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EDITORIALS

Cheerleading dangers

The riskiest event in sports?

If you go to a college or high school football game, you'll see dedicated athletes giving their all in a pastime that in some cases, unfortunately, leads to tragic injuries. And we're not talking about the guys in pads and helmets.

The hazards football holds for young brains has gotten a lot of deserved attention, owing in part to the serious dementia seen among such former NFL stars as Chicago's Dave Duerson. But blocks and tackles are not the only source of irreversible harm. Those young people on the sidelines exhorting the crowd with chants and acrobatics are actually at more risk of grave damage than the running back hitting the hole.

If the mention of cheerleading makes you think of gyrating, scantily clad women at Dallas Cowboys games, think again. Among high school and college participants, modern routines feature jumps, flips and throws that would do a circus proud. If something goes wrong when a young woman is atop a human pyramid, 10 feet in the air, the consequences can be devastating.

It may be hard to believe, but cheerleading produces a larger number of catastrophic injuries — concussions, skull fractures, cervical spine injuries, paralysis and death — than any other sport, male or female. Kids get hurt in gymnastics, softball, soccer and basketball, but there are twice as many severe casualties in cheerleading as in all the other female sports combined.

That's the finding of the Council on Sports Medicine and Fitness of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), which notes that the number of cheerleaders is growing rapidly even as the pastime has become more daring. Five times as many females over the age of 5 participate today as in 1990, many of them on competition teams. And over the past decade, the incidence of concussions rose by an average of 26 percent each year. Since 1982, there have been two deaths.

What should be done? The American Association of Cheerleading Coaches and Advisors and the National Federation of State High School Associations coming out in favor of such steps as certifying cheer coaches, furnishing strength training for participants, and imposing restrictions on riskier moves.

The pediatric group recommends barring cheer events on hard surfaces, limiting the height of pyramids, and removing anyone who shows symptoms of a head injury. Most important of all is to designate cheer as a sport, so it is provided with the same resources and treated with the same seriousness as other athletic pursuits.

Right now, says the AAP, only 29 states recognize it as a sport, and the NCAA doesn't regard it that way. Simply raising public awareness can make a big difference: Parents who understand the risks will expect those in charge to protect the kids.

As with football, it's impossible to banish all serious risks from cheerleading without altering it beyond recognition. But to sharply curtail the dangers is a reasonable goal that deserves a roar from the crowd.



HEATHER CHARLES/TRIBUNE PHOTO

Congestion pricing, in which drivers pay for the privilege of avoiding heavy traffic, may be coming to the Chicago area.

Traffic decongestant

Letting drivers pay to avoid delays

If you've ever been mired in a major traffic jam on a Chicago expressway — meaning, if you commuted during rush hour last week — you've probably daydreamed about ways to reach your destination. A helicopter? A jet pack? Teleportation? Then you've returned to the more plausible prospect: that the prevalence of terrible traffic may get worse but will never get better.

That may seem inescapable. As the metropolitan population grows, the volume of cars on the road increases as well. Providing mass transit doesn't seem to make much difference. Advertising the benefits of carpooling rarely works. Telecommuting turns out to be no big help.

Neither is the obvious option of building more highways. Expanded capacity may reduce travel times, but those induce more people to drive, which fills the new capacity until things are as bad as ever. Unless a few hundred thousand locals suddenly pack up and head for Texas, we appear to be stuck.

But maybe not. Transportation planners have long been attracted to an alternative that would charge drivers for the privilege of bypassing heavy traffic. It's called "congestion pricing," and it

could be on the way here.

The idea is being floated by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning as a way to pay for, and make the best use of, new lanes on six major Chicago-area roadways. These lanes would be "congestion-priced" in such a way as to assure that traffic would always flow at the posted speed limit of 55 mph.

In this scenario, a commuter would cut the drive on the Stevenson Expressway from I-355 and the Dan Ryan in half — from 51 minutes (the current morning rush hour average) to 26 minutes. Eisenhower drivers would zip from Mannheim Road to Damen Avenue in 12 minutes, down from 35.

Skeptics will see this as an excuse to gouge motorists who are already saddled with high gasoline prices, heavy fuel taxes and toll charges. Actually, one attraction of the idea is that if you would rather save the money, you'd have as many lanes available as you do now. Only the people who put a higher priority on their time would have to pay.

But here's another attraction: Even tightfisted drivers would benefit, since the express lanes would siphon cars out of the regular lanes enough to speed up travel there. The innovation is also pro-

jected to reduce traffic on main roads close to the expressways.

If you're worried about being gouged, it's reassuring to hear that the extra cost of a faster journey would not be prohibitive — \$2.76 per trip on the Stevenson and \$3.41 on the Eisenhower. Studies of congestion-priced lanes in other cities indicate that even low-income drivers find them worth the cost when time is short.

If congestion pricing were applied to existing roads, it would be less attractive since it would force drivers to pay more for the same pavement. Introducing it solely on additional lanes or roads would mean nobody would be worse off than now — while some, and perhaps all, would be better off.

It's heartening to see planners devise imaginative, economically sound ways to deal with the Chicago area's notorious traffic delays — which the Reason Foundation says have gone from 18 hours a year per commuter in 1982 to 71 hours today.

We could see if we can make that 100 hours. Or we could take a look at something different. The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning deserves credit for doing the latter.