

Endorsements

Nicole's unfailing resilience in the face of adversity is a constant source of inspiration. There is no better cheerleader of hope and no greater enemy of self-defeat.

– Megan Towey, Investigative Producer – CBS

GAME ON!

RELENTLESSLY PURSUE YOUR DREAMS

*An Illustration on How to Set Goals and Overcome
Challenges to Win Big in the Game of Life*

NICOLE R. SMITH

 **AUTHOR
ACADEMY** elite

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Dedication Page

To anyone who has ever attempted and fallen short of their goal. Try again; one more time. What can it hurt? The next time just may be your time, but how will you know if you don't try? Never. Give. Up.

For Cyrani

I hope this book encourages you to look your fears in the eyes and rise above them.

For Tony Smith

Thank you for pressing and staying on me to write this book.

For Patricia, Selma and Reinaldo Smith

Thank you for always supporting and believing in me.

For Peter Staal

Thank you for believing in me, financially supporting this project and teaching me how to love.

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Fighter

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LIFE ISN'T FAIR

“GAME ON” IS a phrase that doesn't always refer to a sporting event. It can be a battle cry to overcome challenges or the chant that motivates you to press towards newfound goals.

If you have ever set out on the path to achieving a goal, I am sure you have heard the phrases “It won't be easy, but it will be worth it” and “If it were easy, everyone would be doing it” many times. There is another phrase that I would like to offer up: *Life isn't fair*. The faster you can accept this, the easier it will become to pursue your dreams. You will no longer be able to use that phrase as a roadblock or excuse not to pursue your dreams. Whatever your dream is, it will be worth it when you arrive.

GAME ON

LET'S GET STARTED ... WHAT DO *YOU* WANT?



People rarely talk about what happens between the first step of your journey and “making it.” I share my story to encourage you to keep going. You are not alone on the journey. No matter how many tries or how long it takes, I am on the journey, too, as your personal cheerleader. Recognize the small wins along the way, and don't discount them. Whatever your *it* is—becoming a lawyer, doctor, engineer, author, a news anchor, an actress, a DJ, a filmmaker, etc.—it comes with challenges. Expect it.

One of my dreams was to be a dancer/cheerleader for a professional sports team. At 32 years of age, I achieved that dream, and it was the springboard for other goals that I wanted to achieve.

After years of auditioning, I saw how the process can take its toll on young women. Because of this, a new dream was conceived within me. I wanted to motivate young women and to remind them how beautiful they are; especially after being cut from an audition. I wanted to encourage them to not let the result of an audition define them. I wanted to encourage single parents like myself to continue to pursue their dreams. More recently, I became so in tune to so many people around me wanting to achieve goals, large and small, I wanted to be the person to cheer them on, especially when the going got tough. Lastly, for as long as I could remember, another goal was to write a book. However, I was never quite sure of the subject matter.

Now, ten years later at 42, although I am still pursuing my dream of dancing on the sidelines for another

GAME ON

professional sports team, something magical has happened. My pursuit of the first goal has led to the realization of the others.

**One step in the right direction
can change the course of your
life forever.**

My experiences over the past 16 years have provided me with the content and platform I needed to be able to write this book and encourage people all over the world. Seeing these other goals come to fruition isn't half bad. If I can do it, so can you. One step in the right direction can change the course of your life forever.

This is my story. I hope it encourages and inspires you. If it does, for me, it will be another dream come true.

Game On!

DREAM RECOGNITION

Discovering My First Love

I WAS RAISED by two strong Latino parents (¡Viva Panama!). Therefore, music and dance were a huge part of my upbringing. I watched my parents grace the floor dancing salsa, soca, and calypso all my life.

I don't remember much from my high school years, but I do remember one day distinctly. I was in my front yard with my bestie Becky making up choreography. I am grateful for her because I know she was doing it to be nice and that she was indulging me. What she doesn't know is that was the day I realized how passionate I was about dance. In hindsight, it was such an obvious sign that this deep love for dance existed within me, but like most Latino immigrant families at that time believed, "Sports can pay for your college education, and dancing isn't a career—it's a hobby." So I ignored the spark and let life and ignorant beliefs snuff it out.

I attended school on a track scholarship, but I was always drawn to dance, even at my university. They started a dance team to perform at basketball games.

This was a huge occurrence because it was a conservative Christian university and dance was forbidden. But they were starting to loosen the reigns. For instance, women were finally allowed to wear pants that year! Although I couldn't participate on the dance team due to my track commitment, I was able to assist with choreography here and there which thrilled me to no end.

I started a dance team called Liberated at my local church and was the choreographer for the youth ministry there for two years. The little spark had started to kindle again. This time, instead of allowing life to snuff it out, I fanned the flame. It was beginning to grow, and the realization that I could encourage and touch people's lives through dance became a reality. Little did I know back then that this blooming love for dance that flowed through the blood in my veins would guide me, and more importantly, sustain me on this journey we call life.

The Spark that Ignited the Dream

I was working for a radio station in Miami at the time. We had extra tickets to the Miami Dolphins game, and someone asked if I wanted to go. Sure? Why not? I love sports and am extremely competitive. Plus, the ticket *and* the parking pass were free!

That game changed my life forever. I remember it as if it were yesterday. It was a cool, crisp autumn day at the stadium. Pssshhh, yeah right. It was hot as Hades. After all, we lived in Miami for goodness sake. It was

about 80 degrees, and everyone was sweating in the open-roof stadium.

But that didn't matter to me. It was the first time I had seen

I had seen something that I had never known existed.

something that I had never known existed: NFL cheerleaders. The Miami Dolphins Cheerleaders (MDC) were my first exposure to NFL Cheerleaders—I was hooked. I was absolutely intrigued by them. I can't tell you what team the Dolphins played that day or which team won the game. All I could think of during the entire game was, "I can do that."

Every time the whistle blew after a play, the DJ in the stadium would play music and the cheerleaders would begin to move gracefully yet powerfully to the music, executing short spurts of choreography in unison. After every quarter, the cheerleaders rotated corners giving the crowd in that section a glimpse of a new set of cheerleaders. The women were short, tall, blonde, brunette, red-headed, curly-haired, straight-haired, short-haired, long-haired, Caucasian, African American, Latina, and Asian. What a wonderfully diverse and beautiful group of women on the field.

Then I saw her—MDC cheerleader Trisia. A gorgeous, tall cheerleader with the most beautiful dark brown skin I had ever seen. It was like she was glowing. Her huge smile was infectious and her energy contagious. She was absolutely captivating while cheering and dancing on the sidelines. I couldn't take my eyes off her. I was watching someone who looked like me.

With much more conviction, I repeated to myself, “*I can do that!*”

To my disappointment, the cheerleaders disappeared soon after the second rotation. What I didn't know is that they had retired to the locker room to prepare for their halftime performance.

Suddenly, they were back and took the field. They moved quickly yet gracefully to hit their marks on the field. Their choreography was full of clean movements, crazy fast transitions, an insane amount of energy, and of course, high kicks. After they landed in jump splits to the crowd's cheers, that was it for me. I knew I had to be on that field. When I arrived home that night, I immediately looked up the cheerleaders' web page to find out when the next auditions were. I put it on my calendar and waited anxiously for the day to arrive.

THE EMOTIONAL ROLLER COASTER RIDE OF DREAM CHASING

Preparation

I WISH I could honestly tell you that since the date of the audition was months away, I feverishly started preparing for it by:

- following a strict diet and workout plan
- playing with makeup techniques
- researching the best weave and best way to attach it to my own hair
- agonizing over what I would wear for auditions

Yeah, I did none of that. Like a lot of young women who see the ladies on the sidelines and have no idea of the tedious process, I put the date on the calendar and *showed up*. It wasn't until later on in this journey I learned how important showing up can be.

Audition Day

Audition day finally arrived. I had absolutely no idea what to expect. New cheerleader hopefuls trickled in early to the stadium for registration and began stretching to prepare for a long day ahead.

When I entered the audition area, I glanced around the room in a state of shock. I must say it was intimidating. *Everyone* was beautiful and so well put together and flexible. I don't even remember if I had put makeup on that day. Lipstick perhaps? It was an overwhelming situation.

The director welcomed approximately 250 of us to the audition. I snapped out of my temporary paralysis and wondered what I had gotten myself into. It was judgment time. All the hopefuls took their assigned seats and settled in for the nerve-wracking audition ahead of us.

After everyone was seated, the audition officially began. The judges introduced themselves. The panel consisted of former NFL cheerleaders, radio and TV personalities, choreographers, and the director of the cheerleaders. Great. No pressure.

The first round was freestyle. *Freestyle*. Say it isn't so! The DJ played random music while we were expected to show off our dance ability in whatever form was most comfortable. They called hopefuls up in groups of five to audition. After what seemed like an eternity, my number was finally called. It was my group's turn

to impress the judges. I had no idea what to do, so I did what I would do at home—dance like no one was watching. But nothing outrageous, and not salsa.

I moved naturally to the music as though I were trying to dance captivatingly in a club. After all, it was all I could do. I had no real dance skills, but I had a lot of spunk and energy. So, I smiled big and hoped that would make up for my lack of dancing ability. After several more groups performed for the judges, round one of auditions finally came to an end. The judges walked to a back room to make their decisions about who would make it to the next round. All we could do was sit and wait.

After what seemed like a lifetime, the judges finally emerged from the

You could feel both the anxiety and excitement levels rise simultaneously.

room to post the numbers of the hopefuls who had made it through to the next round. They made an announcement thanking each of us for spending our time with them that morning and encouraging us to come back and try out again next year if we didn't see our number on the board. You could feel both the anxiety and excitement levels rise simultaneously in the room as each aspiring hopeful anticipated learning her fate. Each woman asked themselves, "Does the dream end now, or will it continue?"

When the judges moved away from the posted numbers, the ardent chaos began. The emotions ignited the room instantly, like potential energy immediately

converting to kinetic energy. The hopefuls flooded the board trying to catch a glimpse of their number. A myriad of mixed emotions, such as anger, disappointment, and elation, filled the room.

Being short and at the back, I had to wait and watch the despair or elation of those in front of me before I would learn my fate. With every squeal of excitement, my heart filled with excitement. With every outburst of tears, my heart sank. Finally, I was close enough to see the board to look for my number. I kept looking down at my shorts to remember it. I didn't want to get it confused with someone else's. I searched frantically—to and fro, up and down—at the numbers on the board. Eventually, I realized they were in numerical order.

Then, it happened. There it was. My eyes stopped darting back and forth and fixated on my number. The squeals of delight and sobs of disappointment behind me faded away. At that moment, at least in my head, there wasn't another person in the room. It was only me, the board, *and my number*. It was there, on the board. It was actually there. I couldn't believe it. I made it to the next round. I was thrilled yet terrified at the same time.

“I don't know how to dance. What have I gotten myself into? I am not sure my smile alone can carry me through the next round.”

Round two consisted of learning and performing choreography within hours of learning it. My dance experience, up until then, was running the hip-hop

dance ministry at my church in Tulsa, Oklahoma. I was the choreographer, so I never had to learn the dances. I was always teaching them. That coupled with ballet and tap lessons when I was three didn't give me the boost of confidence that I needed.

The hopefuls took to the floor to learn and review the choreography. Then, in the blink of an eye, it was judgment time again. We went through the same process as before. Everyone sat in their assigned seats and waited for their turn to be called. This second round was more agonizing than the first.

I tried not to watch the other hopefuls perform. If they messed up, I felt as though I would, too. Or it would give me false hope and I didn't want to grow overconfident. If they nailed the routine, it would be extra pressure on me to remember the dance. What's worse is you *had* to sit in the chairs. To make it fair for all hopefuls performing and to reduce the distraction for the judges, dancers waiting in the wings were not allowed to practice on the sides or the back of the room. So we had to sit there and watch and wait. They *finally* called my number. I paraded onto the floor with the others in my group and waited anxiously for the music to start.

I will never forget the audition song that year, "Fighter" by Christina Aguilera. I remember it not only because it was my first audition, but also because they played the song over and over and over until every group had performed before the judges. I believe everything

happens for a reason. As sick as I was of that song, I would later learn that my foundation for years of auditioning to come, would literally be built on the lyrics of this song. By the end of the audition, the lyrics to that song were ingrained in my subconscious mind, which was a good thing. Little did I know then how much I would need those words. They literally transformed and shaped my future audition experiences.

*“Makes me that much stronger.
 Makes me work a little bit harder.
 It makes me that much wiser.
 So thanks for making me a Fighter.
 Made me learn a little bit faster.
 Made my skin a little bit thicker.
 Makes me that much smarter.
 So thanks for making me a Fighter.”*

Once the music began, my nerves calmed down, and I started moving. I remembered the choreography better than I expected. The further the song progressed the more energized I became. I decided to put it all out there and leave it on the floor. In my excitement, I forgot some of the choreography, but I didn't care. I was having so much fun that I kept smiling (more like laughing at myself) and kept dancing. The song ended, and we held our positions for the judges so they could make their last assessments. When they were finished, we exited the dance floor and returned to our seats.

“Whew. I am glad that's over,” I thought. I was proud of myself. I showed up and gave it my best. I know I messed up, but that was okay. It actually took the

pressure off. I was able to watch and enjoy the remaining hopefuls as they performed their routines.

Suddenly there was a huge round of applause after the last group performed for the judges. Day One of the audition process had come to an end. Now, it was time to wait.

While the judges were in the back room again, I concentrated on the buzz of the room. Many hopefuls knew each other, so they were chatting. The room was full of conversations that varied from hopefuls recounting how they messed up to what people were going to eat.

After what seemed like a fortnight, the judges eventually emerged from the notorious back room where hopefuls' lives were instantly changed. I honestly wasn't too nervous this time around, because I was *sure* I was going home. They asked everyone to gather around. They thanked us all for our time and for coming out to audition. They encouraged us to come back and try again if our names were not called. If our name was called, they asked us to meet them on the dance floor in the center of the room.

And so it began. Once again, a heightened level of anxiety and excitement filled the room. Then, one-by-one, the judges announced the finalists who would move on to the next round of auditions known as boot camp. As the judges called a hopeful's name, the hopeful would shriek or cry and charge the dance floor with excitement.

Then it happened again. I heard my name called. I was thrilled, excited, and frankly shocked. I couldn't believe it! They were actually considering me. My brand-new dream of becoming an NFL cheerleader was one step closer.

After they had named all of the finalists and were able to quiet us down, the director spoke words that resonated and stayed with me throughout every other audition I ever attended. "Congratulations on making it to the next round, but don't get conceited or arrogant. Today, we sent home a lot of talented young ladies." In the years to come, I would realize that no truer words (in the audition world) were ever spoken.

They call it boot camp for a reason. The week following the audition was tedious. We had three days to review the choreography we knew, learn new choreography, learn and review a kick line, prepare and practice solos, determine the show order, and discover in what order we would be performing. It was a full-on production. It was exhausting yet exciting all at the same time. Finally, the week was over. We had one or two days to rest and/or practice before the final performance day.

Final audition day was here. We arrived early to the Aventura Mall for the run-through of the program. After running the entire production, except the solos, rehearsal was over. It was time to freshen up for the final performance. I felt so ill-prepared. Hopefuls arrived with full makeup kits. Most of them looked like models. I dug into my bag and pretended I had the fresh makeup to put on when I didn't. I figured

the makeup I put on earlier in the morning would last. I thought I would be fine. Not so much. Ding! Another lesson learned.

Soon, although it seemed like hours, they called our names to line up for the start of the show. The music started, and so did the adrenaline. We briskly entered the stage, performed the routine that we learned at tryouts in groups of five, then just as quickly exited the stage. This cycle continued until each group had their moment in the spotlight.

Then it was time for the solos. Now, remember, I had no dance experience, no one to bounce off ideas. I made up my own hip-hop choreography. It wasn't cute or sexy. This was confirmed when I executed what I thought was the best part of my routine—some type of push-up situation, or so I thought. Until this day, I will never forget the look of shock and sheer confusion on the director's face when I stood back up. In hindsight, I realize that was the move that sealed my fate. But, I didn't know it at the time, especially because so many people complimented me on my routine afterward.

I was proud of myself. I felt accomplished. I gave it all I had. I made up the routine all by myself just like I did years ago in my front yard with Becky. Not to mention, a lot of people liked it. I realize now, again, in hindsight, that it was a great routine, but the wrong audience.

After the solos were done, the judges deliberated. Then it was time for the final showcase. Again, we briskly

GAME ON

sashayed out in groups of five, performed another routine, as well as a kick-line. Then each girl was able to take the stage by herself for the judges to get one last look. Finally, the performances were over. What was done was done. At this point, there was nothing else anyone could do.

The event staff for the day whisked all the hopefuls off to a secret back room in the mall for us to sit and wait for what seemed like an eternity. The entire time, I *knew* I made the team. Why? I was able to feign a right turn, my kicks touched my face, I was sporting a nicely toned six-pack and biceps, and most importantly, I nailed all of my dances. Why wouldn't I make the team?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Nicole is a Panamanian-American, single mother, dancer, published author and motivational speaker. She attended Oral Roberts University on a Division I Full-Ride Track Scholarship. After graduating, she started her own non-profit dance organization. Her experience in Sports and Entertainment, Radio, TV and the Performing Arts has spanned nearly 20 years. She has danced and cheered for four Professional and Semi-Professional sports teams, and her heart's desire is to provide others with tools to overcome life's challenges while pursuing their dreams.

Thinking of writing a book?

Author Academy Elite: <https://bit.ly/2NwOKZE>

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