

Two short years ago, just a few days after Christmas, I find myself wide awake at the crack of dawn, anxious about the day as my mind races in circles. I try to stay warm, bundled underneath the covers, but the chilly air outside my hotel in Nashville continues to creep through my veins. I crawl out of bed trying not to wake my best friend Schelin, who lies next to me sound asleep. I go into the bathroom to straighten my hair as I listen to the Beach Boys on my Ipod, anything to keep my mind off the pressure on me today. Today is one of the biggest cheerleading competitions of the year. My whole gym, consisting of about eight large teams, is here in Tennessee to compete against some of the best teams from across the nation. My team is Senior All- Girl, the smallest team from the Tiger Elite All-Star gym. These twenty girls have become my sisters, and together we work hard to overcome all obstacles. Today is the second day of competition, and according to our first day performance, our team is in second place in the biggest division in the competition.

Before we know it, the time has come to go warm up. Our team knows that we are only a few points behind the team in first place. We realize that today we must give it our all and the routine must be completely perfect to claim the winning spot. Four or five teams trail behind us and we are desperate to make sure that they do not catch up with us. As warm ups begin, I can feel terror come upon me. I am a flyer. I become fully aware that if I fall out of my stunt, I will get seriously injured and my team's chances of winning will be completely ruined. My biggest fear is letting down my team members and coaches. Everyone's stunts and tumbling excel in warmups, but we are all still afraid of the actual performance. We soon approach the main mat and wait behind a huge wall, with only a few teams in front of us. My heart thumps louder. My hands sweat. The Adrenaline flows through my body. My shaking hands cause me to bite my nails. However, this is the feeling I live for. This is the feeling I sweat and practice for unceasingly each week. I turn around, fear visible in my eyes, as our team huddles closely together. Two of our team members, Jeanne and Sam, begin their pep talk- a ritual held sacred to the team. Using carefully selected words, they threaten to kill any flyer, who falls out of her stunt. "Sell the dance! Make the crowd want more! Force the judges to make our score the best!" We hold hands and say a prayer before we walk on to the mat.

As I walk on to the floor my heart begins to race. The butterflies in my stomach make me feel like I'm going to be sick. I lose my breath as the music begins, praying that my stunt will not fall. We hit every motion with perfection as we use cheesy smiles to entice the crowd.

Jumps. Toe- touch. Pike. I pull my body up with my arms once more to complete the final jump in the sequence. My throat aches as I use every breath I have to yell the

cheer with all my might, "We are Elite. One step higher. The blue black and white. The eye of the Tiger!" Tumbling. I run across the blue mat using my strength to flip my body through the air. Finished. Now the pyramid. As I sprint to my spot, I try to plan when I will be able to catch my breath again. "Breathe," I remind myself. As I put my foot and my life in my bases hands, I feel the rush as my feet are swept off of the ground. I see Schelin across from me in the air, as we propel another flyer even higher up as we flip her body toward the audience. I stay tight overhead to ensure the stunt stays up. "1,2." I hear the bases yell as they remind us of what count we are on. I struggle to catch my breath as my bases thrust me into the air once more. Defying gravity and most laws of physics, I hit my stunt perfectly. I hold my foot in my hand, showing off my flexibility to the judges. My bases cradle me without flaw making me appear weightless in their arms. A sense of relief rushes through my veins as I dash to the dance. Our team sells it with our intense and crazy choreography. We hit each motion with more attitude and personality than ever. We pop and shake as the music sings, "Too much Booty in the Pants." My heart jumps as I hear the roar of the crowd. Only two minutes and thirty seconds have passed, although it feels like a lifetime. I jump into the arms of my two best friends while our team spirits as we walk off of the mat. We have hit a perfect routine, and our team is thrilled because we know we have done our best when our head coach Lenny jumps up and down with excitement.

We impatiently wait to hear our score at the award ceremony that night. As I look at my team members while our hands are interlocked, I think to myself... three hours of practice, two times a week, just for the chance to come here and compete. Teams are announced - none of them is our team- could it be true- did we... The announcer comes on loud and clear, saying "And second place goes to ....the Nashville All-Stars!" We jump up in excitement, knowing now that we have claimed Our spot as National Champions! All the coaches and other teams from our gym cheer us on as we embrace each other and yell with joy. Our large trophy towers over us as we take our first picture as "the number one" team. A few days before, one of our coaches, Gonz, jokingly had promised that if we won he would get his ears pierced. Little did he know that about a week later we would actually make him follow through on this little deal. As I look over to see the smile on Lenny's face, I could tell how truly proud we had made him, and my heart was filled with joy. We returned home the next day with our egos high, continuing our celebration, since it was now New Year's Eve. I will never forget the moment when my team was announced as National Champions. We finally were able to appreciate all our hard work, which truly paid off in the end. I will forever hold that team deeply in my heart for the close bonds we shared during that amazing and exciting year.