

FEATURES

THE RICE THRESHER FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 1993 15

**T**here is one team at Rice that essentially flies in the face of all conventional wisdom.

They smile even when they're losing. When the score's not in their favor, they kick up their heels instead of digging them in. But the greatest contradiction is that they even exist at a school like Rice.

## RODT: A Brief History

The Rice Owls Dance Team was founded in 1992 by Jill Ferguson and RoseAnn Martinez. Ferguson was responsible for the initial Athletic Department approval for the team, while Martinez developed the program.

They set the precedent for student responsibility within this dance program.

"What I've always been proud of is that we do it all ourselves, the choreography, the organization. We have to do it all on our own," said On-Court Captain Jenni Mireles.

This stands out as something important to all of the members of the team.

"We've always been student-run. That means you have to be an administrator and a dancer. You have to come up with routines, be a dancer and critique dancers," Administrative Captain Sarah Hollister said.

And Hollister has been very busy with administrative side of things.

"One of the things I have been trying to do is make the team more cohesive," she explained.

A change she has instituted was acquiring an official announcer/publicity coordinator for the team.

"The old announcer called us 'Owlettes' and didn't get the crowd wound up. So I talked to Lee Hsia because he's into increasing student spirit and he agreed to say great things and get the crowd hyped up," Hollister said.

There are also other changes.

"Last year there was no practice until basketball season..This year we started in August," said On-Court Captain Kathy Archuleta. "Last year we had one uniform. This year we have two and they are both a lot nicer. We have officers this year, and we also do a lot more performing, not just the dances at half-time."

Hollister made efforts over the summer to involve the dance team in the games more and to work with the cheerleaders.

"I didn't want them on one side of the court and us on the other side. I spoke with Anna Chavez [the head cheerleader] over the summer and we worked out doing 'Louie, Louie' together. We want to do more next year," she said, her demeanor both determined and excited.

## "Dedication. Definitely"

Most members of the team have ballet or jazz dance experience in their background. Many of them also have had experience being a spirit leader. Hollister is a 12-year veteran of such teams.

She says that what stands out most about this squad is their commitment.

"It takes so much time to be on the squad," she said. "So the most amazing aspect of it all is the dedication. Definitely. Especially because Rice students are so academically focused. The fact that people are willing to do all of this and school is impressive."



RODT co-founder RoseAnn Martinez

Because dedication is so important to them, they are adamant that people who try out to join the team are willing to give it their all.

"You should join if you love to dance and you want to be part of something," Hollister said seriously. "But you can't join unless you're willing to make a commitment. We're a small group, and one person quitting rearranges the entire squad."

It is obvious that the team dynamic is very important to everyone involved with the dance team. But there are also very individual benefits to be gained, beyond the group advantages and enjoyment.

"Personally, I've gained a place at Rice," Archuleta said. "It's a place where I feel I belong. I have something in common with these people."

She also drew a contrast between the prevailing attitude of the dance team and the general focus of Rice.

"Academics are so intense here. Everyone is trying to get ahead and be a leader in the classroom. It's nice to be in a group where you can be both a leader and follower, where the focus is on working together," Archuleta said of experiences with the dance team.

Mireles said that for her, "being with other students who have a love of dance" is one of the most compelling reasons for her to "make it a priority."

## Criticism... because it's the Rice thing to do

The dance team's purpose is to rally school spirit through public performances, so it is impossible to write about them without including the input of general students.

Early critics of the team said that it wasn't properly reflecting the individualism of Rice University. It was too "high school." It was too "Big University."

It was too mainstream.

Students, staff and an editorial in the *Thresher* decried Rice's loss of individuality. Despite all of this, the team persisted.

Why?

One possibility, of course, is that RODT members are blindly intent on pursuing their own agenda, perhaps, in their minds, remembering popular high school days as a beloved cheerleader. Of course, this isn't high school and "popular" and "beloved" are words associated more with kegs at Rice than with spirit leaders.

In fact, it is no secret that the dance team is far from revered by the some members of the Rice community.

Brown sophomore Kari Hoffman, who says, "I don't think they're appreciated as much as they should be," added "Well, I think that they deserve a fair chance, but I don't know that they've taken all of the measures necessary to get a fair chance."

One Rice student was surprised when asked if she perceived a negative attitude towards the dance team. "Wow," she replied completely earnestly. "I thought spectators enjoyed sitting there watching their legs."

The team does not operate in a vacuum. All of the members are well aware of the criticism and ridicule to which they, and their activity, are sometimes subjected.

"People don't usually say negative things to me. They have more tact than that. But when you go out to dance you can see the reaction of the crowd and you can tell what they think," said Hollister.

Archuleta agreed that some of the vibes the dancers receive wouldn't make anyone want to jump up and down and shout with glee.

But the dance team has to jump up and down and shout with glee and leap in the air and rally support from the people they see whispering and pointing at them.

"I don't think the dance team commands a lot of respect," Archuleta said.

Why not?

There was no pause before her response. "Well, because it's Rice," she said quickly, punctuating her commentary with a good-natured laugh.

"We [members of the Rice community] pride ourselves on intelligence," she continued. "We have problems with athletes getting respect here. And I guess the dance team gets even less."

## They'd rather just be dancing

Mireles is philosophical about the criticism.

"The Rice community is critical of a lot of things. So you have to take criticism with a grain of salt," she said.

While she keeps this in mind, she does not

disregard student opinion entirely.

"I think there's always room for improvement. We can turn around their criticism. Even though it can be bad, you can turn it around and make it good," she said.

Hollister also said that the criticism has an impact and is taken into consideration.

"The problem is, when you're a group for student spirit like this, it's hard to know when you should start listening to criticism," she said. "If we're just out there for ourselves, we're defeating the whole purpose of the team. But until someone in the Athletic Department comes to us, we'll believe criticism is in the minority."

They definitely have a core of student support.

"I think that once they get some more support the program will be wonderful," Lovett freshman Amanda Kallstrom said.

# ALONE

at center court

*A few determined students gave Rice a dance team. But are they igniting enthusiasm or eliciting ridicule?*

by Rachel Dornhelm

## Spirit, love of dance, and individuality

So to get back to the original question ... why has the dance team persisted?

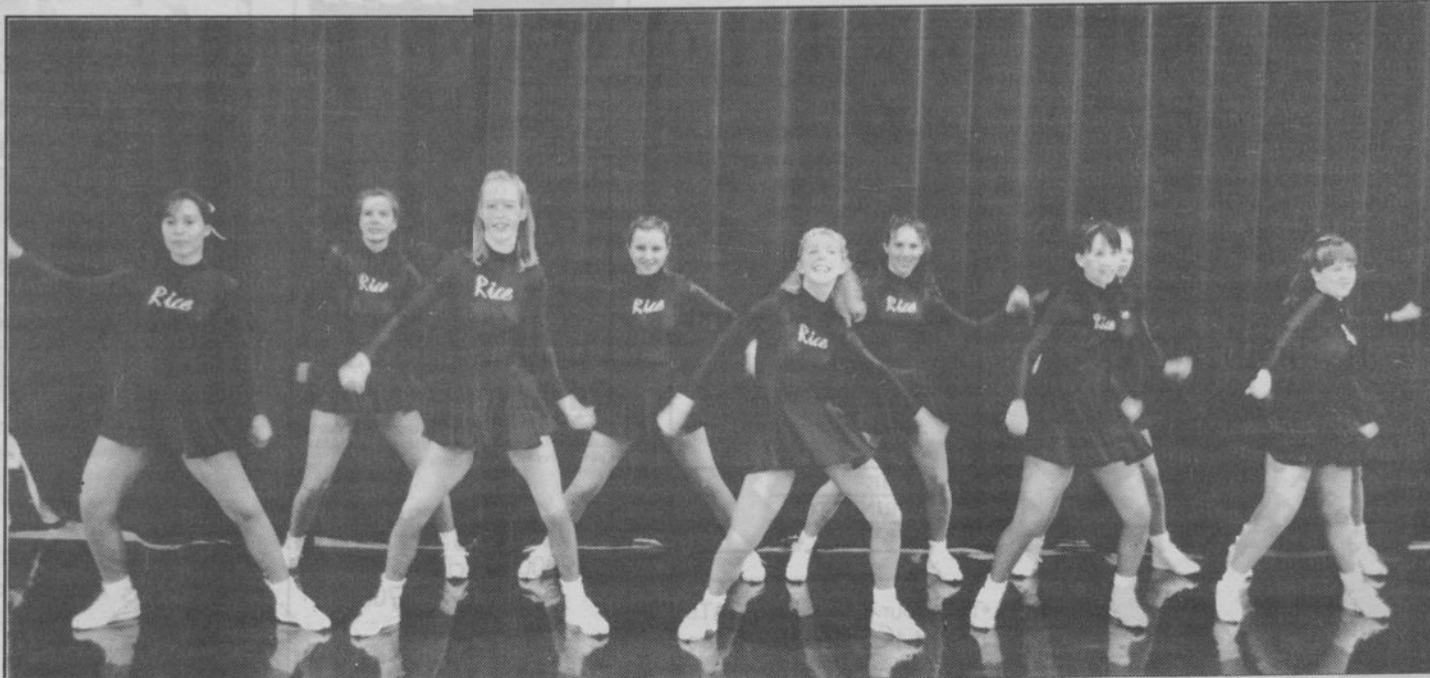
Hollister had an answer.

"We're out there to increase spirit. We're out there to help the team. We want to be there for the students, too," said Hollister. "So maybe it is to increase spirit. Maybe it is to help the team."

Maybe it is just that their spirit, love of dance and, ultimately, their individuality are indomitable.

*The first organizational meeting for everyone interested in being a part of the Rice Owls Dance Team for the 1995-96 season will be on Feb. 12 at 6:30 p.m. at Aury Court. The team will hold clinics from Sunday to Thursday, with the actual try-outs on Saturday, February 18.*

*If there are any questions, or if someone can't make the meeting, please call Sarah Hollister at 795-4891.*



The Rice Owls Dance Team is, from left to right, Jenny Mireles, Kathy Archuleta, Monica Erceg, Agatha Andraczke, Sarah Hollister, Sylvia Spiedel, RoseAnn Martinez, Elizabeth Nylin, Natasha Talib (Hidden behind Nylin)

PHOTOS BY JOEL HARDI