

your life



In *Black Swan*, prima ballerina Nina pushes herself to the edge of health and sanity.

She's a real-life *Black Swan*!

"i sacrificed everything for ballet"

Of course, you'd do *anything* to achieve your goals. But for Hannah, 18, her dream of becoming a top ballerina turned into her biggest nightmare. AS TOLD TO JANE BIANCHI

When you're starting out as a ballerina, all you focus on are the pretty tutus and the amazing

adrenaline rush you get while performing. I'd watch the pros float gracefully across the stage—studying their every move—and leave feeling inspired. But the day I decided to quit ballet, all the magic had disappeared. I was training so relentlessly that I'd fall asleep in my textbooks from exhaustion and wake up stressing about cutthroat dancers. While my friends were taking fun trips to Six Flags on weekends, I was in the studio practicing the same moves over and over. After weeks of grueling all-day training at ballet boot camp this past summer, I felt broken and had a flash of realization. I knew my sacrifice was no longer worth it, and I needed to reclaim my life.

I've devoted 14 years to dance. I started when I was 3 and have been practicing four hours a day at prestigious New York ballet schools for the past five years. For me, ballet quickly became an addiction. Instead of being proud when I nailed three pirouettes in a row, I'd push myself to do four (only the best female pros can do four flawlessly). I dreamed of becoming a pro, nailing a difficult routine, and getting a standing ovation—and thought nothing could stop me.

PSYCHED OUT

Ballet requires perfection. Every hair must be in place, and every leotard must be the right color. And there's a satisfaction in knowing you've gotten all the details just right. But the moment you make a mistake, you are humiliated by the instructor—in front of the whole class. Once I messed up a step and a teacher yelled, "What the f*** do you think you're doing?" I held back tears and told myself: You did your best.

I had to, because your classmates

won't comfort you. The crushing competition among girls is awful. Even if you become super-skilled, it doesn't guarantee you'll get parts. I've lost roles to less talented girls—because a girl's family had donated money to the school or because she'd known the teacher longer. It's unfair, but it's reality.

That's why ballet dancers kiss up to teachers, because it all comes down to who's getting the most attention. And dancers will do whatever it takes to get it. Once, when two new girls hogged my teacher's attention, another dancer got so jealous that she secretly cut the laces off the two girls' shoes, so they would have to miss practice.

ACHES AND PAINS

Ballet is an art, but it's also a sport. My feet are so deformed from blisters and bruised toenails that I'm embarrassed to get pedicures. Even minor injuries make it hurt to go en pointe (on your toes in ballet shoes), but when you have to perform, you just suck it up.

I've had major injuries, too. Once I was an understudy for a lead role in a

"I was brainwashed into thinking ballet had to be my life."

piece with challenging lifts and spins—a big opportunity. I knew I had loose cartilage in my knee, but I was drooling for the part! So when the star sprained her ankle a week before the show, I finally had my chance! I had just seven days to perfect her moves, so I danced like crazy and made it through the show.



Ayla Kell

A STAR'S STRUGGLE

Before Ayla Kell starred in ABC Family's *Make It or Break It*, she was a hard-core ballerina—completing 15 years of training at the Los Angeles Ballet Academy!

"Ballet is so intense that I was super-tired all the time. And I missed out on plenty of movies, school dances, and all sorts of things my friends were doing that I never could because 'I had dance.'"

But I damaged my knee so much that I had to stop dancing for five months—an eternity!—because I was in so much pain. I'm okay now, but I could have permanently wrecked my knee.

A WEIGHTY ISSUE

Ballerinas are ultra-thin, and they'll go to ridiculous lengths to stay that way. Freshman year, I was obsessed with being skinnier than my dancer friends. I tried to diet myself down to an unhealthy weight because teachers said, "You dance best at that weight." When that failed, I'd starve myself, but that just made me binge and gain more weight. It was a huge mistake! The next year, when I made friends outside of ballet who didn't constantly talk about weight, I began eating normally again. And I still danced well!

NO TIME FOR FUN

Ballet demands every bit of your time. Last year I had a rehearsal that was scheduled to end at 7 P.M., the same time my Sweet Sixteen started! I changed into my dress on the way and showed up late to my own party! It was so embarrassing! I finally came to my senses last summer. Two of my friends quit, saying they felt burned out from training so intensely. It rang true. I didn't feel "sparkly" about ballet anymore. In fact, I dreaded competing with other dancers in class.

So when I finish this school year, instead of applying to pro dance companies, I'm applying to college. I want to get into photography and go to parties! I was brainwashed into thinking that ballet had to be my life. But I've seen dancers have meltdowns, and I refuse to become one of them. I remind myself daily that I'm not giving up my dream—I'm chasing a new one. 17

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