

#GoingPro

By Shelby Ray Gandy

LIVINGSTON, ALABAMA—“Unforgettable, crazy and life-changing” are three words that former UWA Cheerleader Madison McMinn and current UWA Cheerleader Chloe Baker used to describe their experience as professional cheerleaders for the inaugural season of the United States Football League earlier this year.

“One week, we were regular college students, and the next week we were professional cheerleaders,” said Baker.

Tryouts were held during the last two weekends in March, with over 100 women vying for the title ‘USFL Cheerleader.’ Both McMinn and Baker made the cut for the 2022 USFL Cheerleading Team, comprising an elite group of 25 women who would cheer for all USFL teams.

The USFL consists of eight teams split into two divisions, each playing 10 regular season games at Protective Stadium in Birmingham, Alabama. The top two teams in each division advance to the semifinals, and the two division winners play in the championship game.

“The very first time we walked out on that field, the stadium was packed,” said McMinn. “People had to stand up because there were no more seats. Chloe and I were standing right beside each other, and I just remember getting the biggest chill bumps and looking at each other, thinking, ‘This is it; this is actually happening.’”

Baker and McMinn share a close bond and knew they wanted to experience this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity together. Both said that if only one of them had made the team, then neither of them would have done it because they both knew this was something they wouldn’t want to experience without one another.

The inaugural USFL season kicked off Saturday, April 16, with the New Jersey Generals facing off against the Birmingham Stallions.

During the first two weeks as USFL Cheerleaders, Baker and McMinn wrapped up UWA’s spring semester.

“Our schedule was crazy,” said McMinn. “The first two weeks, we practiced four days a week. We were going to our classes, leaving Livingston at 2 p.m. to drive to Birmingham for practices, eating dinner, coming back to Livingston and staying up until 2 a.m. to study for finals. Then, we had to redo everything the next day.”

McMinn and Baker both agreed that once the semester ended, they were able to start genuinely enjoying this surreal experience. They no longer had the stress of classes or finals on their minds and grew more comfortable with the cheer routines, coaches and the other cheerleaders.

Once the regular season finished in Birmingham, it was time for the two semifinal games and the championship game in Canton, Ohio.

“Aside from cheering while we were in Ohio, we also got to work the unveiling of the new USFL exhibit at the Pro Football Hall of Fame,” Baker said.

The Birmingham Stallions and the Philadelphia Stars faced off in the championship game in Ohio’s Tom Benson Hall of Fame Stadium on Sunday, July 3. During this game, half of the cheerleaders cheered for the Stars, and the other half, including Baker and McMinn, cheered for the Stallions.

Baker said, “The Stallions were losing halfway through the game, but they won the game! We were freaking out! Confetti was raining down over the whole stadium. I had goosebumps. Tears were running down my face. I could see the players hugging their families all around the field—It was like we had won the Superbowl.”

Baker added, “It was definitely a bittersweet ending because we were sad it was over, but it couldn’t have ended more perfectly.”

After 12 weeks of countless practices, games and trips to Birmingham, Baker and McMinn’s time as USFL Cheerleaders concluded once the Stallions claimed the title of 2022 USFL Champions.

Baker said, “The girls we were on the team with—I still talk to them every single day. Many of them dance at UAB, and Madison and I plan to go to a UAB game to see all of them. We’re friends with people we would have never met outside of this experience.”

McMinn said, “We loved it so much. It was just something that we never got tired of—the experiences, the cheerleaders we got to meet. We even got close to people who had nothing to do with cheerleading, like all the gameday operations staff and the football coaches. It was the experience of a lifetime.”

Before the season ended, Baker and McMinn started to prepare for next season’s tryouts.

“This entire experience taught me to ‘just go for it.’ So many things could have stopped Chloe and me from trying out, but it ended up being one of the best experiences of our lives. I am forever grateful for that random Tuesday night that Chloe and I decided to pursue this opportunity,” said McMinn.