears and tears on a

body. Some are able to perform, while others' time of injury may leave a cheerleader out of competition.

The squads are constantly revamping routines, hoping for perfection.

OVAC Directors Libby Shepherd and Mary Kay Zitzelsberger are dedicated to making the day a tribute to the girls who spend so much time supporting others.

Shepherd and Zitzelsberger have been directing for 15 years.

"This is a fun competition without mounts where we come out and cheer and dance and tumble," Shepherd said.

Zitzelsberger added: "OVAC planning starts in February. The OVAC now gives out scholarships based on ACT/SAT scores, community service and grades. Cheering is a full year commitment."

Second-place winners were Wheeling Park (AAAA), Magnolia (AAA), River (AA), and Bishop Donahue (A).

Third-place finishes were Buckeye Local (AAAA), Martins Ferry (AAA), Linsly (AA), and Bellaire St. John (A).



Photo by Scott McCloskey

There were plenty of smiles around the Toronto contingent after it was announced the Red Knights had won.

OVAC Cheering Championships



Photo by Rick Thorp

Sisters, from left, Alexa, Bria and Erica Cross will be competing with the Wheeling Central team at Saturday's OVAC Championships at WesBanco Arena in Wheeling.

Fingers Cross-ed

Trio of sisters hoping to lift Central to cheering title

By RICK THORP
Staff Writer

After lending support to football, basketball and other teams throughout the year, local high school cheerleaders will be receiving some encouragement of their own Saturday.

Wheeling's WesBanco Arena will once again play host to the Ohio Valley Athletic Conference Cheering Championships, with 34 schools scheduled to compete for crowns in four classes.

Action begins at 9:30 a.m. with teams in Class AA taking the floor. Class A schools will compete next, followed by teams in Class AAA and Class AAAA.

Wheeling Central, the defending Class AA champion, moves up to Class AAA this season. A victory by the Maroon Knights would give the school a tournament-record 12 consecutive titles, breaking their tie with Wheeling Park, which finished first from 1992-2002.

A victory would also give Wheeling Central its 15th championship, the most of any school.

Cheering has a storied tradition at Wheeling Central, just like it does any many other schools throughout the Ohio Valley.

And when the Maroon Knights race onto the floor to perform their routine, they'll be doing it with three members of the Cross family — Alexa, Erica and Bria — daughters of Cheryl and David Cross.

All three sisters believe performing under the bright lights of one of the Ohio Valley's most prestigious sports venues adds to the allure of the event, which brings together cheering fans of all ages.

"It's exciting," said Bria, a freshman, who has watched her older sisters compete the last few years. "You get nervous, too. We just want to do our best and hopefully come back with a trophy and a victory."

Bria has been learning the ropes of high school cheering from her twin sisters, who are juniors. She said the transition from eighth-grade cheering to the varsity level was challenging.

"It's a pretty big transition," she said. "There are lots of harder things you have to do and you have to push yourself a lot harder."

Cheerleaders spend as much time practicing, if not more, than participants in other varsity sports.

"On weekdays, we usually practice for about two hours, and on Saturdays we sometimes have four-hour practices."

**Erica Cross,
Central cheerleader**

"We practice six days a week," said Erica, who has been cheering at Central for three years. "On weekdays, we usually practice for about two hours, and on Saturdays we sometimes have four-hour practices."

And when you factor in the offseason work, like attending camps and tryouts, cheering can easily be a year-round activity, especially at Central, where the football and basketball teams have gone deep into the postseason recently.

"We start conditioning in the summer," noted Alexa, who started cheering during her sophomore year. "Tryouts are in August and we cheer from the start of school until basketball is over."

And unlike Ohio, cheering has a championship in West Virginia. The West Virginia Secondary Schools Activities Commission hosts regional tournaments in November, with a state tournament conducted each December.

And at Central, cheerleaders start working on a routine for the regional and state tournaments in the summer.

But for the OVACs, they have a smaller window of time — about a month — to learn a new routine.

"Someone choreographs it and we go piece by piece working on each part until everyone can do it together," Alexa explained.

Practice time is also spent working on crowd cheers, the traditional cheers fans might hear during a football or basketball game.

While it's a lot of work, the Cross sisters reap rewards of their labor when they see smiles on the folks in the stands.

"The games wouldn't be as exciting without cheerleaders," Erica said. "It's a good way to get everyone involved in the games."

Our Opinion

Cheering the Champs

THEY ARE the ones usually leading the cheers. But Saturday, cheerleading squads from throughout the Ohio Valley were the recipients of the applause.

The Ohio Valley Athletic Conference staged its annual cheerleading championships at WesBanco Arena. It is competition as passionate and intense as prep football or basketball.

Cheerleading has evolved into a year-round activity. Participants train 12 months a year to help their teams in their respective quests for championships. Tumbling, dance and weightlifting have become major parts of the cheering title equation.

The OVAC championships showcase the ability and preparation brought to the mat by squads in four classifications. The cheering extravaganza is produced under the meticulous scrutiny of directors Libby Shepherd and

Mark Kay Zitzlesberger.

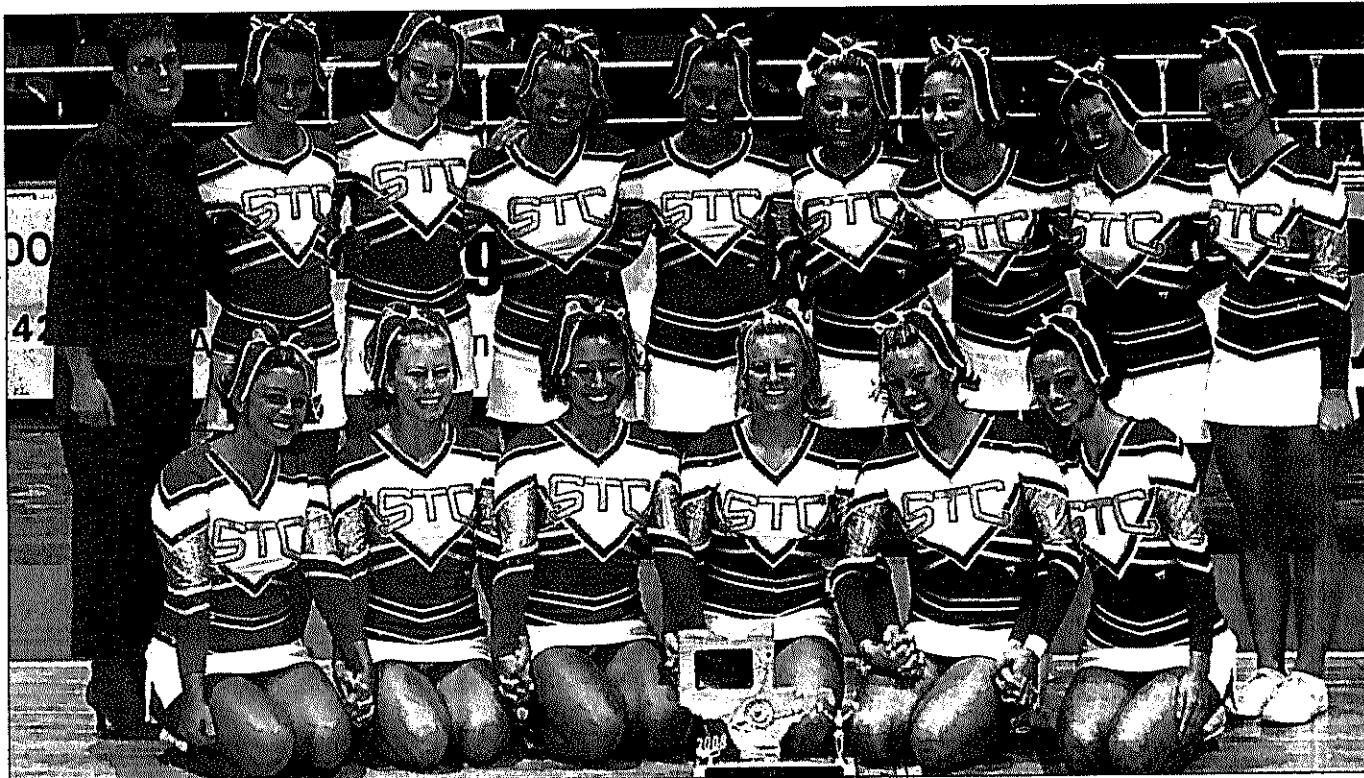
The committed twosome have been putting on the spectacle for 15 years now -- and have done it flawlessly. They begin their work in February. That speaks volumes on how much goes into the event.

After the dust settled late Saturday afternoon, four well-drilled squads left with gold medals.

WE IN Eastern Ohio are fortunate to call championship squads are own -- St. Clairsville in Class AAA and Monroe Central in Class AA. The Red Devils and Seminoles were joined by Brooke in 4-A and Toronto in 1-A.

We tip our caps to the four victorious schools as to all the other teams and individuals who competed in the ever-growing event. We also cheer Shepherd, Zitzelsberger and the OVAC for putting on a most worthwhile program.

OVAC Champions



T-L Photo/JOEL JOSEPH

WINNING THE OVAC 3-A Cheerleading championship at WesBanco Arena Saturday was this team of Red Devils from St. Clairsville High. Pictured, front row, from left, are, Mallory Cooper, Stephanie Mattern, Emilee Carlton, Lindsey Neavin, Megan Campbell and Brooke Hays. Back row, from left, are, Coach Shawn Tomian, Emily Tennant, Jamie Matkovich, Lauren Cencula, Cassi Baugh, Cheryl Vicker, Stephanie Verba, Erica DeFilippo and Taylor Martin.