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Cattle call for non-cheerleaders in New Jersey.

Jersey Girls

FOULING OUT AT THE NETS DANCE TEAM OPEN-CALL TRYOUTS. "YOU'VE GOT TO SELL IT!"

By Arianne Cohen

WE'RE NOT cheerleaders, we're dancers," explains Shirlee Simon, 21, well moussed and fresh out of the University of Buffalo (dance major). She's gnawing her nails alongside 200 Jersey-haired women, who are lined up outside the Nets training facility for the annual open-call dance-team tryouts. "This year, we have five dancers leaving, so there are definitely five spots available," says Kimberlee Garris, the Nets' entertainment coordinator. "We do this every year and publicize through a mix of talent postings and *Backstage*. You never know what you're going to get." I was there to try out, too. Strangely, even though I don't dance, the team manager promised that I wouldn't be the least talented wannabe there. I was probably the least tanned, though, and at 26, the oldest.

I pulled at my quads next to Christina Iannelli, who at 19 has already been a Philadelphia 76ers dancer, her abdomen smeared in body glitter and in a pink-sequined bra top. "I'm really nervous," she said. "I'm moving to New York City, and the only options are here or the Knicks." I asked whether the thick black hair spilling down her back would get in her way. "I think it's an asset!" she said. "I like getting all sexy with it." Hair in your mouth seems to be a crucial part of being a dancer, so I decided to leave my hair down, too.



The Nets team captains appeared in itty-bitty red shorts to lead us through a warm-up of sit-ups, backward push-ups, and a series of yogic floor positions. We pivoted into the "technique tryout" portion. The team's trainer demonstrated a short, complex routine aimed at eliminating 150 auditioners. The first four beats of the routine were cake: strut, strut, look sexy, toss hair. Then came the 360-degree spin, a "calypso jump" (a leap with a leg kick), followed by a high right kick, then a double pirouette. We practiced this a few times. I strutted, flailed for eight beats, then strutted again. Iannelli kept hair-whipping me.

"We're looking for clean moves, but above all, you've got to sell it!" the trainer intoned. "Smile no matter what." Aside from not having the skills or hamstrings for this, I realized that I also don't have the giant bleached teeth. But I clenched my face and ate some hair. Rihanna's voice blasted over the sound system: "Break it off, boy, 'cause you got me feelin' naughty." I was feeling elderly, while Iannelli leaped and spun across the gym, hair flowing, teeth shining, messily hitting each step. The judge handed her (along with the former captain of the Rutgers Dance Team and two sparkily toothed dancers from the Clippers and the Celtics) a number for the next round. Two unattractive girls who sullenly hit every move also got numbers. I'll relieve you of the dramatic tension: I did not make the Nets dance crew. Us non-non-cheerleaders sat on the sidelines, busying ourselves with mirrors and hairbrushes; a few girls rushed out sobbing. Unemployed ballet dancer Betsy Houvouras, 24, said the rejection didn't bother her. "Actually, I don't like Jersey. I'm from Bay Ridge." Iannelli made the team.