

A passion for cheer continues

By Olivia Kennah

"I was hoping they would be open," University of Wyoming freshman cheerleader Tayler Irving says of the closed café in Coe Library at the University of Wyoming.

It's 9:30 a.m. and Tayler sits on a couch outside of the café reading an issue of "The Branding Iron," the university's student newspaper while sporting a UW cheerleading jacket. He wakes up early because he is in "cheer routine". The University of Wyoming's cheer team practices at 6 a.m. so early mornings have become routine for him.

Tayler comes off a little shy at first, but when he starts to talk about cheer he cannot contain his passion.

Throughout Tayler's career at Green River High School, he competed in football, track and field, wrestling, soccer and cheer. Tayler's mother, Adriana believes he would have tried every sport if he had more time.

"Tayler has always been athletic," Adriana says. He was not "the number one" in sports but he "loved being a part of the team."

It was during Tayler's junior year when he first showed interest in cheerleading. At first his family thought it was "just him saying things out loud," Adriana says, but she told him she supported whatever he wanted to do.

Adriana ran into the sister of the Green River High School's cheer coach at the time, and she asked if Tayler would be interested in joining the team. Adriana and her husband mentioned it to Tayler and he said he was thinking about it.

"We started looking at YouTube videos on cheer and co-ed teams," Adriana says. However after a couple of weeks there was no more mention of cheerleading. It was not until a year later that Tayler joined the cheer team.

A week after football season ended his senior year of high school, girls from the cheer team started telling him he should join the cheer team. At that time, there were quite a few male cheerleaders on the team.

"I think this is what gave Tayler the spark to join cheer," Adriana says.

"I decided to give it a week to see if I liked it," Tayler says. It turned out he really enjoyed cheering but he decided to keep it a secret for a week until he decided it was something he really wanted to do.

Adriana admits she was nervous about Tayler joining the cheer team. "I knew that many people would look down upon him and judge him," she says. Although Tayler did receive criticism from the community, he received a lot more support. Most members of the community saw him as strong young man for joining the team.

Adriana says Tayler has "never really worried about what others thought of him," just as he does not judge others.

Tayler also received "amazing" support from the Green River High School coaching staff, Adriana says. They "really helped all the male cheerleaders over come some of the negativity they received."

The girls on the team were also very welcoming to the male cheerleaders.

High school cheer left a positive impression on Tayler. The cheer team finished first place in all three routines: stunt, non-stunt and co-ed.

"It was my first state competition for any sport so to win was really awesome," Irving says.

His passion for cheerleading came as a surprise to him, but also to his parents, but, "they've always been really supportive of me," Tayler says. "They know that this is who I'm meant to be."

"I never thought in a million years that Tayler would love cheer so much," Adriana says. She is extremely proud of him.

"He knew that there would be huge challenges ahead of him," Adriana says, "but he did not let that stop him."

Taylor smiles thinking back to when he told his dad about joining the cheer team in high school. "My dad kind of laughed but when he realized I was being serious he was like 'Oh, you're serious? Well that's really cool,'" Taylor says.

"My dad did wrestling in high school so he was the big macho guy, but I can do backflips and I can stunt and my dad looks at that and says it's really cool. He hides it though because he's trying to be a macho man," he says with a laugh.

During the cheer season, the coaches brought in male and female cheerleaders from Weber State University and a former cheerleader from the University of Wyoming to help the team during practices. "Taylor then knew for sure that he wanted to cheer at the collegiate level," Adriana says.

After the cheer season ended, he started doing soccer, but it didn't feel right for him. He connected more with cheerleading. He started looking into collegiate cheer at Weber State and the University of Wyoming. He chose UW because he "thought it would be cool to progress with a young team."

The tryouts for the UW cheer team took place in May of his senior year.

"I missed senior prom for it," Irving said, but he did not care because he found his college career to be more important.

"College is where you find out the person you really are," he says.

During tryouts he stayed with some of the guys from the team and they watched the Mayweather vs. Pacquiao boxing match.

"It was really fun," he says. The bonding aspect of the team was a big highlight that Irving enjoyed.

In high school he did not have to try out because the cheer team was encouraging male members to join, and he joined the team a week late. This meant the UW tryouts would be his first experience.

He went in believing that he had a good shot at making it. On the first day, he felt good about his performance. The second day however, he said he was a total mess. He did not know if he was going to make the team. Looking back at the experience he said it was nerve-wracking, but it was fun.

Practice started the summer after he graduated from high school, so he made the move to Laramie. Over the summer he found that collegiate cheer was a lot more competitive than high school cheer.

Last year, the UW cheer team took ninth at Nationals, Taylor says. This year they hope to place within the top three. "We are getting excited about it."

The team has just barely started to prepare for the nationals competition. The coach is still figuring who will be on the national team and who will be alternates in case someone cannot perform.

When Taylor made the transition to cheerleading, he discovered that "it takes a different kind of physicality" from other sports he has participated in.

Tumbling, which is the gymnastics aspect of cheerleading, is a challenge that is nothing like any other sport Taylor has done. He says it takes a lot of focus because it is easy to get confused about where you are at in the air. There is a massive risk of injury when tumbling.

Colorado recently hosted their state competition, so the UW team has been busy with recruiting Colorado cheerleaders on top of cheering at basketball games.

"We've been going like crazy," Taylor said.

"Everyone works really hard," Taylor says of his teammates. They feel they have something to prove because people still look at cheerleading like it is not a sport.

Taylor is very aware of the stigma that comes with being a male cheerleader.

"I got a lot of that in high school, which I thought was weird because I didn't think that was a thing anymore. It caught me off guard," he said. "It teaches you how to have humility as a

person." He believes it teaches him to be true to himself no matter what others might say or think.

"People think 'oh you're a guy cheerleader you just touch girls' butts all day,'" he said. "The girls understand that it is your job to touch them in order to support them. As time goes on, you worry about it less and less."

"Even though people joke about it, and you are around girls all day, it's a job and it's professional."

Taylor believes the most important thing cheer has taught him is how to laugh at himself. "You have to let go of that macho man idea and come back down to reality," he says. Some parts of the routine may seem more feminine, but if he does not do them, the routine will look bad. "I just have to laugh at myself and not be so serious about my image as a guy."

Taylor loves cheerleading and his passion is clear when he talks about it, though he is happy to have a weekend off to relax every once in a while.

Cheer keeps him busy but he is surprised that he is not struggling with balancing cheer with his classes. He had to make sure his classes start after 9 a.m. so he can attend practice in the morning. "For the most part, it hasn't been too difficult for me," he says.

When he started college, his major was in chemical engineering but he changed it to undeclared. He plans to change it to kinesiology because of his love for cheer and all sports. "There are a lot of different things I could do with kinesiology," he says. "I started working out to relieve stress and anger." Now he has a passion for sports and activity and he would love to incorporate that into his future career.

"Cheer has helped him mature," Adriana says. "My husband, daughter and I are extremely proud of Taylor in all of his accomplishments in cheer."

"I am proud to call my son a University of Wyoming cheerleader," Adriana says.

"It's crazy because I've only been cheering for a little over a year," Taylor says. "Now it's hard to imagine my life without it."