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Supremes, a nontraditional cheerleading squad, is a crowd-pleaser

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At 59 -- "and a half," she insists -- Annette Marcus says it would be easy to sit back and let old age overtake her. But it's a battle she refuses to cede, opting instead to take on new and stimulating challenges. Her latest: Cheerleading.

The Sandy Springs resident is one of 12 volunteers who make up the Dream Supremes, the very nontraditional cheerleading squad of the Atlanta Dream women's basketball team. Like her fellow pompom shakers, Marcus is, as the French say, of *un certain âge*: The group's ages range from the mid-50s to the early 70s, with an average of 62. But that doesn't stop any of them from taking center court at Philips Arena and strutting their stuff to tunes by Lady Gaga and James Brown.

"Women in general get stale really fast because they don't connect to new things," Marcus said. "It's fun at this age to be expanding emotionally, spiritually, physically. And everyone in my family gets a kick out of it -- my kids as well as my husband and my 84-year-old mother."

The Dream does have a younger squad, the Shooting Stars, who are all in their mid-20s and the polar opposites of the Supremes, who sport black yoga pants and Dream T-shirts tied at a jaunty angle on the hip.

"The Stars gave us some tips, but we didn't like their boom-boom-booty thing," said organizer Marcia Jaffe. "We do more chorus-girl things -- splits, some stunts. Some women are afraid of getting hurt, but I'll do more daring things, like handstands."

Jaffe approached Dream owner Kathy Betty last spring about organizing an older cheerleading squad after seeing stories about similar groups in Miami, Phoenix and Los Angeles.

"They're really crowd-pleasers," Jaffe said. "You get to ham it up; we don't want serious routines. But we still have to practice every week."

Betty went for the idea immediately.

"My first thought when I saw them was, 'Would I get out there and do that?'" said Betty, 54. "It's pretty neat that these women will take a risk, make a statement, in front of people. It takes guts to do that. And the crowd loves it."

Betty sees the Supremes as more than just a cheering squad.

"These are women of all ages empowering other women by showing that life doesn't stop at 20, 30 or even 50," she said. "I took a risk and bought a basketball team at 54, so in a way, I feel that they represent me."

Along with a broad age range, the Supremes boast a mix of women with considerable life experience. The roster includes a professional photographer, a caterer, a media liaison, an image consultant, real estate professionals and a few retirees.

Rhonda Ware-Brazier has been principal for 14 years at the Cleveland Avenue Elementary school in Atlanta, where news about her extracurricular activity is slowly spreading.

"The other night, I ran into a parent who saw me at a game, so the word is getting out," she said with a laugh. "I think I will let the students all know at some point, and they'll get a big kick out of it."

Ware-Brazier heard about the Supremes through friends and decided to take on the challenge.

"At this point in my 50s, I'm focused on finding things to keep me moving," she said. "I do ballroom dancing so I thought this would be easy, but ballroom and cheerleading are two ends of the spectrum. There are very different moves. And dancing to the Lady Gaga was a stretch for me. But now we're dancing to James Brown -- something I can listen to."

After Ware-Brazier's husband got used to the idea of his middle-aged wife becoming a cheerleader, his second question was about costumes.

"I knew it wouldn't be anything skimpy!" she said. "He's been to the games and brings many of our friends as well as my daughter and mother. They've very excited for me."

The Supremes' routines are choreographed by volunteer Karen Shmerling, 51, whose goal is to show the crowd what older women can do.

"At 55, you're not dead; you can dance, move and be fit, and that's the message we want to send," she said. "Most of these women have never danced before. Not one of them had ever heard of Lady Gaga, either. Some of them say, 'I want to be in the back line,' but there is no relying on the person in front of you. They have to learn how to dance."

The Supremes made their debut after the third quarter of a game on July 25 -- a night when the team broke a 5-game losing streak. As the Dream heads into the playoffs, the Supremes will be courtside to cheer them on. After that, they plan to make appearances around the metro area to tout the message of health and fitness.

"People just go nuts to see older people dancing," Shmerling said. "And yeah, I do make them shake it a bit. It doesn't matter if you're four, 34 or 64, people like to see those tushies shake."

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