



# “It’s more than 5-6-7-8”

- Luke Johnson

By Heather Portnoy

Photography provided by Birkenheuer Photography, Top Photos, Megan Ninemire, GK Elite staff and Twisted Choreography staff.

It’s more than 5-6-7-8. This is the motto of “Choreographer to the Champions” Luke Johnson of Twisted Choreography. At only 31, he has taken the cheerleading world by storm with his revolutionary choreography that will keep you on the edge of your seat with its cinematic appeal. His choreography has helped attain over 15 Worlds medals and multiple Worlds bids, including 40 bids at the 2010 Worlds alone.

The Cheer Coach & Advisor staff met Luke two years ago at the USASF Cheerleading and Dance Worlds. It all began over a Worlds t-shirt. If you have been to Worlds, you know what I am talking about. You’ll see a plethora of creative t-shirts supporting all your favorite programs. The shirt that caught our eyes was “Luke’s Got My Back.” We asked the simple question, “Who is Luke?” and we quickly learned that he was an amazing up and coming choreographer, thus beginning our journey with Luke Johnson. He was innovative, inspirational and blazing the trails with many award winning routines. Luke created the choreography for 27 teams competing at the 2009 Cheerleading Worlds. There was no question this was someone that we needed to meet.

For Luke, it all began with cheerleading. He cheered for a couple of different all star programs and vividly remembers the first time his coach hired an outside choreographer. Luke shares, “Everyone watched in admiration. I was very intrigued and was mentally breaking down everything that he was doing. I could see the pictures that he was trying to create and knew that I could do this.” At the age of 18, Luke took this experience and created the choreography for a local high school cheer team. That year, the team came in first in their state championships. Luke was hooked and choreographed eight routines the following year.

Things have snowballed for Luke ever

since. He has had experience in almost every role in cheerleading. He has been a cheerleader, owned a gym, coached, choreographed and managed the Maryland Twisters program. In his early 20’s, he moved to California to pursue dance and became a certified Hip Hop instructor. His heart was still in cheerleading and he quickly returned, bringing with him a dance inspired style that includes leaps and turns not typically seen in cheer choreography. (but brought his knowledge and inspiration from dance. (by using more turns and leaps not typically seen in cheer choreography.)

If anyone lives up to their reputation, it’s certainly Luke. He is an absolute perfectionist, creative genius, and a pure fireball of energy. His joyful personality is contagious. Luke believes in spreading a positive attitude. Known for his trademark v-neck t-shirts and scarf, if you see Luke enter the room, clear the way and prepare to be inspired. He has an innate ability for making people feel comfortable, identifying commonalities and creating a unified spirit. It almost seems that he is the puzzle

master knowing which pieces fit together perfectly with each group he meets.

We asked Luke how he is able to make these connections and so accurately fit the right routine to the personality and vibe of each team. He shares, “So much of what I do is based on the energy of the kids. I feed off this energy so much. I take time and connect with the team. Ask each coach what their strengths and weaknesses are. I don’t just focus on the strengths. I work to round out the entire team.”

It’s a natural fit for coaches to be the catalyst in motivating their team. Luke definitely believes that everyone has their own way of doing things but he quickly shared his personal beliefs on getting the most from your teams. “The energy that you possess is how you will affect them. Once they see the personality that you are bringing in, you can get them connected with you and bring them back in. A coaches’ personality and energy changes the game.” He goes on to say, “I am a believer in creating your own reality. If you want the kids to have energy, you have to create that for them.” >>

Photo courtesy of Birkenheuer Photography.com

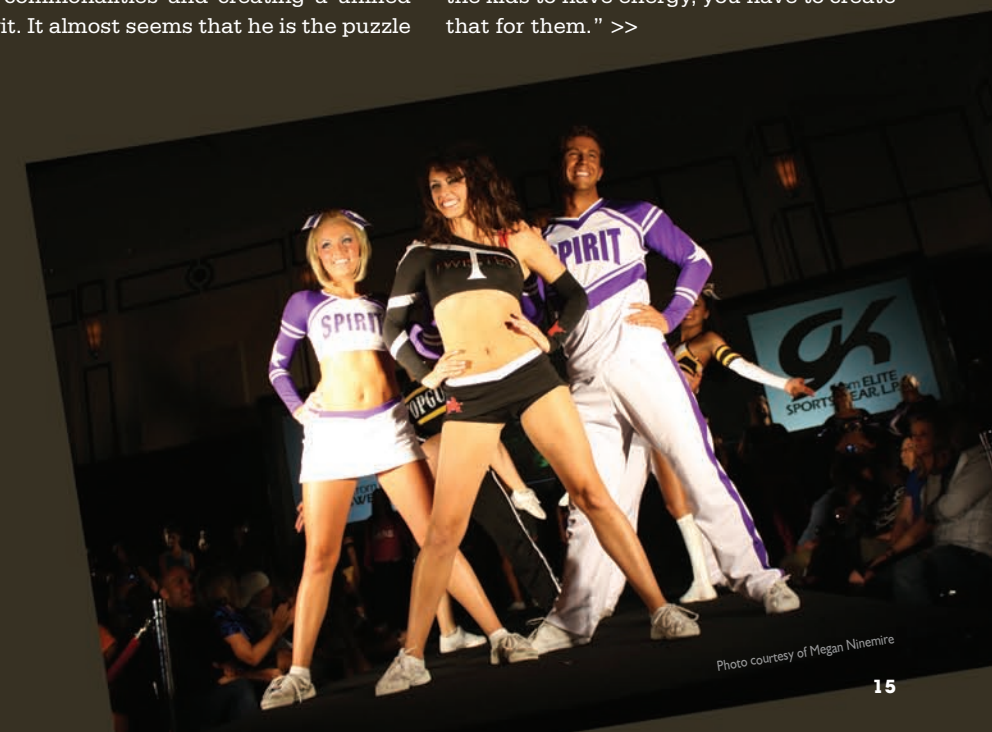


Photo courtesy of Megan Ninemire



GK Elite staff photo

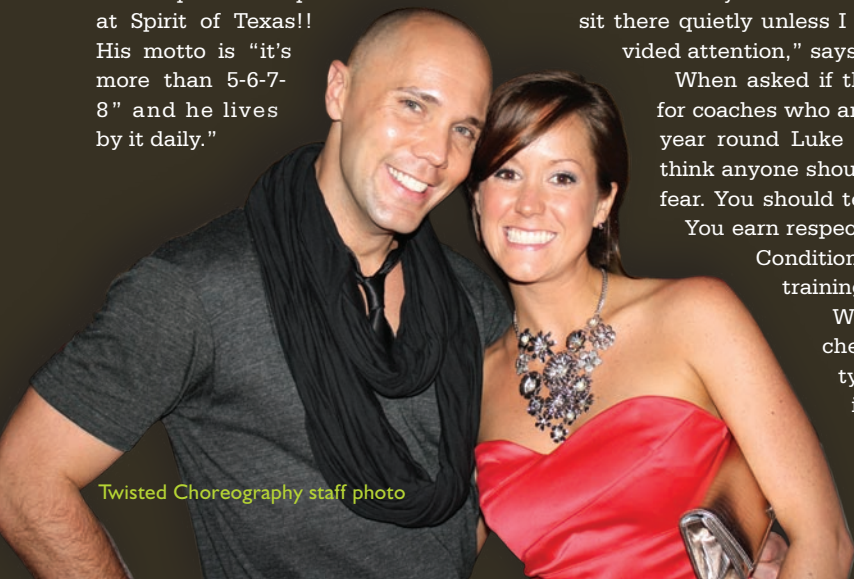


Luke spends at least 10 months out of the year traveling throughout the United States and abroad working with powerhouse gyms both big and small. Some of the programs that he works with include: California All-Stars, ACE of Alabama, Cheer Extreme, Illinois Cheer Company, Arizona Power Extreme, Maryland Twisters and Spirit of Texas just to name a few. He has an affinity for every program he works with regardless of size or name recognition in the industry. The affinity is obviously mutual through the conversations we have had with many who work with him and by watching people gravitate to him wherever he is.

Brad Vaughn, Spirit of Texas Owner, Choreographer and Head Coach shares, "Luke is such a great person!

He has managed to stay humble and professional despite his incredible success. He seems to always connect with the athletes regardless of their level or ability. He is one of the most talented individuals in the cheer industry. He is dependable, respectful and above all else, kind. He has a heart bigger than Texas and it shows in everything he does. Luke is one of those rare people that touches the lives of thousands of people across the country. He has made such a positive impact at Spirit of Texas!!

His motto is "it's more than 5-6-7-8" and he lives by it daily."



Twisted Choreography staff photo

Being an inspiration to coaches is very important to Luke. He believes his actions trickle down to the team. "The energy that I share will keep going down from kid to kid to kid and create a positive effect that isn't there all the time," says Luke.

As for what inspires Luke's creativity and passion, he answered, "I have had many inspirations in my life which include God, family and friends. However, my cheerleading inspirations date back to when I was younger, and range from Top Gun's endless innovation to Spirit of Texas's visual creativity and seamless transition work. But the bulk of my creative juices comes

**"Being an inspiration to coaches is very important to Luke. He believes his actions trickle down to the team."**

from the cheerleaders themselves."

On the flip side, how a coach disciplines their team can be equally important. Luke certainly has a wide array of experience watching the different discipline techniques of coaches throughout the world. "I'm so patient. I don't discipline kids by doing things to them. I feel if the kids aren't paying attention and giving 100%, instead of getting mad and making them do conditioning, I simply stop teaching. I don't raise my voice. I stop teaching and sit there quietly unless I have their undivided attention," says Luke.

When asked if this was realistic for coaches who are with the team year round Luke shares, "I don't think anyone should ever teach by fear. You should teach by respect.

You earn respect by knowledge. Conditioning should be a training tool."

When it comes to cheerleading safety, Luke feels the industry is mak-

ing the proper strides. He is a firm believer in 'Perfection Before Progression' and appreciates the new cheer safety video created by GK Elite Sportswear, Shawn Johnson, and Top Gun. Luke shares his thoughts, "I feel this video is something everyone needs to watch and is spot on. If you don't do this, you are setting everyone up for injury. I see so many ranges of this as both parents and kids are working to get to the next level. I have even seen coaches that tend to forget this."\*

Another natural fit is for a choreographer to help identify the right music mix for the routine. Finding the right music is

the critical final step for a routine. Luke believes, "It's the icing on the cake. Music is as much of a delicacy in this sport as choreography, uniforms and proper training. People know who to go to when looking for good music. We are an industry that talks all the time. People know who does what music and who people are."

Luke's passion for cheerleading, standards of excellence, and desire to continue revolutionizing the spirit industry can be an inspiration to any coach. He thrives off traveling the globe "twisting" every team he meets. He recognizes that key to success is the team effort of choreographer, coach, and cheerleader. "I am humbled by the intensity this sport has in affecting people's lives and in that, I find great inspiration from the athletes themselves. I feed off their energy and passion for the same amazing sport that so graciously allows me to be here, doing what I love every day."

\*Visit [www.cheercoachmagazine.com](http://www.cheercoachmagazine.com) for full video. ★