

Redbird competitive cheerleader Carter signs with McKendree

by Brent Feeney, Sports Writer
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ALTON – Competitive cheerleading has been gaining a foothold on the consciousness of the public in recent years.

The growth of the sport can be seen in the number of states who have sanctioned state championships, including Illinois, in recent years. High school and collegiate competitions have been seen on television, most notably on ESPN, for several years.

Alton's team has enjoyed success as well, and one of the Redbirds' cheerleaders, Taylor Carter, signed a letter of intent to join McKendree University's team beginning next fall in a ceremony Monday morning.

“They have a really good cheerleading program,” Carter said following the ceremony as to why she selected the Bearcats, “and they’re a private school, so the teacher and students have a good relationship with each other.”

Carter began cheerleading while in middle school. “It was something I wanted to try,” Carter said about how she got into cheerleading. “I’d been doing gymnastics, so I thought that would be good.

“The most difficult part of competitive cheerleading is probably conditioning.”

“I’ve worked with Taylor over the last three years,” said Redbird coach Breonna Pettigrew, “and every year, I’ve seen her grow in her skills and in her leadership; she’s done a phenomenal job of just always meeting the expectations for what we throw at her as coaches and as the sport evolves.

“I’m proud of her for stepping up. At the college level, it’s very intense and it’s very athletic – she definitely fits that standard. It’s really awesome to see the Alton cheerleading program grow where we can produce college-ready athletes, so I’m really excited about that.”

There’s much more to the sport than people may realize – it takes much work and practice to learn routines and stunts that are performed for competition. “She puts in her hard work,” Pettigrew said, “she studies her craft; she’s always asking for feedback. She’s one of those kids who are kind of low-key but always working – it shows in her skills.

“When you see her competing, you see a big, bubbly personality out there, so she’s great for the job.”

“She’s a very strong base,” said Bearcat coach Bob Oeth of Carter. “I watched her a couple of times this year; she came to practice with us. Just sitting and talking with her, she’s very open to the knowledge of what the college cheerleading stunting is; a lot of the stuff we do is illegal in high school, so having someone who comes in with an open mind and a good attitude is always something we look for; she’s a very good student too, so that always helps.”

McKendree’s competitive cheerleaders are members of the National Cheerleading Association; the Bearcats will be heading to Daytona Beach, Fla, next week for the NCA national competition, highlights of which will be shown later on CBS Sports Network or CBS.

“We're excited to have Taylor joining us,” Oeth said. “We're always looking for kids who excel in the classroom and on the cheerleading mat. It makes a big difference in how they perform in the classroom and on the mat when both of them excel.”

Carter plans to major in criminal justice with an eye on joining a behavioral analysis unit after graduation.

“I'm going to remember all the friends I've had these past four years,” Carter said of what she'll remember from her time as a Redbird, “and all the new friends I made.”