

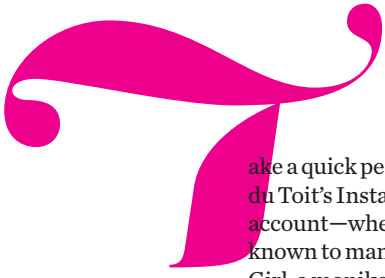


Guts and Glory

Life coach, entrepreneur, personal trainer, blogger, survivor, and now, boxer—White Collar DXB's reigning women's champion Nadine du Toit spills all on how a girl from a small town in South Africa became one of the Middle East's fittest and most inspiring personalities.

By Yi-Hwa Hanna

Photography by Ethan Mann



Take a quick peek at Nadine du Toit's Instagram account—where she is known to many as Glory Girl, a moniker earned from her fitness company—and you'd think this is a woman #blessed. And that she is—beautiful, successful and strong, in body, mind and spirit, she's a beacon of positivity, constantly spreading good vibes to anyone who comes across her path be it online or in real life. But being able to light up any room with smiles that are seemingly on tap isn't something that's come about because of a picture-perfect past—it's quite the opposite, in fact.

A serial entrepreneur—aside from Glory Girl Fitness, a Dubai-based company that offers life coaching, personal training and transformations for both body and mind, she's also the brains behind Dubai-based networking group Fit Girls in Business and the kettlebell-based workout group Dubai Bells—Nadine's latest venture saw her take part in the UAE's hotly watched reality TV show and boxing competition, White Collar DXB, where she took home the title of women's champion. And while this former fitness pageant competitor's shining personality makes it all look effortless, her journey to the top has been anything but easy, with a lifetime of hard choices and sheer grit behind her. To say that the 35-year-old's life has been inspirational would be a serious understatement.

Born in Phalaborwa, a small town in the northern parts of South Africa, Nadine came from humble beginnings. "I had a rough childhood," she says. "My always sporty and the-life-of-the-party dad suffered a severe head injury in an accident when I was still a baby. My mom had to raise three children and my mentally and physically disabled father on a very small income. We were very poor, but somehow my mum always kept it together and we were always dressed and educated," she says. Ten years later, her parents divorced. Her mum remarried a few years later—but it wasn't by any means a happy ending, since it was to "a man [who] would mentally and physically abuse her for over 20 years," Nadine says. "Witnessing the strife and suffering that my mom and we had to go through during

my whole childhood made me promise myself that I'd overcome these circumstances one day, and build a life that would never, ever resemble the one that I grew up in." It's this very attitude of sheer determination and indomitable optimism that has taken Nadine to where she is today. Her ability to let go of all of the injustice she experienced, and the opportunities she missed out on as a child, helped her develop an immeasurable amount of empathy for people going through seemingly hopeless situations. "Through the decisions I've made to overcome a destructive past, I know that there is always hope to find a better way and a better life," she says.

“I was inspired by models who had bodies that looked strong and healthy, not unattainably thin.”

From fitness model to life coach

Perhaps it's her innate ability to survive and find a positive outlook no matter how dark things seem that have carried Nadine through the various gruelling physical challenges she's taken on, including 11 fitness pageants across seven different

cities. Nadine—who has competed as both a bikini and fitness model from Cape Town and Johannesburg to Las Vegas, Miami and Boston—has proudly placed 1st and 2nd in some of them, and typically found herself coming in the top ten contestants. It took Nadine three years to finally decide to compete in her first fitness model competition, since the often over-sexualised nature of the sport held her back. "My whole being leans towards inspiring and encouraging women, and not just being seen as someone who shows off her body in a tiny bikini in a sensual or sexual way for men to perve over," she says. "My father was a bodybuilder before I was born, and did very well in South Africa in the sport. Since I didn't know him as a healthy, functioning man, I was always in awe of the pictures that were taken during his bodybuilding years. That fascination with bodybuilding stayed with me, and throughout my transformation years, I was inspired by fitness models on the covers of magazines, who had beautifully sculpted bodies that looked strong and healthy, and not unattainably thin."

While Nadine had always been sporty by nature, she wasn't always able to keep fit—"I loved sport as a child and was always very active, until my mom remarried and my stepfather 'grounded' me from sports on a regular basis since I had to study and focus on my academics. When I went to university and found my freedom, I rediscovered every single sport that I was never allowed to do, and played netball, football, volleyball, rugby, and anything active that I could get involved in!" she says. Eventually, a job opportunity came up that would take her overseas—and while she was granted the chance to travel the world, the new role also had its setbacks when it came to her rediscovered active lifestyle. "When I came to Dubai in 2004 to work as a flight attendant, I discovered the world of self-development after I gained around 20kg in my first two years here.

I desperately wanted to change and better myself, so I read every single book out there and listened to all of Tony Robbins' CDs," she laughs. "This was the first time in my life that I learned about setting goals and how our own thought processes can build or destroy our self-belief and life," she



“When you box in a match, there is no second place. I felt like a bully every time I won in my fights.”

continues, adding that she vehemently wishes every parent could teach this to their children. That's when her journey to becoming a personal trainer and life coach as a career really began. “In 2006 and 2007 I went through a mental and physical transformation with the accountability of my best friend, Riel. I didn't know it back then, but I was building the foundation of what Glory Girl Fitness is today,” she says. During her seven years as cabin crew, Nadine used her time and resources to study personal training and life coaching, eventually ending up becoming certified and accredited in both. Another thing she didn't realise at the time? Her best friend, Riel, would wind up becoming her husband years later. “Riel—Gabriel—is possibly the best man you'll ever meet!” she smiles. “I literally go to bed every night being thankful for him. We've been married for almost nine years,” she adds.

Nadine and Riel met at university, where he was a prominent auditing lecturer and professional rugby coach. A few months before she left South Africa for Dubai, they grew closer, and their

friendship lasted for years before their relationship grew into a romantic one. They were married just six months after getting together. “Riel was always the guy that I could tell everything to, to be vulnerable with, cry my ugly cries, but also dream my loftiest dreams—and to my frustration, sometimes he'll still hold me accountable to those dreams! The only time we argue is when I'm not working to achieve my goals and become the best version of myself. I've learned to be dedicated, consistent, disciplined and focused regardless of my emotions in the moment thanks to him, and I always joke with my single friends that their future husband's number might be on their phones already; that guy that you can be yourself with 100 percent of the time. Something that I've learned coming from a broken home, and that Riel is so good at, is to wake up every morning asking yourself the question: ‘How can I make my partner's life more fun, beautiful and better for that day?’” she says. Outside of her marriage, Nadine's family is also a strong support system that plays an essential role in her life. “My family is amazing,

MAKEUP: ANGELIQUE TURNER (ANGELIQUETURNER.COM); HAIR: MARISSA AT SOH ART & BEAUTY (SOHDUBAI.COM); NAILS: SOH ART & BEAUTY (SOHDUBAI.COM); PREVIOUS PAGE: CROP TOP, DHS465 AND MIDI SKIRT, DHS135, TALULAH; NECKLACE, STYLIST'S OWN; BRACELET, DHS49; MANGO; RING, DHS140; AND MIDI RING, DHS75; BOTH MELODY EHSANI; ALL SIVVI.COM; THIS PAGE: PLAYSUIT, DHS695; BEBE; SANDALS, DHS95; VINCE CAMUTO; NECKLACE SET, DHS99; MANGO; RINGS AND BRACELET, AS BEFORE; ALL SIVVI.COM.

they always love hearing about my latest crazy adventure. As with every expat, I still find it hard not to be a part of their day-to-day lives," she says.

Family values

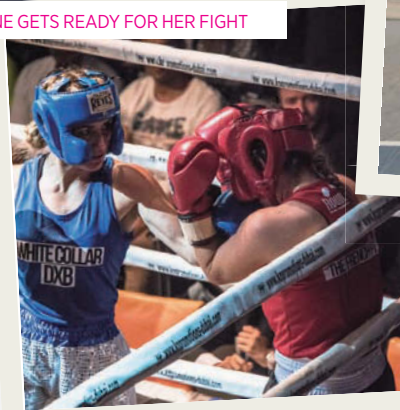
Still, she's managed to create a solid little family of her own here in the Middle East, through a strong network of friends, many of whom she found through the Dubai Bells. Drawn to unique and non-commercialised training systems, four years ago, when kettlebell training was still somewhat of a novelty, a friend introduced Nadine to a workout that would, once again, change her life. "A friend of mine wanted to start a kettlebell training group, and I partnered with her to help develop the sport in Dubai. After we received our kettlebells, a few obstacles came up, and sadly she couldn't continue with it. I was left with half a ton of kettlebells and decided to start a little community group close to home, for me to at least to continue with my own training... and that is how Dubai Bells was born!"

Now, the group meets up regularly to train outdoors, often in themed costumes to help spread positive messages, and they are now among her closest friends. The themes are often related to self-esteem and how we feel about our bodies, a lesson Nadine learned from her pageant years. "I loved the structure of competing, and the goal date that I had to work towards. That focus of hitting the stage in a tiny bikini for all to scrutinise your physique is like nothing else, and the way your body responds to the disciplined diet and training is immensely rewarding and very inspiring for everyone in your life. [But the] downsides... the most concerning to me is the negative mental effect that the subjective way of the sport has on most women and athletes I've worked with. A woman will eat, sleep, work, and train for three to 12 months to compete in a fitness pageant, and she'll know with absolute certainty that she is in the best shape of her life. Unfortunately, she won't always fit the criteria to win, and she might not place in the top 10 at all. If they haven't prepared for this confusing and possibly self-esteem crushing experience, it could be a very long and difficult journey to come to a place where they accept their bodies as good and beautiful just the way they are again," she says.

Finding fresh, new ways to appreciate your body is one of the reasons Nadine



NADINE GETS READY FOR HER FIGHT



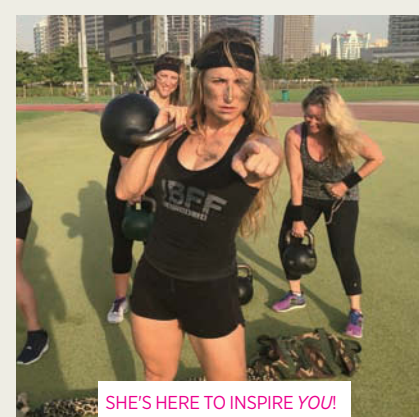
HITTING A HOME RUN AT WHITE COLLAR DXB



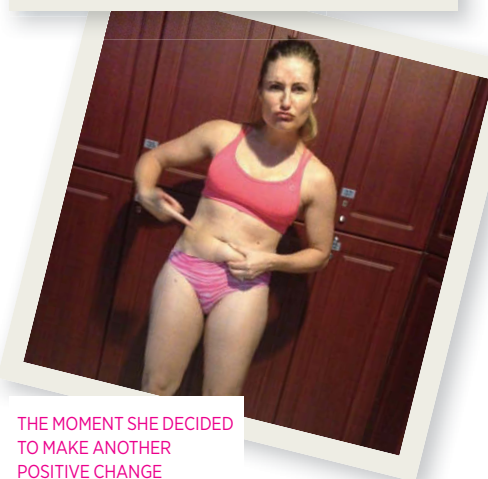
DRESS-UP FUN WITH THE DUBAI BELLS



NADINE ROCKING HER COMPETITION DAYS



SHE'S HERE TO INSPIRE YOU!



THE MOMENT SHE DECIDED TO MAKE ANOTHER POSITIVE CHANGE

decided to take part in White Collar DXB. After her last pageant in 2012, she had reached a point of physical and emotional burnout, and that combined with two quite serious foot injuries in the following two years made it tough for her to train the way she used to. Although Glory Girl Fitness was growing, and publicly it looked like Nadine was going from strength to strength, she never reached out to ask for help, trying to stay strong for her clients and her husband, who at the time (and with her encouragement) had started to pursue his passion in his career. The couple invested everything in their shared dream, and their planned two years of Nadine being the sole breadwinner became five years as the timeline of building and inventing new products from scratch goes. They downscaled their lives completely, moving into a studio apartment, selling their second car and properties they owned, to continue making the right financial decisions. "As a life coach, helping others find success in their careers and life, this downscaling of everything materialistic just didn't fit into my life plan and vision for our future of living in a beautiful home, and helping people and especially children in hopeless situations all over the world. Add to that my past where I came from a very restrictive environment, and I literally felt like I was trapped. I became quietly depressed, still trying to invest in others' lives as it's a part of my being and business. I became emotionally bankrupt, and lost my mojo for everything fitness-related," she says. "I ate whatever I felt like, trained only a few times a week, and didn't spend any time



on mental development. I felt like a fraud, and not like someone who could make a positive contribution anymore. I no longer had an athletic and sculpted body, which was one of the cornerstones of my brand and who I identified as—I literally wanted to check out and quit the entire industry [as a whole],” she explains.

Rolling with the punches

After a few months of internal struggle, Nadine asked herself two simple questions: ‘Where will I end up if I continue with my current habits?’ and ‘What do I really want?’. Her answers were exactly what she needed, and she set about finding a simple recipe for living the life she truly wanted (one goal was, as our Editor discovered weeks after approaching her for this story, to appear on the cover of *Women’s Health!*). “I met one of the producers of the show at an event, and she told me about White Collar DXB, asking if I would ever consider taking part in it. This was the perfect

opportunity to not only do something I’d never done before—boxing was entirely new to me—and have this incredible physical challenge, being part of a reality TV show was just another part of it!” she says. During the casting, which took place in July this year, Nadine says she wasn’t very fit. Despite this, she was chosen from among 50 hopefuls to be part of the programme that would involve eight gruelling weeks of training, filming and a highly publicised final fight. “The two days of casting and fitness trials were intense, and I was really nervous,” she says. When she found out, weeks later, that she had been chosen as a reserve, she was thrilled and made a commitment to push herself to her limits in every single training session. “It was *intense!*” she says. “The technique, sparring and pad work were like nothing I had ever done before, and the first four weeks were incredibly frustrating since I had to learn all of these new skills with a

fight looming in the near future. With every training session, I came home with more things that I did wrong than I did right, but I committed really hard to working on my shortcomings and not suck so much in my next session,” she says. Her determination paid off, and among the 16 fighters who made it past the castings, she made it through to the last round—and won her final fight. “I absolutely loved our team from day one, as well as my coaches at KO Gym,” she says. Aside from the joy of her win, Nadine has also walked away from the competition with yet more members to add to her ever-growing expat family. “We still do activities together as a team, and it was just amazing to see their lives and bodies transform during the run of the show,” she says. Nadine herself lost 7 percent body fat within the eight weeks without even trying to, thanks to the extreme conditioning sessions and the effect they had on her body composition. One thing she

won’t miss, however, is the way boxing made her feel when it comes to fighting other women. “When you box in a match, there is nowhere to hide—there’s only you and the other person. There is a winner and a loser, no second place. I felt like a bully every time I won in my fights, even though that’s what we signed up for. But I just hated for the other girl to feel embarrassed and like a loser and in front of her friends and family. I never want to fight again, but I will always make boxing training a part of my life!” she says. Participating in the show gave Nadine renewed vigour for what she does, and she’s now more ready than ever to keep on trying to inspire legions of women across the globe. “Now that I know a small part of the process, I have so much respect for boxers or fighters as a whole. It’s such an incredible metaphor for life—at the end, it’s only you who has the power over how you fight or live. It’s a lonely journey, and only you have to go through it—no one else can do it for you.” ■