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May The Force Be With You

The members of Air Force One of Houston are a force to be reckoned with.

By Beth Whiffen

[Issue: October 2002](#)

In the two seasons that the Air Force One all-star squad has existed, its members have accomplished what most teams only dream of achieving. The Houston-based, 21-strong, all-girl squad is the apex of University Cheer and Dance's repertory of 15 teams. Besides winning the UCA large varsity Nationals in 2001 and 2002, AFO has secured the top spot at Cheer Power Nationals and the American Spirit Championships, and placed in the top 10 at NCA Nationals.



United We Stand

A standout quality of this squad is its seemingly unwavering team unity. "We are truly friends, not just teammates," says AFO member Megan Ryan, 18. The team focuses on having fun and motivating each other, rather than worrying about placing high at competition—a philosophy that has served them well. Motivating each other and putting the team before anything else have gotten this team a long way in two short years. "If my teammates believe in me, then I can believe in myself," says Ashley Efir, 18. "It's a really cool feeling to know that you can depend on anyone to give her heart to the team."



Cross Into the Blue

Not only are these girls loyal to each other and the team, but every one of them is an exceptionally talented athlete. Squad hopefuls must be able to do a triple-toe touch-back tuck and a full-twisting layout. And they better be ready for some elite stunting, because AFO is working on tick tock Heel Stretches.

Orient Express

This team is going places—literally. In August, the top 20 members of AFO, along with a few coaches and parents, flew across the globe to China to showcase their skills and learn about Chinese culture. Ping Ping Lin, a Chinese-American woman who owns businesses both in Houston and in Shanghai, China, asked AFO's coach, Nicole Leago, to bring her squad to China to perform at two soccer games. The girls saw this as a unique opportunity to give the Chinese a positive look at American teenagers, since often their only frame of reference to American culture is in the movies. After performing at the sold-out soccer games, the team toured the country. The trip was not only special for the girls on AFO, but also for their parents. Ryan McMinn's mother, Terra, who had just recovered from ovarian cancer, was chosen to go on the trip with the team and enjoy a remarkable life experience with her daughter. "It's amazing that cheerleading can bring such a wonderful opportunity to both cheerleaders and non-cheerleaders," says Ryan, 18.



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AFO Fast Facts

Coaches: Nicole Leago and Heather Clare

Team colors: Blue and white

Fave team ritual: Singing songs as a squad before heading out to the competition floor

All in a day's work: AFO only held a total of eight practices before competing in and winning UCA Nationals in 2001.

Happening hairstyles: For Nationals last season, the AFO girls tied thin blue and white ribbons in their hair and pulled it back into a ponytail with a large bow. Then they curled, crimped and braided small sections of their hair. "It was unique and looked good from the floor," says teammate Megan Ryan.

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