

Durham Divas going strong

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*"My name's Louise,
I'm feeling fine.
I still can split
at 69!"*

Captain Louise Gooche sets the bar high for the members of Durham Senior Divas 'n Dude. With a schedule like theirs, she has to.

A local cheerleading squad ranging in age from 62 to 86, the Divas have grown in popularity and reputation since their founding in 2004.

The squad has now brought home the gold medal four times at the North Carolina Senior Games, including the most recent games in 2011, according to the group's website.

Also in 2011, Gooche was chosen as the torchbearer for the games. Though she is on the executive board, Gooche said she was not expecting the title, but wouldn't have missed the opportunity for anything.

"I said that I'd carry that torch if I had to rent me a motorized vehicle," she recalled of her reaction to the news.

In previous years at the statewide competition, the Divas won two silver medals and one bronze. Each member has received a medal for every year they have placed.

"We have a bunch," Gooche said.

The secret behind the Divas' success? Practice. They meet once or twice a week at the Downtown Durham YMCA and practice anywhere between 60 and 90 minutes, Gooche said.

Despite being busy with performances throughout January and February, the Divas are currently learning new cheers. They want to be ready for the Durham Senior Games in April, Gooche said.

With running season approaching in March and April, their schedule is filling up quickly. Gooche said walks and runs are some of their most frequently requested appearances.

"It's rewarding because you can tell the runners really appreciate it," Gooche said.

The Divas have even been asked to perform at a NASCAR event, but they



Photo by Leslie Ann Blake

The Divas 'n Dude dance to a Michael Jackson medley. L-R: Betty Reed, Edna Thompson, Ed Moore, Liz Colfer and Lillie Cannady.

turned the offer down because of the demands of the contract.

"We don't want to get locked in," Gooche said. "We just want fun."

One of their most recent performances was at an awards ceremony for the Roxboro Alumnae Chapter of the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority. The event was Jan. 28 at Shady Hill Baptist Church in Roxboro, N.C.

Clad in their red Diva uniforms, sequined silver gloves, and black and silver hats, the Divas performed several cheers and danced to a medley of Michael Jackson songs. During one cheer, each member stated his or her name and age in rhyme form. Their voices filled the church room with the energy of cheerleaders one-fourth their age.

"It was absolutely awesome," said attendee Wanda Neal, a resident of Person County, whose two daughters were recognized during the ceremony. "They give us inspiration for what we can do as we mature." The event was Neal's first time seeing the Divas.

The Divas work to give each other inspiration, too, Gooche said. Last fall, one of the Divas had a heart attack during rehearsal. Gooche said she did not realize what was happening until four Diva registered nurses went to

check on the Diva in the locker room, and didn't come back. The Diva has since recovered.

"She's up and about again," Gooche said. "We don't let anyone just sit at home."

She explained that another member who had her gallbladder removed less than a month ago is back at practice, though not back in the routines. She has been put to work playing the music with the title "technical assistant."

Gooche said that the Divas try to find a balance between the more serious task of supporting each other through hard times and light-hearted fun.

Ed Moore, the "Dude" in the group, agreed.

"It's really fun, and good exercise, if nothing else," he said.

Captain Gooche knows a thing or two about staying active. She is a colon cancer survivor of ten years and credits her health to good nutrition and exercise.

Gooche said that emotional, physical, spiritual and mental health work together, and it's important to stay active in each way.

"You could sit in a rocking chair and rock yourself to death," she said, "if you're not involved in something."