



Thirty-six-year-old wife, mother, and career woman Leigh Gauger embarked on a secret mission to be a professional cheerleader. **Again.** If only for a little while.

// BY REBECCA LANDWEHR //

A fabulous parade of pretty young things saunters into Invesco Field. Women with perfect hair, perfectly made faces, and perfect bodies. Many of them wearing velour sweat suits and toting Louis Vuitton bags. The scent of heavily perfumed tension is thick in the air. Open auditions are about to begin for the 2004–2005 Denver Broncos cheerleader squad.

This year, for the first time, the Broncos organization advertised open auditions on television, which might explain why the turnout is the largest ever. About 400 women have come hoping to fill one of the 34 pairs of those famous fringed chaps. Whatever your sideline pleasure, there's a cheerleader here for you. All (very shapely) sizes and colors are present. And yet, although it is an ethnically diverse bunch, it is also the expected convention of youthful beauties, in their late teens or early 20s. Except for one.

Quietly warming up among the wannabe-Broncos girls, who are now peeling off their sweat suits and turning a wide stadium hallway into what looks like a giant, girls-only game of Twister, there is a girl who is different. Compared to the look-alike Beyoncé's, Britneys, J. Los, and Lucy Lius, she's a Jaclyn Smith from "Charlie's Angels" – the original one. Her name is Leigh Gauger. She's a 36-year-old wife and mother, and an advertising sales representative at the *Denver Business Journal*. She also happens to be a former Dallas Cowboys cheerleader.



Promptly at 10 a.m. on this first Sunday in April, the Queen Bee of Broncos cheerleading, Teresa Schroeder, summons the women onto the audition dance floor. Tall, blonde, and a former cheerleader (she was on the Broncos' inaugural cheer squad), Schroeder is now the director of cheerleading and game-day entertainment. She thanks everyone for coming and starts her welcome speech. "It's going to be a long day," she says with authority. (Actually it'll be two long days.) Schroeder outlines the schedule: The women will learn a short dance routine, they'll have about 30 minutes to rehearse, and then, in groups of three, the dancers will perform the routine for 12 judges, who are sitting shoulder-to-shoulder at a table, à la "American Idol."

I am one of those judges. Me – a 33-year-old, 138-pound, curly-headed brunette, who still dances like a Deadhead. The panel also includes KCNC News 4 sportscaster Steve Atkinson, Colorado Mammoth player Nick Carlson, former Broncos cheerleader Beth Wilderotter, Broncos wide receiver Ashley Lelie, and a guy who bid for his seat at the judge's table on eBay. Stacking the panel with media types, local celebrities, and Mr. eBay was director Schroeder's idea. The strategy is part gimmick, part science, and actually fairly ingenious. Having press and local celebs on the panel increases the chances for media interest in the Broncos cheerleaders and the team itself (this story, for example). However, recruiting a variety of "civilian" judges also helps ensure the Broncos get a cheerleading squad with something (or rather somebody) for everyone. Our votes will be tallied equally, and the girls with the most votes will wear the coveted chaps. That is, provided Schroeder's discerning eye doesn't spot any egregious selection flaws. "It's my team," Schroeder tells the judges. "And in the end I will have the final say."

Historically, Schroeder's system works, but I find it a little surprising that she hands over so much control to such novices. The eBay "winner," Kevin Goodfellow, tells me he had to pass a background check before the Broncos let him in the door.

"No attorneys to plead my

case, no orbits to send me into outta space," growls pop star Pink as her "Trouble" begins what will be a two-hour loop on the speakers. The first three candidates line up at their positions on the dance floor and simultaneously turn on their big, white smiles. In my hand, I hold tally sheets preprinted with contestant numbers. Director Schroeder's instructions to the judges are simple: Rate contestants in the categories of "dance," "appearance," and "interview." Specifically, when considering "dance" and "appearance," the questions we're to ask ourselves are: "Can she dance?" and "Does she look like a Broncos cheerleader?" Schroeder says it's a *you know it when you see it thing*. I guess I'll have to see it.

Two hundred and sixty-two contestants later, with the hard guitar-riffing sound track of Pink pounding my eardrums, I feel like I'm witnessing a dance rumble between really hot girls who all shop at Danskin. The pants are all tight and black. Audition numbers hang on hips. The tops are all sports bras. The low-cut variety abounds. Some of the smaller-chested women opt for a chic, black-lace halter. Sitting on my right at the judges' table, eBay-guy Goodfellow feels like his successful bid – around \$400 that went to the Denver Broncos Charities Fund – was worth every penny. "It's a beautiful day outside," he says. "But who cares?"

To my left is former Broncos cheerleader Beth Wilderotter. Dressed in a simple suit,

she chats easily with some of the girls she knows from her days on the squad. I feel like Skipper to her Barbie, in my Levis with a shirt from Target, one that I've already dribbled Diet Coke on. On one of Wilderotter's slender fingers is an enormous gold Super Bowl ring, with the horsey Broncos logo and at least a dozen diamonds. It's a status symbol among the cheerleaders, and I start to look for it on the hands of the other ladies. (Cheerleader-in-Charge Schroeder has two rings. She usually wears both of them on audition day, but today she forgot to put on either one.)

As the dancers take their turns, Wilderotter smiles at them and gives supportive nods. I quickly start mimicking her. "You can tell the really good ones right away," she tells me. And, as I'm noticing, the bad ones too. You do know it when you see it. Wilderotter recommends that I weed out the good and the bad quickly and then focus my attention on the dancers in the middle ground. Her counsel helps me rate the dance category. Judging appearance, on the other hand, is tougher than I thought. I was never a cheerleader, I played trumpet in the high school marching band. Back then I thought cheerleaders were popular and stupid. Today, I expected my preferences to lean toward members of my brunette sorority and toward a "nontraditional" cheerleader body type – say a size 10 rather than a size 2. Very shortly into the process, though, I find myself drawn to the dancers with long, straight, blonde hair,

MORAL SUPPORT Gauger gives her husband, Chad, and her son, Max (at left), credit for supporting her in this mid-life challenge. Project Cheerleader meant Chad had to stay at home with Max while she trained, and Max had to get used to seeing less of his mom. Gauger's cheerleading credentials are powerful to say the least – then Leigh Gilbreath, she cheered (at right) for the Dallas Cowboys 1987-88 season, during the Tom Landry era.

bright white teeth, and killer abs. I realize I have a type, and she's a hot blonde.

I also discover that the world of cheerleading is built on several axioms. Cheerleader Truth No. 1: It's best to be between 20 and 23 years old. Former Broncos cheerleaders advised wannabes to not mention their age if they were younger or older than that range. Truth No. 2: Ten pounds makes a difference, especially in a sports bra and yoga pants. Truth No. 3: Long hair is sexy. Truth No. 4: Long, straight, blonde hair is sexier. Truth No. 5: Abs are more important than boobs. Killer abs are required for the Broncos cheerleader outfit, which markets the midsection. Unlike boobs, you can't buy good abs.

Nearly two hours into the competition, we're up to contestant No. 263. Her hair is flowy in that "Charlie's Angels" way. She executes an impressive high kick, and I see for the first time that it is Leigh Gauger, my old friend whom I met when I, too, worked at the *Denver Business Journal*.

Every office has that one person whom everyone gets along with, and Gauger [pronounced, Gay-ger] was ours. Although she was in advertising sales, she never seemed motivated by the schmooze and shtick. She

was genuine – the kind of girl who makes friends in the produce section at Safeway. Rarely did she talk about her days with the Cowboys. She was there during the 1987 to 1988 season, still the Tom Landry era, when the Cowboys were America's Team. The cheerleaders in their boots and tie-up tops were icons. It was before "Girls Gone Wild," and though the Cowboys cheerleaders were sex symbols, they were wholesome, well-mannered, all-American ones. Then-owner Tex Schramm insisted every woman in his kick-line was a lady.

In 1987, Gauger was a 20-year-old college student on a dance scholarship. Her boyfriend at the time encouraged her to audition for the Cowboys cheerleaders. She made it through a field of at least 1,000 women to earn a spot on the team. That year, she was one of the youngest girls on the squad.

That was 17 years ago. Out on the Broncos audition floor, Gauger nails the first combination of the routine and punctuates the performance with a great hair flip. She throws me a little wave at the end and skitters off the floor.

"Swear you won't tell a soul,"

Gauger begs me during the break after the first round of competition. "Can this be our secret? Can we keep it just between us?"

Because we're friends, she fills me in on her covert operation. Gauger seems like the Hollywood image of a woman who has it all: marriage, motherhood, and a career. And, to a certain extent, she is: She's in love with her husband, Chad; their 3-year-old son, Max, amazes them daily; and she was 2003 salesperson of the year at the *DBJ*. She had everything under control. But the routine of taking care of the family, the house, and her career took up her every last minute. As Max grew out of the toddler stage and became more independent, Gauger got a spare moment or two to herself; she began to take stock – it was time to break out of this routine before it was too late.

Motherhood, she realized, meant more of an identity change than she had expected. It seemed to Gauger that for all of the immense joy that came from Chad and taking care of Max, she ended up relinquishing some of her more carefree self.

Parenthood was a blessing, but it meant self-sacrifices of the soul-altering sort. Keeping everything under control took discipline. Then one day last fall she drove past Invesco Field with Chad and had a revelation. In her full Texas twang she threw it out there. "Wouldn't it be a hoot to try out for the Broncos squad?" She needed to shake things up. She'd been a mom for three years, but before that she'd been a dancer her whole life. And she missed it. She missed the energy dance gave her, the music, the girl time. She missed the way she felt when she was dancing well.

During the weekend of her husband's 36th birthday, Jan. 20, 2004, Gauger hatched a plan. She had researched Broncos cheerleader auditions online and decided she had 10 weeks to prepare. It would mean Chad would have to take on extra childcare duties, even fewer nights on the town for both, and a promise to keep her secret safe. Chad signed on and Gauger embarked on Project Cheerleader.

She took every dance class possible, including a prep class for aspiring cheerleaders taught by former Broncos girls. Among the

The big question remaining was the hair: Would she go with a modern version of her tried-and-true Dallas 'do, or attempt the stick-straight look that's apparently so Denver. She consulted with Chad. It was a risk, but, as he advised, she went with flowing curls.

twentysomething dancers, she kept her age and impressive cheerleading credentials to herself. She went on the South Beach Diet. She did 250 sit-ups nightly. She skipped beer and bread, but never the sit-ups. "I knew I had to get those abs back."

About a month into her training, Gauger attended an official pre-audition workshop at Invesco Field hosted by the Broncos cheerleaders. It was then she realized dance had changed in the last 17 years. Hip-hop had evolved. As Gauger puts it, "I had the Paula Abdul but not the Britney." Luckily, a friend's husband was a hip-hop choreographer and offered lessons in his Boulder studio. For Gauger, the Boulder studio became something of a dance time machine. As she popped-and-locked her way into 2004, Gauger practiced her moves at home for devoted fan, Max.

The big question remaining was the hair: Would she go with a modern version of her tried-and-true Dallas 'do, or attempt the stick-

straight look that's apparently so Denver. She consulted with Chad. It was a risk, but, as he advised, she went with flowing curls. "We thought, look at Jessica Simpson, look at *Charlie's Angels*, this hair is back in fashion."

Audition day was closing in. She'd dropped 20 pounds, but she'd pulled her hamstring and within a week of auditions she came down with the flu. No biggie, it was only Tuesday and she knew she'd be better by Sunday. She bought the latest dance shoes and an audition outfit: a black cropped shirt with "dance" written in silver studs. She even took the new dance pants to her tailor to ensure a flattering fit. She was ready.

Cheerleader Truth No. 6: It takes a village to raise a cheerleader.

"Stop – look and listen, baby that's my philosophy. It's called rubber-

neckin' baby, but that's alright with me..." Back at auditions, after lunch on day one, and we're on round two. A techno remix of an Elvis number plays nonstop. The field of 400 women has been cut to 94. Hundreds of hopefuls, some in tears, have trickled out to the parking lot. For those who made the cut, there remains another routine to learn, and they are rehearsing in the hallways. Some of the girls display fierce concentration. Other women, perhaps the more seasoned vets, seem to walk through the motions during rehearsal time. Their ease with the competition seems like a confidence power play. Most of these girls were in diapers when Gauger cheered for the Cowboys.

For the lucky few who make this year's Broncos squad, it means a year of low-key fame. Today's Broncos cheerleaders practice twice weekly and earn between \$125 and \$150 per game – believe it or not, this is the highest rate in the NFL. They do volunteer

PREVENTION AT THE SPEED OF SIGHT.

Don't let the silent killer sneak up on you. Even if you feel fine, get tested for heart disease today.

The best way to prevent heart disease is to know your risk. And the best way to know your risk is to visit South Denver Heart Center, the Rocky Mountain region's exclusive home of the **e-Speed scanner**, the world's fastest, most accurate CT scanner.

- e-Speed CT scan takes only 30 seconds; the entire procedure lasts less than 15 minutes
- Non-invasive scan means no injections, and you can keep your clothes on
- Colorado's most advanced tool for seeing and diagnosing heart disease, the country's leading cause of death

Call 303-74-HEART today to schedule an appointment. Because the sooner we scan, the sooner you'll know.

THE HEALING PLACE

1000 SOUTHPARK DRIVE, LITTLETON, COLORADO 303-74-HEART WWW.SOUTHDENVER.COM

"VOTED ONE OF DENVER'S TOP DOCTORS IN 5280 MAGAZINE IN 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003"

SKIN

- Botox
- Spider Veins
- Medical Skin Care
- Microdermabrasion
- Pulse Dye Laser
- Peels

FACE

- Facelift
- Brow Lift
- Eyelid Surgery
- Fat Injections
- Nasal Surgery
- Laser

BODY

- Tummy Tuck
- Liposuction
- Breast Augmentation
- Breast Reduction
- Breast Lift

STACEY FOLK, M.D.
BOARD CERTIFIED PLASTIC & RECONSTRUCTIVE SURGEON

ROSE MEDICAL CENTER
303.321.6608

work within the community and have the opportunity to get paid extra for personal appearances, generally another \$100 an hour. Compared to the Cowboys cheerleading regimen that Gauger lived, the Broncos time commitment is far more reasonable. If she makes the team, she'll make the time.

The dancers are back on the floor for the afternoon round, sets of three rumbling once again. The cut has made it tougher to judge. Everyone seems to be dancing better than this morning. Yet no matter what internal butterflies are hatching inside their washboard abs, these women appear to be having the time of their lives. There's a redhead in particular. Every time she comes onto the dance floor I think, *Man, it must be good to be her.* It's not so much that I yearn to be a hot cheerleader with fierce dance moves – though that would be nice. What I really want is their courage. Their ability to flash a smile and give a great hair flip when I'm scared shitless.

Maybe that's why we need cheerleaders in the seriously frightening era of 2004. It's not just bonus eye candy for professional sports. There is an unflappable optimism

coming from cheerleaders that is missing in everyday life. When people talk about the home-team advantage, it's the cheerleaders who bring it. They get the crowd fired up and get us believing that – scoreboard be damned – we *can* win.

George W. Bush was a cheerleader in high school at Philips Academy. One could argue it was this same spirit that helped him connect with the public following 9/11. He's forever championing the notion of America as the ultimate varsity. *Iraq, Osama, we will, we will, rock you.* Katie Couric was also a high school cheerleader in suburban Virginia. Is the engine driving her "Today" show demeanor really anything more than a spunky pom-pom girl? So what if she probably spends more on shoes than most of us earn in a year, she's fun and enthusiastic as she leads that pep rally for us every morning while we fumble for coffee. And get this: Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg was a cheerleader. The Brooklyn teenager rallied her teams at James Madison High School. Knowing that, it's not so crazy to wonder if, back in the Court's chambers, she

lets down that tightly wound black bun of hers and turns on the cheerleader charm to persuade Justice Antonin Scalia (who was never a cheerleader) to see things her way.

"La la la la la – Hey Mama...", chant the Black Eyed Peas. I am beyond hearing words at this point. I'm only feeling the beat pound my bones. It's the second and final day of auditions, and of the original 400, 58 girls have survived. We've been through another round of threesome dance-offs and the interview process. Girls are asked one personal question and one football-related question. There shouldn't be any surprises. It turns out the football answers were given to the girls in a packet they received at the end of day one. If they miss those questions it's only because they didn't read the packet. Despite the cheat sheet, some still fumble.

For the final element of the competition, the dancers are given 30 seconds to freestyle. It's the first time Schroeder has brought this element into the auditions, and it's a no-holds-barred flashdance after flashdance just

"I was finally at a point where I felt OK taking time for myself," she says. And focusing on herself, if even just for a few weeks, ultimately became an investment in her family. "This made me better for Max and Chad. *If I can do something like this, anyone can.*"

before the judges head back down to our chambers for the final time. I'd tell you what happened in those closed-door discussions, but we judges have taken an oath: *What happens in the judges' room stays in the judges' room.* What I will say is that striking a United Nations-like balance was a concern, and I will reveal that we made the final cut in a remarkably short time, about 20 minutes: 32 women, two alternates, with three veterans sent packing.

I feel good doing my part to ensure "your" 2004–2005 Broncos cheerleaders are fit and fine dance machines, but I will always feel like this year's team is missing something. It's missing Gauger. If this were a movie on the Lifetime network, you can bet Gauger would be dancing off into the sunset of an NFL "Monday Night Football" game wearing those chaps – *Leigh Gets Her Groove Back.* But in the real world, Gauger has been cut. That first day, when Schroeder read the numbers

of the contestants the judges chose to return, Gauger's number wasn't called. After all that work I figure she must be crushed. I invite her to lunch to cheer her up.

"I had the time of my life on the day of auditions," Gauger tells me a few days later over sashimi at the Sushi Den, the restaurant where she and her husband met. Project Cheerleader wasn't about making the team for Gauger, it was about making a change. The dance training, the sit-ups, the new shoes – it was all about breaking out of her working-mom routine for a few weeks. "I was finally at a point where I felt OK taking time for myself," she says. And focusing on herself, if even just for a few weeks, ultimately became an investment in her family. "This made me better for Max and Chad." That's why she's agreed to share her secret now. "If I can do something like this, anyone can."

Gauger had already lived the cheerleading life – with the ultimate cheerleading dynasty

– and chose to walk away. She chose to leave that life and made space for Chad and Max. And actually, they are the only players she wants to cheer for now.

Gauger says she's glad she put herself through cheerleader training again. Now she's a mom with a cheerleader physique and cheerleader energy. She's still doing the South Beach Diet and has found time to work dance into her schedule. Matter of fact, she tells me, she was looking and feeling like her old self when she and her husband took a recent trip (sans Max) to Vegas for a little R&R. "It wasn't about making the team, it was about showing up," she says. "When I walked in the door I succeeded."

Cheerleading Truth No. 7: Once a cheerleader, always a cheerleader. ▲

Rebecca Landwehr is senior editor at 5280. Never a cheerleader, she recently took her first hip-hop dance class.

JEWELRY DISCOUNT
for your vehicle.
TIRE CO. INC.

Check the Yellow Pages for the store location nearest you • DiscountTire.com

WETLANDS
Wetlands: Preserving the Quality of Land and Water
A Natural History Exhibit full of Feathers, Fins, and Frog legs
OPENS OCTOBER 2, 2004
The Wildlife Experience
FINE ART ♦ FILM ♦ NATURAL HISTORY

10035 South Peoria, Parker
1 mile east of I-25 on Lincoln Avenue
(720) 488-3300 ♦ info@twexp.org
thewildlifeexperience.org

More than a Museum, It's an Experience!