

Sachem North cheerleaders land third in UCA National Championship

February 20, 2010 by LAURA ALBANESE / laura.albanese@newsday.com



Sachem North cheerleading would kindly like the world of high-spirited stuntmen and women to know its name. The team will even spell it out for you.

With a few lively screams and a routine set to a medley of songs such as "Heaven on Earth" and "Public Service Announcement," the girls of S-A-C-H-E-M reintroduced themselves to the national cheerleading world this week at the UCA National Championship in Orlando, Fla. And as it turned out, they're pretty good at this whole cheerleading thing.

"The feeling you get when you hear 'Sachem North' and 'third place,' it's a complete shock moment," senior and co-captain Jillian Schook said. The team's third captain is also a senior - Stephanie Deboer.

Sachem placed third behind [Bob Jones](#) (Madison, Ala.) and Upper Darby (Pa.); Sachem East placed sixth. Though the Flaming Arrows have come in first in smaller divisions, this is the best the team has ever done, said coach Jamie D'Andrea. In the past three years, Sachem North placed 10th in large schools and sixth in a coed smaller school division. Even so, when it came to the large school varsity group, the most competitive division in nationals, few people picked out the girls in gold and black as competitors to watch.

"We weren't really known and no one was expecting us," Schook said. When Dunbar [Lexington, Ky.], last year's third-place team and the subject of an episode of "Cheerleader Nation," passed them in the practice area, "they didn't look at us. They didn't know we were a team to look out for," she said.

With different teams came similar reactions: "No one could pronounce it," Schook said. "The teams didn't know who we were. They'd say 'Sah-chem.' "

In the end, it was their high difficulty routine that spoke for them. Double back handsprings, round-off handsprings and full-up stunts - over the course of a grueling few months of practice, these became just a few of Sachem North's favorite things.

"We were doing stunts and tucks from the beginning," D'Andrea said. "We went to [cheerleading] camp in August and we already had a full team doing full-up [aerial] stunts from the get-go."

Executing from those first tentative days to the finals was "a big accomplishment," said senior Jackie Tomascello, also a captain. The team lost some 13 seniors to graduation and revamped in the new school year. The talent was certainly there, D'Andrea said, but some had to hurdle mental roadblocks in order to pull off more difficult stunts.

"The big thing was don't be afraid," D'Andrea said. "With trying the much more elite stunts, they had the talent, but they lacked the confidence . . . They write it on their socks now, 'Confidence.' "

The magic marker seems to work. One of the Flaming Arrows' premier tumblers was one of those unsure freshmen: Kristina Hadnagy. During the national routine, she took over most of the double back handspring tucks along with Taylor DeSimone.

"We didn't do our best routine," Tomascello admitted, as the team lacked a touch of the polish it had in other competitions. "But the difficulty was there. We were expecting the worst, but they kept calling the names and the placing and we realized they hadn't called our name."

Indeed, the routine had demanded respect. The medley hits the familiar strains of the [Aretha Franklin](#) hit, "Respect," when four fliers execute identical aerial portions of a kick twist basket toss. They fly up in the air, almost suspended, before twisting their bodies 360 degrees - landing surely in the arms of four awaiting teammates. It was an attention-getter, to be sure - even for people who can't pronounce Sachem.

"Yeah," Schook said, laughing. "I'm pretty sure next year, they'll know who we are."

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