

# Cheer we go!

*Actress Robyn Morrison and her rugby-star husband Glenn Morrison are running a flourishing cheerleading school in Bradford, where the activity is taught as an athletic sport. With the popularity of cheerleading increasing in Yorkshire and beyond, Mark Butler went to meet them.*

**M**ost people associate cheerleading with America, and picture pretty women scampering about in short skirts. But the reality is that the activity is becoming very popular in the UK, and it often involves great athleticism and fitness.

Actress and coach Robyn Morrison and Bradford Bulls star Glenn Morrison set up the Panache Cheer school to teach the activity to children earlier this year, and it's been a huge success. On any given Wednesday at the Richard Dunn Sports Centre in Bradford you'll find kids aged five to nine enjoying a range of games and routines, while older girls take on impressive stunts where they are lifted up high into the air. Robyn said: "We started it in February and it's just got bigger and bigger. There's been huge demand."

The Australian couple say that cheerleading is a great way for young people to get fit, and is a proper sporting activity with real benefits. Glenn said: "We picked Bradford because there's not much sporting activity available for kids and particularly girls here – certainly not compared to Australia.

"Cheerleading at Panache involves a proper warm-up at the start and warm-down at the end, and it's a great workout. It's also great for improving confidence. You see kids come out of their shell and go from being very quiet to very confident."

Robyn added: "People have a preconceived idea that cheerleading is just dancing around with pompoms, but it involves stunts and gymnastics and it's really athletic – you have to be very fit. With the older students we do stunts where they're standing on each other's hands and that requires a lot of skill. Obviously safety is paramount and we work up to the big stunts. Some teenage girls who turn up are very self-conscious and think they're not right for it because they're not stick-thin, but real cheerleading isn't about glamorous women prancing around in skimpy outfits – it's a real sport and requires a lot of strength."

There's no doubt that cheerleading is becoming a more popular activity in the UK. Although it is not yet officially recognised as a sport, there are more than 400 official clubs and over 15,000 participants, with a 20 per cent annual growth rate in competition entries since 1998. In Yorkshire alone there are over 20 clubs, with four in Huddersfield and five in Leeds. Robyn said: "In the last two years it's grown so much in the UK. Cheerleading is getting really big, and I think it's going to get even bigger. The popularity of films like *High School Musical* has made a big difference and got a lot of kids interested."

Robyn is a Master-level qualified cheerleading coach who has been involved in the activity for many years, and while Glenn was playing in the National Rugby League (NRL) in

