# Writing or Rewriting Your Constitution

*By Joyce E. Pennington*

I have seen so many new schools opening and ready to start their own dance team program. Preparation is fairly easy: creating a performance costume, coming up with a team name, finding a rehearsal area, and planning a fundraiser. However, there is the challenge of writing a constitution that will fit the individual needs of your school or community, the age and type of young people you are working with, the parents, and the activities in which they are involved (in addition to dance/drill team).

I found myself in a real dilemma when someone requested a 'sample constitution.' In looking over about five or six constitutions, I realized that none of them really fit the needs of the team or district that requested the information. What I did conclude was that every constitution should have some basic elements to be effective along with some additional guidelines and student contracts that will strengthen your organization and avoid conflicts down the road. I recommend that you reach out to your admins from your school to see if there is a 'standard' constitution that is required for all dance teams (where there are multiple high schools), as well as look at student guidelines set forth by the district. There are several additional areas that need to be addressed.

**Rehearsals**... In order to have an effective program, you must have a strict rehearsal schedule where attendance and punctuality are mandatory. In order to have an effective team, the group will need to practice six to eight hours a week during their performance season (There is an 8 hour rule for Texas schools). If rehearsal is after school or evenings, it will be important to choose the days and times that will not conflict with other community and school activities. Be sensitive to a time frame that will be conducive to carpools either by parents or students. I recommend that you insist on perfect attendance during the week of a performance because each rehearsal is so vital to the success of a performance. I also recommend that you give a 10 minute tardy margin and after that, they are considered absent. If they have missed the first 10

minutes of warm-ups for rehearsal, they have missed a critical injury prevention activity and should not hold up the rest of the team. Everyone's time is far too valuable.

Another issue for rehearsals is dress code and conduct. It is much easier to maintain discipline when all are dressed similar or alike in class. It is also easier to perfect precision technique when they are dressed alike. As far as conduct, it is important to create a business type atmosphere where everyone has gathered to focus on the rehearsal (no talking). This will require that the officers and the director have had a chance to plan ahead for each rehearsal and that the instruction process is well prepared.

**Performances**... Each of the performances should be required by the members unless it is an optional event. Just as with rehearsals the areas that should be addressed in your rules and regulations should include attendance, tardies, dress code and conduct. There should be guidelines for a team member's conduct in uniform as well as instructions for the care of her performance uniform.

**Regulations**...This area should cover the consequences for not following the guidelines mandated in other areas. Many teams implement a merit/demerit system that applies to a grade or their standing as a member. Teams that are associated with a school and receive a grade for dance/drill team as a class could use their grading scale of 100 points and have points deducted from their grade for demerits (rules broken). Each infraction should have a specific number of demerits with a maximum number of demerits to accumulate before being placed on 'probation' from the team. If a team member has been placed on 'probation,' they can work off demerits by doing community or school services or be benched for a set amount of time before the probation is lifted. For those teams not associated with a school, the demerit system can be in place to remain in good standing on the team.

**Purpose and Philosophy**... Every team needs traditions to build upon to make the organization a stronger and more successful one. Decide on a motto or chant. You can choose some famous words from famous people or create your own. Come up with a team song. This can be created to follow the tune of a popular song that everyone knows and they will enjoy memorizing new lyrics to fit the team.

Write job descriptions (expectations) for each officer, manager and team member. This will be important to define the role of each participant, most especially when the team is new and has no 'old members' to follow. When the team has progressed into the second year, have the 'old members' choose a Little Sister to mentor and guide to becoming a successful member of the team. There can be the traditional exchange of gifts, but the primary concern should be mentoring.

**Contract**… Each team member should have a basic contract stating that they understand the constitution as well as the rules and regulations required of team membership. Both the student as well as the parents should sign this. A copy of the constitution and job description should be issued to each team member to keep and refer to throughout the year.

**Administrative Approval**… After you have completed the rough draft for your constitution, rules and regulations and job descriptions, you should have a school administrator review for approval. After your school administrator has approved it, it is a good idea to present to the school board for board approval. This will allow you to have support when any of the rules are challenged. You may also want the attorney for your school district to review the constitution for legal jargon.

If you have an independent community team, organize a review board to review the constitution. Include one or two parents, an attorney (free, if possible), a dance/drill team professional (high school director) and yourself to review and approve your constitution. This will lend it credibility with the team and parents.

Remember to be reasonable in making your rules so that they are easier to follow. Although your team must have structure, you will want to make sure that you have not created an environment where rules will be constantly broken because they are too difficult to achieve or maintain. Each year in advance of tryouts, review your constitution and reflect on any difficulties you may have encountered that might be resolved by updating your constitution. Each time, have the constitution approved by your school or advisory board.