


[Home](#)
[Coaches](#)
[Schedules](#)
[Game Stories](#)
[News Archive](#)
[Multimedia](#)
[Team Rosters](#)
[Maps and Links](#)
[Booster Club](#)
[Past Seasons](#)

Clear Lake Falcons Football

Area teens expose Chinese to cheerleading during trip

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By ANDY SUMMA

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Not even a fall through a glass floor and 20 stitches on her leg could keep Clear Lake High School cheerleader Lindsey Blythe from enjoying her first trip to China.

Blythe, 17, recently returned with 18 other Clear Lake-area cheerleaders from a 15-day trip to Shanghai and Suozzo, where they performed at soccer games, nightclubs, competitions and exhibitions. Four parents and four coaches chaperoned.

Blythe and the other cheerleaders are members of the University Cheer and Dance team, a two-time Universal Cheerleaders Association national champion invited by Chinese sports promoters to perform in China.

"She took a pretty bad fall," said Nicole Leago, president of University Cheer and Dance, a private studio at 550 Genoa Red Bluff. "It was pretty scary, but it looked worse than it really was. It was scary being so far from home at that point, but it turned out to be OK."

Blythe, a senior, was injured before a Shanghai performance when she fell through a glass floor. She and the other girls were warming up on a glass platform they thought was set up for them, but apparently was just part of the set. Blythe fell seven feet.

"I got hurt pretty early in the trip; so I wasn't able to perform with the rest of the girls. But I am so thankful to have had the chance to visit China," she said. "I learned so much about the culture."

The University Cheer and Dance team cheerleaders learned about more than Chinese culture -- they learned what it was like to be celebrities.

"We had reporters around us all the time. We had a press conference, and everybody was wanting to take our picture. We were on television almost the entire time," Blythe said. "It was really amazing. It was pretty cool being a celebrity for a while."

The girls, whose travel was paid for by various cheerleading sponsors, performed at two soccer games. They attracted a crowd everywhere they went, Leago said.

"At the first soccer game we performed at, it was about at half-capacity. But the second game was standing-room-only at a 40,000-seat stadium," she said. "The promoters told us it was because of us. Cheerleading is very respected in China. Sometimes, cheerleaders don't get the respect they deserve (in America), but they're held in high esteem in China."

The large crowds were unexpected, said Cassie Thiessen, 16, a junior at Clear Lake High School.

"It made it pretty nerve-wracking," Thiessen said. "They came expecting to see a great show, and that put a lot of pressure on us. But I think those expectations made us perform better. It was a lot of fun."

The girls, all of whom are between 14 and 17 years old, had a great time, said Kathy Thiessen, chaperone and Clear Lake High School cheerleader coach and mother of Cassie.

"Their performances were wonderful, and they impressed everywhere they went," she said. "Cheerleading is starting to catch on in China, but it's still pretty new. So when they saw us perform, they saw things they hadn't seen before."

The girls said they also saw things they had never seen before.

"I don't think they realized the level of poverty in some parts of the world," Leago said. "Once, we were on a boat in this very dirty, very polluted water, and there were families washing their clothes and drinking this water. It really made us appreciate what we had in America."

Blythe said the trip was humbling.

"We had fun on the trip, but we also realized how lucky we are," she said. "Our lives are pretty good."



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