

SPREADING GOOD CHEER

We meet the man behind a documentary chronicling the Cinderella story of Thailand's world-class 2009 cheerleading team



From left: The cheer team in action; Director Cassidy-Dorian

Like Cassidy-Dorian looks like a man at peace as he sips from a cup of coffee between smiles. He's an affable chap, friendly and relaxed, ready with a smile or an anecdote. But beneath the puckish demeanour and the blond, Billy Idol spikes is the steely determination of someone not easily dissuaded from reaching his ambitious goals.

Cassidy-Dorian moved to Bangkok in 2005, seeking a change of pace from his frenetic Silicon Valley lifestyle as a software developer, and since then he has been steadily ticking off items on his to-do list. Become fluent in Thai and throw in a smattering of Sanskrit for good measure? Check. Become a yoga master and build up a loyal coterie of followers for his popular classes? Check. Host a TV travel programme (*Farang Pok Pok*) in Thai? Check. Set up a film production company and make a documentary? Check.

The latter is Cassidy-Dorian's latest goal to be realised. When *The Cheer Ambassadors* screens at the flood-delayed World Film Festival of Bangkok at the end of January, it will

be a proud moment for the Californian and, he hopes, the start of a new chapter in his life: one where he works as a producer and director of documentaries around Asia.

The Cheer Ambassadors recounts the true story of Bangkok University's 2009 cheerleading team, which against all odds become the first Thai team to compete in the International Cheer Union's World Cheerleading Championships in Florida. The team ended up shocking the cheerleading world by beating out more than 50 national teams to come a very close second, pipped only by the much better-trained and -funded athletes of the US squad.

It's a good-natured and heart-warming romp that tells the story mainly through the eyes of five members of the Thai team, as well as their diminutive but indefatigable leader, Toey. There are tears, cheers and tantrums as the squad face down insurmountable odds to do their country proud. After winning the national finals in November 2008, the Bangkok University team still had to raise over three million baht to fund their trip to Orlando. Fearing the effects of jet lag,



the team began living on Florida time, sleeping all day and training all night.

The sport has been practiced in the US since 1898, and enjoyed a huge surge of interest around a decade ago, when the film *Bring It On* and its sequels were splashed across cinema screens worldwide. Thai teams would gather around TVs in the wee hours to catch a glimpse of broadcasts on ESPN, and then feverishly copy and practice the daredevil, high-flying moves and precarious human pyramids that are the spectacular centrepieces of competitions in the sport.

Cheerleading has not been without controversy in Thailand. In 2005, safety issues were ignored and students in Chonburi and Ayutthaya died in quick succession in accidents caused by unsafe human pyramids. Education authorities tried unsuccessfully to ban the sport. Following the deaths, stringent safety rules were introduced.

Says Cassidy-Dorian: “The problem was you had these relatively slight Thai guys trying to copy the moves done by much bigger and more muscular athletes in the US. The guys at the base of the pyramids in particular have to be

really strong. But it’s all the more credit to the Bangkok Uni team that they were able to overcome these challenges and build up their strength enough to seriously compete.”

Compete they do. It’s impossible to have lived in Thailand for any length of time and not feel a surge of pride at the power and passion with which the team executes its moves in the film. Even the shock of having to perform on a sprung floor for the first time without any prior rehearsals doesn’t set them back too much, though it does cause some wobbles.

Cassidy-Dorian says he and his team spent a year making the documentary, including shooting the team training in Bangkok, conducting endless hours of interviews, and following them to the US for the 2011 cheerleading championships, where they did even better, tying with the US team for first place.

“If I had to pick one word to describe these kids, it would be ‘dreamers,’” he says. “They are a group of young kids who had a dream to become world-class cheerleaders, and they put an enormous amount of hard work into making that dream come true. Their achievements are testament to the power of teamwork and the power of dreams.”

The Cheer Ambassadors debuts at the 9th World Film Festival of Bangkok, which runs from 20-27 January.

Above: At the competition venue in the US