

# 'I'm 43, a MUM OF TWO, and I COMPETE against girls half my age'

Meet Laura Vikmanis – the world's OLDEST CHEERLEADER

BY ANTONIA HOYLE



**W**ith her blonde hair, toned abs and impressive ability to do the splits, Laura Vikmanis doesn't, from a distance, look that different from the rest of the Cincinnati Bengals cheerleading squad.

But, at 43, Laura is twice the age of most of her teammates, and the oldest cheerleader in the US National Football League (NFL), performing to stadium crowds of 65,000, and TV audiences of up to 10 million. Not only that, she combines cheerleading with a full-time job and bringing up two teenage daughters on her own.

"I love the adrenaline rush I get

from cheerleading. It's given me my self-esteem back, and made me proud of my body again. It keeps me feeling young – even if I am old enough to be the rest of the squad's mum," she says.

Cheerleading has not just changed Laura's body, it's transformed her life. She beat off competition from 150 other women – the oldest of whom was just 21 – to gain her place in the Cincinnati Bengals cheerleading squad in 2009.

Two years before, she had called time on an unhappy marriage, which had left her a shadow of the vibrant, energetic woman she is today.

"I still regret not leaving earlier," she says. "I've wasted a lot of precious time, but becoming a cheerleader at such a late stage is making up for it."

So inspirational is her story, that the rights to a book she wrote about her life have been bought by the company behind the *Sex And The City* movies, who want to make it



Laura before she reinvented herself

into a Hollywood film.

Laura met her husband Andy\* when she was 21 and in her final year at college. They married the following year, and she worked as a dietician in her hometown of Dayton, Ohio.

But cracks started to show after the births of their daughters Lilia, now 15, and Alexa, now 13. While Laura gave up her job to look after them, her husband, a software engineer, travelled frequently for work. When he was at home, they rowed over his controlling behaviour.

As the years passed, Laura's confidence ebbed away. She became increasingly unhappy and turned to food to fill the void, piling on more than 2st.

It wasn't until 2007, when she was 38, that she found the strength to leave.

"I was decorating Easter eggs with the children when I realised I'd been on my own with them for such a long time, I was effectively a single mum already. Going it alone wouldn't make any difference," she says.

The decision to divorce her husband gave Laura new-found confidence. She found a dietician job, cut out biscuits and sweets to regain her figure, and had breast implants to take her from an A cup to a DD.

Perhaps most importantly, she took up dancing. "I enjoyed hip-hop and jazz when I was younger," she says. "It's a great way to keep fit, and I was desperate to do it again."

It was at a dance class in 2007 that she met a former NFL cheerleader, who suggested she try out for the Cincinnati "Ben-gals" cheerleading squad. Laura was hesitant – professional cheerleading is extremely physically demanding, which is why cheerleaders are so young.

"I'd done a bit of cheerleading at high school, but when she suggested it I thought she must be joking. She insisted my age wouldn't be an obstacle, it was my ability that counted," says Laura.

### Fierce DETERMINATION

She attended a try-out clinic at the Paul Brown Stadium, home of the Bengals, in Cincinnati in May 2008. She was rejected, but she was determined to try again. The following year was spent honing her fitness with six-mile runs, interval training and weightlifting.

"The more I trained, the more I wanted that place on the squad. Not just for me, but for my daughters. I wanted to be a positive role model. To show what their mum could do."

The following May, Laura returned for a second try-out.

"The coaches guessed I was older, but didn't know my age," she says. "When I won a place, I was overwhelmed."

Laura barely slept before her first appearance in September 2009, fretting over whether she'd forget the routine in front of thousands of fans.

But once she stepped on to the pitch in her skimpy two-piece black-and-orange uniform and white knee-high

boots, she loved every minute of it.

Being a cheerleader is far from easy, though. With their high-energy routines and sexy outfits, they're almost as much of a draw for the throngs of American football fans as the players and the games themselves. So during football season, from September to February, Laura attends three two-hour training sessions a week. The rules are tough – if the girls miss training they're barred from the next game.

They have twice-weekly weigh-ins, and are suspended if they go 3lb over the target weight they're allocated.

"It's cut-throat and we're in constant competition to get a place. Last year I cheered every game, whereas some girls only make two games a season. But it's not a catty environment, arguments are rare," she insists.

The only time Laura can fit in the daily workouts to keep her 5ft 4in frame at 8st 7lb is before dawn.

"I stick to a high-protein, low-carb diet, and get up at 5am to go to the gym. Then, after I've done the school run, I go to work. As a cheerleader, I only get paid if I'm picked for the game – and it's only around £50 a time. But it's not about the money, it's about doing something I love. In the evenings the girls do their own after-school activities while I go to training."

### Family VALUES

Her daughters are thrilled for her, and attend every game. Laura's boyfriend of four years, PJ, 33, a contractor for a local air-force base, also goes along, but is less enthusiastic.

They met in a bar shortly after her marriage ended, and Laura admits the attention she receives has created friction.

"I've been asked on dates and had marriage proposals from fans," she says. "PJ had to learn they're only interested in the cheerleader, not the real me."

Laura's also grown apart from several friends her own age.

"A lot of mums think cheerleading takes away time from my kids," she says. "But my children are teenagers and busy with their own lives. Knowing I'm happy makes them happy."

Laura does admit she sometimes feels torn between motherhood and the squad. "I've missed the children's choir recitals and plays and Alexa's birthday party, which made me sad. But I won't be doing this forever, and they understand."

Even when her cheerleading career inevitably comes to an end, Laura plans to still help out behind the scenes.

"I look back on the woman I used to be, and it feels like a dream," she says. "Cheerleading has given me my self-esteem back. It doesn't matter where you've come from. You can change your life as long as you let your fears go."



Working her stuff as a Ben-Gal



Laura with her daughters Lilia and Alexa

\*Name has been changed. Photography: Ryan Kurtz. Hair and make-up: Kendall Stutz