

CHEERLEADING, DRILL TEAM, DANCELIN AND BAND AS VARSITY SPORTS

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO BE CONSIDERED A SPORT, AND WHAT KINDS OF RIGHTS AND RULES GO ALONG WITH THIS CLASSIFICATION?

It has come to our attention that there are athletic governance associations, schools and colleges who are attempting to recognize drill team, cheerleading, danceline, marching bands, twirling and similar extracurricular activities as bona fide sports and varsity athletic program offerings in order to comply with Title IX.

The purpose of this position paper is to comment on the use of an appropriate definition of varsity sport and the conditions under which physical activities should be considered sports for the purpose of compliance with Title IX of the 1972 Education Amendments Act.

DEFINITION OF SPORT

The most commonly accepted definition of a sport activity includes all of the following elements:

- a physical activity that involves propelling a mass through space or overcoming the resistance of a mass
- a contest or competition against or with an opponent
- is governed by rules that explicitly define the time, space and purpose of the contest and the conditions under which a winner is declared
- the acknowledged primary purpose of the competition is a comparison of the relative skills of the participants

Any physical activity in which relative performance can be judged or quantified can be developed into a competitive sport as long as (1) the physical activity includes the above defined elements and (2) the primary purpose is competition between teams or individuals within a competitive structure comparable to other sport activities.

Danceline, cheerleading, drill team, baton twirling and marching band are normally considered to be extracurricular activity programs that are conducted in conjunction with sports contests and involve elements of physical activity. They usually exist to entertain or educate a spectating audience, or, in the case of cheerleading, to coerce audience enthusiasm and participation for an athletic team that is engaged in competition. Even bona fide sport teams may participate in exhibitions and demonstrations (such as a halftime volleyball demonstration), but these activities or performances are neither athletic contests nor practices. These exhibition activities are secondary and indeed unnecessary to the existence of an athletic team or the purpose of an athletic activity.

Similarly, danceline, cheerleading, drill team, baton twirling and marching band (and in some states even debate and typing) may periodically act like sports teams when they engage in state or regional championship competitions conducted under the jurisdiction of high school federations. The existence of a competitive opportunity does not qualify the extracurricular activity as an athletic team or sport. This issue was addressed by a 1975 Office for Civil Rights Memorandum to School Superintendents which specifically stated that “drill teams, cheerleaders and the like” were extracurricular activities not considered to be a part of the institution’s athletic program. Title IX requires an assessment of the quality of competitive opportunities offered to men and women with regard to competitive level and numbers of competitions. The Office for Civil Rights looks at the number of competitive events offered per sport, the number and length of practices and the number of pre-season and post-season competitive opportunities offered to both male and female participants.

This does not mean that drill teams or similar programs could not under any circumstances be considered a sport. If the primary purpose of drill team or cheerleaders is to compete against other drill teams or cheerleaders on a regular season and post season qualification basis in much the same structure as basketball or gymnastics and if the team conducted regular practices in preparation for such competition while under the supervision of a coach, these activities could be considered sports. On occasion, these groups could also put on exhibitions at boys’ or men’s sports events, but these exhibitions could not be their primary purpose.

Compared to boys, girls still enjoy 1.3 million fewer opportunities to participate in high school and college sports. Few schools are in compliance with Title IX and most are looking to increase girls' sports participation in order to meet the letter and spirit of the law. In this period of economic difficulty, many schools would like to take existing and already funded extracurricular programs for girls and find a way to put a different label on them in order to make them athletic teams or sports. It seems obviously transparent and unethical to do so when danceline, drill team, cheerleading, baton twirling or the marching band are clearly not fulfilling the definitional requirements of sport.

The competitive sport experience is critically important for our daughters as well as our sons. Girls who compete in sport are more confident, have higher levels of self-esteem, stronger self-concepts and are less likely to experience depression. Research shows that girls who play sports are more likely to graduate from high school and are at lower risk for an unintended pregnancy. Girls who are physically active reduce their lifelong risks of breast cancer, osteoporosis and heart disease. Learning how to be successful in a highly competitive environment is an important sport lesson that has significant implications for career success. In an economy where two incomes are often necessary to provide for one's family, we simply cannot afford to train our daughters less effectively than our sons.

The achievement of fair treatment in sport requires a good faith effort on the part of those charged with the well-being of our children.