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By Fred Mitchell

DECISIONS, decisions.

It didn't used to be this complicated for high school girls. The choices were plain and simple. Girls were either cheerleaders, or pompon girls, or baton twirlers, or drill team members.

Now, thanks largely to Title IX, high school girls have more and better extra-curricular options. But they also have to face some pressing questions when deciding whether to go the cheerleader route or the sports route.

● Is high school cheerleading a perpetuation of sexism?

● Is the level of girls' high school sports adversely affected by the large number of potentially good athletes who opt for cheerleading?

"YES, THE GIRLS have had problems like that before," said Willowbrook volleyball and track coach Carole Jacoby. "Girls are going to have to make some adjustments, some major adjustments.

"At a lot of schools, cheerleading is strictly a popularity thing. It was when I was in high school, but not here at

"As far as cheerleading . . . there's a time and a place for everything. What they're doing takes some athletic ability, too."

—Janie Fincher
Chicago Hustle

Willowbrook. We're a little more flexible with the girls. There are some who are doing both — cheerleading and playing sports. It sort of divides their efforts, and some of them are finding it very hard."

One at Willowbrook who is trying to do both is senior Jackie Cameron. The 5-10 athlete says that she gets up at 5:30 every morning, catches the 7 a.m. bus to school, and doesn't get home until 7 at night after practice sessions for volleyball and pompon practice: "She's really running herself," said Coach Jacoby.

"GIRLS ARE FACED with big decisions at an early age now," said Cathy Core, who coaches the Chicago Honey Bears. "I also work with grammar school girls in Wheaton, trying to get them interested in cheerleading, but they want to get involved in other things like gymnastics and basketball. It's definitely a problem situation."

"I decided to be a cheerleader only, instead of going into sports," said Sandburg High School's Chris Carman. "You get to decorate the guys' lockers and listen to the noise of the crowd. It's more exciting. And actually, cheerleading is a sport itself, to me."

"It's a serious sport," added Natalie Cetera, also a Sandburg cheerleader. "I think professional cheerleaders, like the Honey Bears, are exploited, with the kind of clothes they wear and everything. But not us."

"Being on the Honey Bears is like being on a competitive team," countered 21-year-old Jackie Nicholson, a Downers Grove South graduate. "I was a cheerleader for three years in high school and also participated in gymnastics and volleyball. It was hard to do

both, so my senior year I decided to quit gymnastics. I have no regrets."

"HERE IN Chicago, especially, when I go to speak at banquets and such, I hear a lot of high school girls saying I look funny out there playing," said pro basketball player Janie Fincher of the Chicago Hustle.

"I can't understand that attitude. Back when I was in high school [in three different small-town schools in Oklahoma], if you were a basketball player, you got all the dates. You were it. The guys would come up looking for girls with uniforms," said Fincher, whose father coached her in high school.

"And now, with the Hustle, we all believe you can be a woman on the court and off. Last year, for the first time, we were being accepted as good athletes, instead of a bunch of women in tight shorts running around.

"I CAN SEE how girls have to make a decision nowadays. I would tell them to give both [cheerleading and competitive sports] a try. But give it a long thought. I was brought up in a very competitive atmosphere. And I knew it

took more than an hour or two of basketball practice a day to be good. I practiced at least four hours a day, including in the summer.

"As far as cheerleading . . . there's a time and place for everything. What they're doing takes some athletic ability, too. Like the Honey Bears, well, I don't think I could stand to wear those skimpy uniforms in the dead of winter just to get somebody to stare at me. Their outfits look kinda funny, but they probably think we look funny running around in a pair of boxer shorts or something," Fincher said, jokingly.

"WHEN I WAS in high school, I had to make a choice between gymnastics and joining the drill team," said Honey Bear Carolyn Caruso, a 19-year-old Proviso West graduate. "I was real strong in floor exercise, and gymnastics had been my first choice all along. But I decided to go with the dance drill team.

"I don't feel we are exploited. A lot of people feel that way, but they don't understand that it's a lot of hard work. Athletics is more self-rewarding, but cheerleading makes a lot of people happy."

"It's not that girls who participate in

sports are thought to be masculine or anything like that. I ran track on my own for endurance and participated in gymnastics up until high school. And I don't think I look like I'm what you would call masculine."

Raylene Bernard, a Honey Bear who graduated from Libertyville High School, was an outstanding gymnast in high school, finishing second in the state AAU uneven bars competition while participating on a club team from Mt. Prospect.

"If I were to give a young high school girl advice now on which route to take, I would tell her to concentrate on one thing, whichever she does better."

"The girls will probably never, ever be up to the standard of competition of the boys. That much emphasis on sports would take the fun out of playing," said Willowbrook gymnastic coach Randi Kamber.

"But cheerleading is a lot different now; it's not sensationalized, it has a lot more glamour to it. When I was in high school you had the 'greasers' and the 'rah-rah's.' But now, being a 'rah-rah,' a cheerleader, has a good connotation."