

The Pro Cheerleader
Diaries:
Behind the Scenes of
Pro Cheerleading

Volume 1

Compiled by Melissa Darnell

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My Olympics, My Obsession

By Wynter Lloyd

My obsession with the sport started when I was a freshman in high school. During the winter season of sports I chose to become a girls' basketball manager because I had many friends on the basketball team, and there was no way I was joining the team. There was no way you could get me to run down a court along with a ball in my hand and expect it to make it there with no injuries. I was known as the shot clock girl, and believe me, I also did not know much about the shot clock. I messed up quite often, and the coaches were not very happy with me. The whole time I was sitting with my shot clock, I was watching the cheerleaders as they performed their cheers on the sideline as well as dancing at halftime.

Being the super shy girl that I am, there was no way I would even think about trying out for the team. I met a girl over the following summer who was going to be cheering for my high school in the fall. We became the best of friends and she had actually convinced me to tryout that next winter season. I ended up trying out and making the team. It was the best choice I could have made in my entire life. Ever since that moment, cheerleading has become such an important aspect of my life. Not only did I cheer throughout the rest of my high school career, but I also cheered the next four years of my college life as well. During my summers in college, I taught summer camps for Eastern Cheerleaders Association (ECA) and Cheerleaders of America (COA). I ate, slept, and breathed cheerleading.

I told you how obsessed I was about cheerleading, right? My freshman year of college, in English 102, 80% of my papers happened to be related to cheerleading. My professor did not seem to have a problem with it, and it is always easier to write about something you know a lot about, so I went for it. One paper in particular meant something to me. I had written a paper entitled My Olympics. In this paper, I had stated that athletes from around the world had their chance to prove they were the best in their sport by becoming an athlete in the Olympics. All of these individuals had their chance, but I was to have no Olympics because

I was involved in cheerleading. I became a little depressed while cheering in college, because I felt I had accomplished all that I would have been able to accomplish in my cheerleading career, and was now stuck in a rut. Reading the campus newspaper one afternoon, I came across an ad that stated that the Baltimore Ravens Cheerleading team was having their tryouts for the 2001 season. Could this be my Olympics?

Now, I am one of those girls who have always been relatively a normal girl. I never excelled in anything, and was never the star in any activity in school. None of the teams I cheered for ever made it to a nationals or was popular in the cheerleading world. What makes me so special that I thought I could try out for a professional cheerleading team, let alone it be for the NFL! I had always stunted in my cheerleading days, and the Baltimore Ravens are the only team in the NFL who have a stunt team. I figured I might have a shot if I stunted on the team. I had never partner stunted on any of my teams, but I had friends who were male stunters and had played around with them from time to time. I downloaded all the information I would need for tryouts and sent my packet in. I had my roommate from college take my photos that I would be mailing in with my registration. Besides my roommate, the only other person who knew I was trying out was my boyfriend. I knew that if I had told many people, I would have completely psyched myself out at the

tryout and would constantly worry about what everyone thought about me if I hadn't made it.

When filling out my registration papers, I did a little investigating on the tryouts. All I had figured out till this time was that tryouts would start on Saturday and they would have call backs the following day. If you made it to call backs you had to go through it all again on Sunday just to have another set of cuts that night. Deep down I knew I wanted to make the team. On the outside I portrayed that as long as I made it through the first cuts I would be happy. At least then I would know that the coaches did not think I was completely horrible and not worth showing up to their tryouts.

I finally had made it to the day of tryouts. It was very cold outside, since the tryouts are held the first weekend in March. I thought this was a little funny since the football season doesn't start until August, but what did I know? I was scared to death. I was completely alone. Not only did I not know what to expect, but I had no one to go through it with me. I showed up at the Downtown Athletic Club in Baltimore with my hair half up, as I had always worn it in college, normal makeup, average outfit. If you saw me you would probably think I was just a "Plain Jane" walking into the tryouts. I waited in the very long line to receive my number. I entered the main gym floor where all of the girls were waiting, stretching, and chatting among

friends. I picked a nice quiet area in the back of the gym, laid my bag down, and began to stretch. I figured, if I just sat there and stretched I could watch all the different girls around me and maybe sense an inkling of what I was doing here in the first place. Veteran cheerleaders began the warm-up and I hopped up to join the crowd in preparing ourselves for the long day we were about to have. We did some jumping jacks and jogging in place to get our hearts ready, and then we began to stretch our legs. At this point I turned my head to stretch my opposite leg and my eye caught someone I know. A girl from my college cheerleading team was only a few rows up from me, stretching and preparing herself for the tryouts as well. I ran up to her in excitement that I found someone I knew and I wasn't alone anymore. Just knowing I was not alone helped my confidence and I felt a little more at ease in this enormous gym filled with over 250 girls.

Since the Baltimore Ravens cheerleaders have both a dance team and a stunt team, each set of tryouts ran a little different. All of the girls gathered around to learn the dance we would be performing in front of the judges. I felt at ease with this part. All throughout cheerleading I had been comfortable with learning dances. I was in my third year of college and I could still remember my first dance I performed as a cheerleader in tenth grade. The dance they taught us was more of a cheerleading style than a dance studio style, so that made me feel

reassured as well. Veterans performed the jumps we would need to execute in tryouts as well as technical dance skills such as leaps and turns. I had never been in a dance class all my life, so I certainly was timid of attempting a leap or turn in front of anyone. Thankfully the coach let us true "cheerleaders" that we were to perform a second jump as our technical skill as opposed to a leap or turn. Wow, things are really going my way. Next, they take all individuals trying out for the stunt team and send us to the back of the gym to begin finding a partner to stunt with to prepare for the tryout. Great, here I was again with a massive group of people of which I knew no one. My partner in crime had chosen to tryout for the dance team so she was with the other half of the girls perfecting her technical skills and dance moves. The stunt coach divided the new girls trying out into groups with veteran stunt males and had us begin warming up our stunts. How do I tell these guys that I have hardly stunted with males before and had mostly done all girl stunting? I just went for it. I grabbed onto my partner's wrists and let him toss. I'd love to tell you that I flew straight into the air and landed my liberty without flaws, but instead I actually did not even make it off his wrists. Apparently I didn't have the right prep and we had to try again. No fear, I eventually made it into his hands and we decided that for the tryout we would perform hands and then go into the lib from there. I had only a few runs to get in with my partner

because there were so many other girls who needed a chance to practice their skills as well. I was a little disappointed because all the while we were stunting, the dance girls were able to continue working on the dance that I had practically forgotten by now. I was too worried about hitting my stunt. No more practice time, tryouts were to begin in two minutes.

The veteran stunters had to enter the tryout room because they were needed to perform the stunts with the new kids trying out. How in the world am I supposed to tryout looking my best after sweating from dancing my heart out and then stunting with a partner I had never had before? My teammate from college tried to give me some pointers on my look before I headed in for the tryouts, and I straightened myself up as much as I could. Again, how did she have it so lucky? I had to practice my stunts and then tryout first, while those trying out for dance were able to practice the dance while we were stunting, and then practice for an additional time while stunt was trying out. It was turning into a big bummer by the minute. The girl on the microphone called our numbers and we lined up as if it were the line for the firing squad. It seemed no one knew what happened once you left the gym and you weren't sure if you'd ever see them alive again. Last minute touch ups to my make up and hair, and I was in line. "You can go," said the girl with the microphone, pointing us to the direction of the tryout room. Was this it? Was it now or never? No,

another stop on the way. Oh the torture! Just when I thought I would be entering the dreadful tryout room and facing the many judges, we're stopped at the water fountain, with a group we can see just a few steps ahead of us waiting at the top of the stairs. Oh, we still had plenty of time before our tryout. This moment became time for me to panic. What if I mess up on the dance? What if my stunt falls? My mouth was getting extremely dry and my heart was pounding as it had never done before. Next step, the top of the stairs. Here we could see the group ahead of us enter the tryout room while the girls who had just finished their tryout were stepping out of the room, completely relieved after the ordeal they had just experienced. We could hear the music being played in the tryout room and my group of girls began to do the dance in our heads along with those trying out. I guess we felt we could not let a minute go without trying to perfect some skills of ours. A few moments of silence and the group left the room. It was definitely time now. There was no turning back on this tryout. Everything I had learned in cheerleading from tenth grade to this moment was on the line in front of many important people. Is this how the Olympians feel before they take the stage?

My tryout group entered the room and placed ourselves on the white X's made on the dance floor with white tape. It was an image to add to my nervousness. In this large dance studio room was a

panel of judges that went on for the entire length of the room. There had to have been at least twelve judges sitting in front of us, including the head coach of the team. As intimidating as it was, the tryout still had to continue. The song was played as we stood at attention ready to perform the tryout dance. With my heart pounding and my mouth so dry I could hardly speak, I began dancing as best as I could. I may have stumbled upon a count or two, but overall I did very well on my dance portion. At least in my mind I had. Next we had to perform our jumps. I had always found myself to excel more in my jumps than other cheerleaders. I had always been one of the best jumpers on all of the teams I had participated on. Then again, like I had mentioned before, I was never on a nationally ranked team or one that was well known. Some of the girls at these tryouts had amazing jumps. Jumps that would send me home before I had even begun to tryout. Running through my head I continued thinking about how this was my Olympics and how I had to be that athlete that tried their very hardest to prove they were one of the best. I performed my jump when my turn had come around and I was very pleased with how it was executed. Next step of the tryout process was the technical skill. I did not have any of the leaps and turns that my fellow newbies had, but I was going to try my best at my second jump and hope that it would work just as well as a dance move. Again, I had no problems executing my second jump, and now I felt a little relieved that the tryout

was just about completed. At this time, we had our partners step up to us to perform our single stunt for the judges to watch. The one, single stunt, which would determine if you were going to make it to the second day of tryouts. You can believe I was more than a bundle of nerves and was even unsure if I was going to make it off of the ground when my partner attempted to toss me. He whispered a little reassurance into my ear as he grabbed my waist. He counted off and up I went into the air, landing "hands." Well, at least I didn't mess up my prep into the stunt and had actually hit any stunt at all. But next we were to take it to the liberty. My legs were shaking like twigs, unsure if he was even able to keep me still in his hands. My lib had hit and before I knew it I was up in my liberty, my partner had called the stunt down and I had made it safely back to the floor. I didn't really pay attention to the other girls in my group with their stunts because my stunt kept replaying itself over and over in my mind. How did it look? Did I smile in my stunt? Could they tell my legs were shaking? I had to remind myself that I needed to stop dwelling over it because whatever had happened was now over and my tryout was finished. The head coach thanked us for our work and let us go on our way. That's it? It's over? I guess that is how couples feel when they get married. They prepare so long for that special event, and when it comes, it is gone in the blink of an eye and you wonder where it all went to.

Back in the main gym, I found my bags and decided that since we still had about 150 girls to go, I might as well take a nice nap right there on the floor. Tryouts had started at about 10 A.M. and it was around 6 P.M. when the judges had finally come out of the tryout room and made their way out the door. Then the three coaches made their way to the center of the gym floor and prepared to make a speech. I thought my heart was beating hard when I had gotten into the tryout room, but it just may have been beating even harder now that I knew this could be my final moments at the tryouts. The coaches thanked us again for coming out to their tryouts and told us about what wonderful talent they saw. I could not really remember what was said because my mind was too worried on remembering my number. I didn't want anyone to see my number in case it wasn't called so I had hid it in my bag, and hoped to remember it in my head. How anyone would remember my number out of the 250 girls that were there, I'm not sure, but I just didn't want to take any chances.

We didn't know how many girls the coaches were cutting, so we didn't know how many numbers they would actually call out. They began the dreadful countdown. You could hear a pin drop, as everyone was listening so intently for their own number to be called. "456, 458, 521..." they continued to call out. Every so often you would hear a whispered "YES!" or you could see a two girls

quietly celebrating as their numbers were called. My heart sped as I felt the numbers were coming to an end. Would I make it? Is this the chance I had been waiting for. "280." Did they really just call that number? Did I imagine them calling my number because I had wanted them to call it so badly? No, they actually had just called my number. I was invited back to the second day of tryouts. I looked over to my teammate, and she too had been invited back the following day.

I made it home, and my mother had wondered where I had been all day. I forgot to tell her I was trying out for a professional cheerleading team. Well, I decided to keep it to myself because I didn't know what she would think if I ended up not making the team. That night I must have ran through the dance at least fifty times through my head. You would think I had known that dance for ages. The next morning came way too fast, but it was coming no matter what. I arrived, registered, and began stretching and reviewing for the upcoming tryouts. I practiced my dance some, met up with my stunt partner to review our liberty and make any final adjustments, and before we knew it, they began calling our numbers once again. We did not have the same numbers as we had had the day before, so now I had to remember a whole new number all over again. Since there was about half the people attending today as there had been the day before, the tryouts seemed to move just a tad bit quicker. I had

learned through a few girls that the hair style the team wore was to have their hair all down, so I took my hair out of it's half up pony tail and attempted to look like I knew what I was doing. We entered the tryout room just as we had the day before, but this time my tryout group was made up of a different set of girls. We all were as nervous as can be, but as we discovered the day before, there was nothing we could do about it now. Our time was up and we had to show those judges what we were made of and why we deserved to be on the team. This day we had a whole new panel of judges, which proved to be helpful and somewhat hurtful to us on this dreadful day. Thankfully these judges hadn't seen my little mistakes in the dance so they would get to see a fresh new me. These judges hadn't seen my legs twitching like I was about to be blown down in a hurricane. But this would be the first and only time these judges would decide if I should make it on to the interview portion of tryouts. I kept telling myself, "Wynter, you made it to your goal. You wanted to at least make it through the first round of tryouts to show that you were not a horrible cheerleader." And this was true. I had gotten further than over 100 girls from the first round of tryouts. So why did I still feel so nervous and afraid? As my number was called we traveled to the tryout room, and performed our skills as we had the day before. I felt more comfortable in my dance and I feel I may have shown that with my facial expressions. I tried to give them bigger smiles and more eye contact. My

jumps hit wonderful heights, mostly due to the adrenaline I had rushing through my body at the time. Don't ask me to perform another jump that high in a while because I don't think my body could perform again how it felt that day. My stunt had hit, although I ended up toeing a little and the stunt moved a few steps forward. Not bad though. At least the stunt hit and I did not come crashing down in a towering blaze in front of all to see. Again, I was semi-pleased with my performance and was ready for my stress-relieving nap on the hard gym floor. That dreadful moment had come again all too soon, and the pit of my stomach was not ready for any news it was about to hear. My college teammate sat next to me as we held hands and prepared to hear the number we had been wearing on our thighs all day. Again, it seemed like number after number was being called, but none were numbers close to mine. My teammate squeezed my hand as she had just heard her number called and she then knew she would be heading into the interview portion of tryouts. I started to worry just as I felt they were rounding the end of the numbers.

"Thank you ladies. Those who were not called may head out. Those who were need to stay for additional instructions for interviews." No such luck. My number was never called. My heart stopped. I made sure not to show my true feelings on my face. I gave my teammate a congratulatory hug. As I headed out of the gym, I kept telling myself

that it was fine. This was no problem. "How would I commute 2 ½ hours to practice twice a week anyway?" I would tell myself. "I'm too busy with school and all my classes." Deep down I knew these were just excuses to make myself feel better. My boyfriend comforted me and let me know that it was alright, but I was still mad at myself. Did I do my best? What could I have done to work harder? There is always next year, right? Too bad I hadn't made it that year. That was the year the team went to the Super Bowl!

Needless to say, there was no next year. The 2002 season would be my senior year of college. I was an Elementary Education major, and I would need to dedicate my time to student teaching and graduating with honors. I bet you are wondering about what happened with my girlfriend who had made it to the interviews? Well, she made it through interviews to the final tryout, but was cut at the very last tryout. I'd love to say that I felt bad for her and wished she had made it, but you know deep down I was kind of happy that she hadn't made it. Who wouldn't be completely jealous of their teammate who made a team, and you didn't. Of course I was very thoughtful to her and we were still friends. So I went back to cheering for my college my senior year and dedicated my time to my studies. I had been student teaching for a month when I realized that the tryouts for Ravens were rolling around the corner again. This time, all I would have

hindering me from trying out would be a brand new teaching job in the fall. I had no reason not to tryout. Have you known an Olympian to give up just because she didn't get the gold her first time around? Why should I be any different?

Somehow, my cooperating teacher found out I was trying out for the team again, and the nerves started up once again. Why did she have to find out? Now the whole school is going to know that their student teacher is going to be trying out for a NFL cheerleading team. The pressure was now on. I followed all the same steps I had taken before. I filled out all the paper work, this time having my boyfriend take some pictures of me to go along with the documents. I figured, something had to have gone wrong for me to have not made it the first time, so what would I have to change to give myself a better chance? I remembered the looks that some of the veteran cheerleaders had at the previous tryouts. I realized their makeup was a little darker than I had normally worn it. My friend said it was because we were performing, and the judges need to see our faces while we dance. I made sure to pile on the makeup as much as I could this time. I even had friends from cheerleading associations I had worked for previously who were trying out for the team as well.

I felt more comfortable at this tryout overall because I knew what to expect. I knew how the

tryout was run, and knew there would not be many surprises up their sleeves before I tried out. The biggest change I made to myself for this tryout was that I decided to tryout for the dance team instead of stunt. I had not stunted for an entire year, and knew that if I was going to tryout for a professional cheerleading team, now was not the time to start stunting again. I could just picture myself getting more time to practice while the stunt girls prepared their stunt, and even more practice time while the stunt girls were tending to their tryouts first. I took my time to practice the dance they had taught that morning. I needed some mental rest time and reviewed the dance in my head. I even attempted to try some leaps or turns that I might perform during my tryout. I guess you could say I began to take things a little more daring than I had the first time around.

Tryouts ran the same way as they had two years ago. The only difference was that in the tryout room I did not need to perform the dreadful stunt. After leaving the fearful tryout room, I proceeded to find my friends in the gym and relax until numbers were called. Just as it had occurred before, as soon as the coaches had walked into the gym, a silence fell across the crowd. We all pulled in to hear if we were to attend call backs or go home wondering what could have been. To my amazement and happiness, I had again made it to the second round of tryouts. Thankfully, the coaches and judges

decided I was good enough to check out for a second try. That night was dedicated to running through dance moves in my head, downloading the song we had been trying out with so that I could practice with music, and basically stressing until I fell asleep. The next morning was one of tiredness and completely sore muscles. You would never realize how much of a workout dancing can be, until you do it for approximately 5 hours in a day. We warmed up as a group and began practicing the infamous dance which would be performed for tryouts. At times I wanted to just stop practicing because I felt the more I practiced it, the more I would make silly mistakes. Mental breaks are the way to go. Soon my turn was up, and I went through the same process I had gone through 3 times before. You would think I was a professional at professional cheerleading tryouts. My tryout went well. Jumps were high and toes were pointed. My dance was performed full out with only a few slight mistakes. Now the waiting game. Yet again, we gather in fright as the coaches enter the "ring" of cheerleaders on the floor. They thanked us all for coming out. Reminded us that if we did not make it, to not feel discouraged and to try again next year. I knew some girls who had said this was it and if they didn't make it they would not try out again. I couldn't imagine not having cheerleading in my life. I couldn't imagine how someone could just give up that easily. And the selection process began. "654, 659, 701..." they shouted. It can get a little stressful

when you here all the silent celebrations going on around you, and none of them are for you. My old college teammate had tried out again this year and she was sitting with me, waiting to hear our numbers called. I felt a tight grip from her on my hand, as we were holding hands in sheer nervousness, and this meant that she had heard her number and she had made it back to the interview round. Number after number had been called, and I had yet to hear mine. Could you imagine being the last number called at the tryouts? Determined that your number is not going to be called, but at the last second you get a wave of relief as you hear your number. Wish I could say that was me and my number, but it definitely was not. Yet again, second year, and my number was not called to continue on into the interview round. What was wrong with me? Why did they not like me and want to have me on their team? Maybe I wasn't good enough. Maybe the talent out there far outweighed what I could provide for the team. Again, negative thoughts consumed my head. I walked away as my friend had walked to the group of girls signing up for their interview time for the following two weeks.

Some would think it was over. I tried out twice and was denied both times. Being depressed for a while, I continued to be involved in cheerleading. The coaches for the Baltimore Ravens cheerleading team are also the owners of Spirit

Unlimited, a company that provides cheerleading camps and competitions. I became a part of their summer staff and taught children of all ages the fundamentals of cheerleading. This could be a nice opportunity for me to become closer to the coaches and get to know them and their expectations. Even if I did not get to work with the coaches personally, I was still able to keep up with the cheerleading world and not give up my favorite sport. During the winter season I was a manager for the company, helping run competitions in the Mid-Atlantic part of the United States. The competition season ended in February and I had one month left before tryouts came around again. I debated back and forth for a long period of time before deciding a third time might be a charm, or at least that's what they say it is. I convinced myself, three times and that is it. If I do not make it this time then my joining the team was definitely not meant to be. I tried my hardest this year. I had my photos professionally taken by a photographer. I have naturally curly hair, and I discovered through girls on the team that the coaches do not prefer curly hair so I took the time to learn how to straighten my kinky curly bush I call hair. I made my own tryout outfit out of bright and dazzling fabric, making sure it would stand out from the rest of the girls trying out. I was not going to make any mistakes this year. I determined I was going to do all that I could to make it this year. My old college teammate had made the team so she had given me some great pointers for the tryout. At the

tryouts I had watched the style of dance she used when practicing the tryout routine. I was constantly watching the veteran cheerleaders to pick up on any moves I should emphasize, or any tips on my makeup I should use. My friend truly tried to help me out as much as she could in preparing for this tryout. The tryouts were held the same way as all of the previous years. Same order, same process, same route to that dreadful room. The same amounts of judges were crowded along the entire length of the room, intimidating the prospective cheerleaders. The music played and the bundle of nerves continued to grow. I performed the dance to the best of my ability, hoping that it was executed well enough for the judges. I rested and grabbed a bite to eat after the tryout was complete, but nothing could calm my nerves. I had told myself this was it. The third time is a charm! I'm going to make this team no matter what I have to do. Yes, some people may not be made out to do certain things, but I wasn't going to let this be one of them. Like I said in the beginning, I know I was not made to be on the high school basketball team with my friends, but I knew I could be just as good as any of those cheerleaders on the team if only the coaches would give me a chance. All I needed was for them to give me that one chance to prove myself to them.

The circle of doom was formed when the coaches came to read the numbers of those returning for Sunday's callbacks. I'll save you the suspense I

had put myself through and let you know that once again I was invited back. I should be happy that through these three years of tryouts I was never cut on the first day of tryouts. But it was always that second day of tryouts that bit the big one when it came to the cuts made. The second day of tryouts was just like all the others I had experienced. Sore muscles, a fatigued mind, and the longing to make it to the end of the day led to when I can celebrate my acceptance to the interview round or if I should sulk on my way home. The hours passed, my tryout completed, and still the waiting continued. The longer I waited, the harder my heart would beat and the more stress I felt overwhelming my body. Why did I put myself through all this torture? It was only a sport I liked to participate in. But I kept telling myself that this was my Olympics, and it would be unheard of if an Olympic competitor gave up on their dream. That would not be someone you wanted representing your country in the games. We became antsy when we knew the last group who had tried out had come back from the tryout room and the judges spent their time deciding over who would continue, and who would not. We used to make jokes towards the girl who may say "Hurry up and just get out here!" We used to tell the girl that at that moment the judges were debating over her and if she rushed them then they were just going to cut her automatically. The only way we could pass the time without losing our minds was by joking around. The moment of truth was upon us, and the coaches

entered just as I had seen them do five times before. I had worked my hardest and performed my greatest but to no avail. Again, my dreams had failed me. I'm done! I'm done! I'm done! Why do I do this to myself? I QUIT!

But not really. As any person who is an avid lover of their sport, you cannot just give up your sport like that. The following year, while those girls who I had worked with for years before had made the team and had spent their time practicing and performing in front of thousands, I decided that I would continue on with Spirit Unlimited during the summer months. Come fall, I had heard that my old high school was in search of a cheerleading coach. I volunteered myself to become a coach for my alma mater. My time spent with the cheerleaders wasn't the same since I was not participating, but more like delegating 15 year olds. I had still longed so much to be apart of a team. Most people who had known that I had tried out for Ravens did not know that I had tried out so many times before. Only those who were close to me realized how hard I had tried to become a member of the team. I used to attend Ravens games and see those cheerleaders on the field and just imagine that I had once been in a gym full of those girls and it could have been me on that field on that very day. At some games I didn't feel so bad since it was about 30 degrees and the girls were still in their cute and adorable outfits that I longed to wear. I don't know what it was about me, I have

never been a quitter in my entire life. Never had I quit a sport, a club, or a job. So how could I just let myself go and quit trying to be something that I had wanted so very badly.

I decided then at the game that I had to try again. There had to be something I could do better to give myself more of a chance. I knew that my talent was equal to some of the girls on the team. I know I'm not a world-renowned cheerleader, but I do have the ability to be an asset to their team. I went all out for the upcoming tryouts for the 2004 season. After working with Ravens cheerleaders through Spirit Unlimited, I was gaining knowledge of ways I could improve my look. I am a pale girl, and found out that the coaches find a tan look more healthy and prettier. I found a new tanning salon and began my tanning ritual. I found out which salon and hairdressers the girls used and made sure to make an appointment with the hairdresser. While there I discussed with the hairdresser that I was planning on trying out for the team and that anything she could do to improve my look and make it the way the coaches preferred would be wonderful. I went to the makeup consultant the cheerleaders used and had her teach me exactly how to do my makeup the way the coaches preferred. That day, I also had taken my pictures. I figured I might as well take them that day since I had both my hair and my makeup done by individuals who knew what the coaches were looking for. I attempted to eat healthy

at home so that my body was in the best shape I could get in. I would leave no stone unturned in this journey to tryouts. A fourth time was too many times to just go into this willy-nilly. The morning of tryouts, we warmed up and learned the routine. Again, the dance was very cheerleading-like and easy for me to learn. Performing it with attitude and flare would come with the hours of practicing I would try to fit in before I had to make sure I looked perfect for my entrance into the tryout room. I had a non-returning veteran help me tease my hair so that it was nice and full for the judges. Many retakes on my makeup were needed as I sweat it all off during the practicing of the routine. Jump after jump was practiced to make sure my form and height were just right. I had my friends constantly watch me dance and give me any pointers they could think of to improve my look. There was no way I could leave this tryout second-guessing myself. I did make it through the initial tryouts again, and spent the night going through the dance millions of times in my head. Here I was again, at the second day of tryouts, my fourth time in this process. You would think I could tell the girls trying out what they should do for the tryouts since I had been through them so many times. In the room on that Sunday I worked my hardest to prove to those judges how bad I really wanted this position. They just did not know how hard I had actually worked for this and how it affected my life so much. By this point I truly did not know what I would do if I hadn't

made it. Four times is way too many times to try something and to be let down every time. How many times would it take me to tryout before I realized I wasn't meant to do it? I then told myself that since I did know the coaches now through Spirit Unlimited, I felt comfortable enough emailing them if I had not made it the second day and just asking them exactly what I needed to work on, and if they thought I should even tryout again. Either way, I was going to find out what it was I was doing wrong this year.

The tryouts were completed and all we could do was wait. I had been so nervous for this tryout that my stress level had gone through the roof. I had even lost about 10 pounds from the worrying I had done over these tryouts. Again, it was all for this moment of truth. I knew if I had made these cuts it did not mean I had made the team. All it meant was that I had made it on to the interview portion of the tryouts. But that would mean so much to me, if only to make it past the second cuts. I had not been able to do that for 3 years, and I just had to prove to myself I had gotten better and was good enough to go to interviews. The nonchalant walk the coaches made to the gym was not settling my stomach any as they held the list in their hand of all those who would be returning. The numbers began to ring throughout the gym. There was a silence of all who were waiting to here those three digits, which admitted them into the interview round. Why did

there have to be so many numbers that sounded alike, and which were so close to each other that you almost thought they were calling your number, yet to realize they were off by 2. My friends smiled as they heard their numbers. They had all been invited back for another year as of yet, but I still waited to hear if I had that chance. Then, as if I expected them to be done with their numbers and I would take my usual walk of shame towards the door, I heard it. No, that couldn't be it. I misheard them. Why would they call my number? But I swear, I heard my number. Did I just think that was my number? Did I want it so bad that I imagined them saying my number? I was so unsure that I had to ask the stunt coach, who was holding all the called numbers, if they called my number. He looked down the list, and there I saw it printed in red ink, 762. Someone, showing that I should go for an interview, wrote my number. They wanted to talk to me, and ask me questions about why I should be on their team. They were finally giving me this chance. My friends were so excited for me that after all this time, 5 years in the making, I had finally had my chance.

We had to rush over to the trainer and pick a slot to mark down as our very own to meet with the coaches for an interview at the stadium. By now I was a first grade teacher and had to make sure that my interview time would not interfere with school. There was no way I could do this so I had to pick a day where I thought it would be alright to leave

school a little early and head into the city for a very important day. It was about a week before I had to be at my interview, so you can bet that week leading up to it was a stressful one at that. Again, not being able to eat because I was so nervous, I had to do my best to try and calm myself down and work with the kids at school. Usually those kids always take my mind off of what is going on in my head. I had to pick out a nice business like outfit to wear to the interview. I hardly owned anything nice like that, so I had to dig through my wardrobe until I could find something I thought would be appropriate. Even though I had worked with the coaches many times previously in cheerleading competitions, there was something so nerve racking about meeting with them in such an official way.

The day arrived and I met the security guard at the front desk, who led me to the office where I would be interviewing. They welcomed me into the room and sat me down. It was a friendly atmosphere and seemed to be less threatening than I had imagined in my mind. The head coach had let me know that they would each be asking me a question or two of their choice. Of course the questions started off as "Tell me about yourself," and "Why do you want to become a Ravens Cheerleader." These questions were very easy to answer and did not take much concentration on my part. Although while I was speaking, I had that second voice going on in my head telling me things like "Don't sound stupid

when you talk to them,” and “Did you really just say that? Did that make sense?” I told them about my story I had written in English 102 about how making this team was as if I was winning the gold in the Olympics. One of the coaches hadn’t even realized I had tried out so many times. The interview was over in a short 20 minutes and I was off again to wait a week for the coaches to finish their interviews before our numbers would be posted on the machine. The following Friday we were to call the office number and listen to the recording to hear what numbers would make it to the final round of tryouts. Final round.... I wouldn’t even know what to expect if I made it to the final round. Waiting is the key word in this tryout. Waiting while all the others are trying out. Waiting for the coaches to come out to read the qualifying numbers. Waiting for the interviews to complete. Waiting for my dream to finally come true.

That Friday had come and it was hard to keep myself from the phone while I was at school. As soon as I was able to have a moment to myself I called the office number. Ring after ring, I waited (again) for the machine to pick up. “You have reached the office....” it began to say. “Here are the numbers selected to continue on to the final round.” It was so tough to listen to the numbers. Each round of tryouts we had a different number, so I struggled to remember what I was supposed to listen for. Each time we listened to the list of numbers

being read to us, it became shorter and shorter. I was so scared that I would hear the final number, she would thank us for our interviews, and I would have never heard my number. Then I would have to call back and listen again, even closer, to make sure I hadn't made a mistake. But I heard it clear as day. You have got to be kidding me! They did call my number. They did like me in the interview. They did think I was worthy of attending their final tryout round. Was all my hard work and dedication paying off? We would only hope! The final round of tryouts were to be held at a cheerleading gym the following Thursday. It was to be a regular practice and the coaches would watch us throughout the practice to make their final decision by the end of the night. In less than a week I would know if I was a brand new professional cheerleader. The only way I could prepare for our final round was to continuously practice the tryout dance and make sure I was prepared with all my makeup and hair products for the night.

The night arrived and I met my college teammate at her house to prepare for the tryout. She helped me get ready with my hair and makeup and to review the final touches to the dance. We left with our bags in tow and traveled to the gym. I arrived at the gym and was interested to see all the individuals who had made it to this round. It was nice to see some familiar faces of veterans and even some new girls who were in the same boat as me.

Don't get me wrong, all the veterans have to tryout just like the new girls, but I felt they already were a shoe in for the position. We warmed up as a "team" and then began to work on our jumps. Just a normal practice, dividing into lines and taking turns working on our jumps. We worked on our tryout dance routine and perfected some skills on that. The whole time I was having a great time chatting with the girls and making new friends. Hopefully these would be friends I would be able to see all year long on the sidelines at a NFL game. As we continued dancing we saw the coaches gather and begin discussing. You knew as you watched that they were deciding who was going to be cut and who would make the team. This was the final cut I had been waiting for 5 years to attend. I won't lie and say that if I didn't make it I would still be happy just to have made it this far, because I would definitely be upset if I made it this far just to fail yet again.

With time about to end for our practice, the coaches brought us in for one final time during the tryout process. They made a short speech yet again thanking us for coming out to tryout for their team. And before we knew it, they had announced that all that had made it to the final round would be continuing on to be apart of the 2004 Baltimore Ravens Cheerleading Team. That fast it came in my ears, and it took a much longer time processing what I had just heard. Does that mean what I think it

means? Did they just say that we just made the team? Just as I had prepared myself for the worst, I heard the best news I had heard in five years. I couldn't believe it. I had always been disappointed in the past that I didn't even know how to react now that the results were in my favor. But this was it, there was no going back, I had made the team!

Believe me, once I made the team, this is when they put us straight to work. We had practices once a week for 2 hours. We have to run for 30 minutes before we actually started our practicing. Then we would practice the fillers we would be using for game days. It seemed kind of silly to start practicing the fillers in May, but if you want perfection then we must start as soon as we can. Come June we head to Western Maryland to have our own team training camp. Training camp is one of the best parts of being on the team. We travel approximately 3 hours from home to spend a long weekend with the girls and guys who are going to be our second family for the next seven months. We definitely have a lot of work to do during this long weekend. Most of our time is spent practicing all the material we had to learn off of a video in about a month. All of the girls running for a captain's position take turns reviewing our fillers and making sure that we all hit our motions and positions exactly where they should be. At times we may play friendly games of kick ball, or relax and make jokes during lunch. We have "rookie skits" where the

rookies (like myself the first year) have to make up fun and entertaining skits to perform in front of the veterans and coaches. But it is not all fun and games. The nights while we are away for training camp, we have appearances to work. We attend restaurants and visit with the patrons. We sign autographs and mingle with the crowd. Anything we can do to promote our team, we make sure to get out and do what we can. We have even completed team-building activities while away at camp. My first year we did an obstacle course through the woods and had to work in mini teams to accomplish the tasks laid ahead of us. This past summer we did orienteering. This was extremely fun. We were put into teams of 5 and sent off in the park to find objects based off of a map and a compass. We really get to intermingle between the rookies and the veterans this way, and we can meet some of our next best friends just through training camp.

After training camp we start our two a week practices lasting for three hours each. That is tough work. Especially when we run our 3 miles before practice, and I am not a big runner at all. We try to meet up every now and then outside of practice to get together as a team. We had a crab feast where we got to hang out with our teammates along with the alumni that are no longer with us. In between the practices we have, there are many functions in which people ask for cheerleaders to make an appearance. I did so many appearances my first year

on the team that I was awarded the Charity Award at our banquet. We do appearances for just about everything. I have had the opportunity to walk in Michael Phelps' parade after his win in the Olympics. I met Governor Ehrlich at a USO function where we packed care packages for troops overseas. I have helped people celebrate their birthdays and bar mitzvahs, along with charity walks and carnivals. We do promotional work for the Baltimore Ravens and appear at their activities as well. I have done appearances for our sponsors Coca-Cola and Miller Lite. The best part of appearances is that you get out in the public and get to meet so many different and wonderful people that you would otherwise have never even known. One appearance that touched me was when I helped cheer on walkers for the American Heart Association. We heard a woman talk about her battle with heart disease and how it had affected her life. We had the pleasure of congratulating her on her recovery at such a young age and spread the word to help out others just like her. Our Countdown to Kickoff week is full of appearances. We take our time to visit all the local establishments in Baltimore and promote the Ravens and their opening game. We also have our very own cheerleader party where we invite people to the Harbor and perform for our fans celebrating the start of the new season.

Between the practices and appearances, we also have other responsibilities that need our time.

Photo day is a fun but extremely long day where we take our team photo as well as our individual shots for our trading cards. We arrive a little before 7 A.M. and begin to get our hair ready and our makeup perfect. We are lucky that our team photographer is also our stunt coach so he knows exactly what he is looking for in our pictures. Since we are the largest NFL cheerleading team, it does take a while to get through everyone's individual pictures and then meet together to make our team shot. There is a lot of down time during the day, so this is another day when we get to know more about our new teammates. We may play cards, chat while lying on the floor, or take long needed naps in-between takes. In the end, the photos which were taken are beautiful and we can't wait to get them out to our fans. This year we shot for our very first calendar. We traveled to the Eastern Shore of Maryland to take some beautiful pictures on the Chesapeake Bay. This too was an extremely long day, but well worth the time put in. It is nice when we can show our fans just what wonderful girls we have on our team and can portray it in a form where everyone can share in our beauty.

The way I talk, it sounds like all our team does is practice to make sure our dances are perfect and travel to appearances to meet our fans and share what we love most about Baltimore. But what people know us best for are our game day performances. What our fans may not know is that

the cheerleaders have been practicing for four months before we even see a preseason game. We pride ourselves on being one of the most athletic teams in the NFL, so we cannot let our fans down. On a typical game day week, we practice our usual two practices for the week, three hours each. During the practice we will review the fillers we have perfected up to that point, as well as our end zone routines that our very own cheerleaders have choreographed for the team.

On game day, the cheerleaders must arrive five hours before kick-off. During this time we hold our final game day practice to make sure all of our moves are just right for the field. We take ourselves out to the field and mark our performances to make sure we are set for game time. Once our practice is over we may enter the locker room and use the best of our time to get ready for the game. Contrary to what it may seem, we do not have very much time to get ready, so we definitely look like a bunch of scrambling girls trying to make ourselves as beautiful as we can in as short of a time possible. Uniforms must go on, hair must be teased and curled, and makeup must be applied just right. Before kick-off, we then head out to see all of our fans in and around the stadium. Some girls may visit the Club Level seats to visit our visitors on those floors while some ladies may be outside of the main gate meeting fans as they enter the stadium. All the while, we try to make sure we get autographs to all of our fans that

would like one. Once our appearances around the stadium are complete, we head back to the locker room for any last minute preparations before we head ourselves to line up to enter the field. We have a prep room we wait in while all of the players are lining up to take their turn onto the field. In this room is when we try to get all of our last minute jitters out and our last minute practice can be reviewed. We stand together and say a little prayer before we head off to the field wishing everyone to be healthy and stay safe, and to make sure we have a wonderful time on the field since that is what we had come to do. We then line up in time to form the gauntlet for our players to enter the field. It is amazing how big the players are. You watch them on the television and they look like normal people just like you and me. But then as they are walking by, you realize that they are larger than human and could crush us with just one hand.

I believe this to be the most exciting part of the entire game. We are standing to the side of the players, the fog machine begins to blow out smoke for the players' entrance. Music plays and the video is played on the jumbo screen. Our coach sends us out quickly as we run to form the gauntlet, appearing in front of 69,000 fans. The thrill of this experience creates pure excitement through our bodies. As soon as we are on the field, the announcer begins to call out our players. The only moment that is more exciting than entering in front

of our fans for the first moment of the game, is watching Ray Lewis take the field. There is nothing like having the cameras on him as he is waiting to take the field, the crowd gathers to their feet, screaming so that it is the loudest I've ever heard them yell. His music is played and he performs his signature dance before he takes the field. The excitement that explodes through the stadium in that one minute of time is amazing and can only be experienced on the field in the stadium. After a most amazing gauntlet, we head into our four corners, two dance and two stunt. From here we perform our fillers and sideline chants. In between the first and second quarter we will head to one end zone and perform an end zone routine, which is similar to a halftime routine in college cheerleading. We perform another end zone routine between the third and fourth quarters. During halftime four girls are chosen per game to help out with Quarterback Challenge presented by the Ravens. Just another appearance to add to our list of many.

My first time experiencing the entire game day experience was nothing but surreal. I had waited so long to be on that side of the game and it was finally my chance to shine. Preseason games were excellent practices for the real thing, but nothing is quite like the actual NFL regular season game. Everything was so exciting. Walking through the corridors to the stadium, meeting all of the fans outside the main gates, and standing in the

gauntlet my first time in front of all those fans can never be replaced in my mind.

We go through this routine for five months. Super amounts of work and dedication are put into making a high quality NFL cheerleading team. The saying is true, "You are only as strong as your weakest link." We are truly a team and can only function as one if we are all in it together. At the end of the season we celebrate our teamwork with a banquet. We come together as a family and celebrate all of our accomplishments throughout the year. Individuals are awarded such titles as MVP and Rookie of the Year. Captains are thanked for their hard work put in throughout the season. Our banquet makes a nice ending to the job we put forth for the Baltimore Ravens Corporation.

If anyone gets one thing out of my diary, I hope that they realize that you can reach your goal if you truly set your mind to it. One of my favorite songs is "The Impossible" by Joe Nichols. In the song he states that "unsinkable ships sink,(and) unbreakable walls break..." and I feel this shows in itself that nothing is impossible. Through my professional cheerleading experience, I have had the opportunity to share with other cheerleaders through this very book that your dreams can come true as long as you stick with them. No matter what negative remarks may come your way or what hardships you may encounter, someone else has been

through them too and they have survived. I stand on the field, and I take in certain moments when I need to tell myself to freeze that moment and think about it, because in five or ten years, this will all be a wonderful memory of a phenomenal experience.

Author's Biography



Wynter Lloyd is a contributing author for *The Pro Cheerleader Diaries* and *The Ultimate Guide to Becoming a Pro Cheerleader*. Ms. Lloyd is also...

- A current NFL Baltimore Ravens Cheerleader and a member of the staff for the Lil' Ravens
- A current summer and competition staff member for Spirit Unlimited
- Recently won an award in 2004 for completing a multitude of appearances
- A former staff member for ECA and COA
- A former cheerleader for the Florida Southern College and Salisbury University
- A former cheer coach at the high school and all-star levels