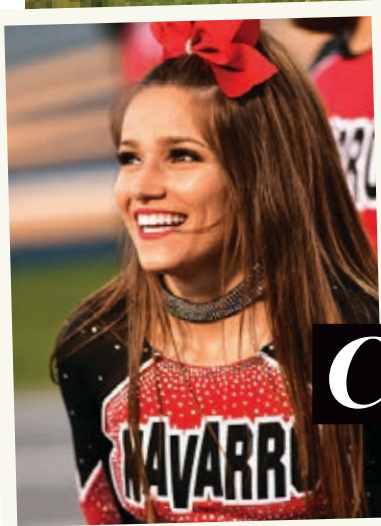




Cheer's Morgan Simianer

'I've Learned to Listen to My Body'

DIAGNOSED WITH ASTHMA IN HIGH SCHOOL, THE STAR OF THE HIT NETFLIX DOCUSERIES OPENS UP ABOUT MANAGING HER CONDITION—AND HOW IT'S TAUGHT HER TO PUT HER HEALTH FIRST

By **BETH WEINHOUSE** Photographs by **BRENT HUMPHREYS**

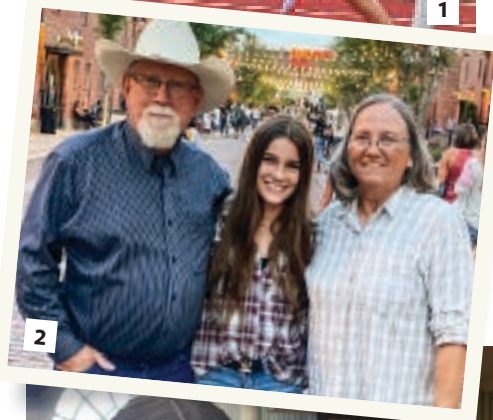
Under Control
"I'm pretty lucky," says Simianer (in Dallas in May 2022 and, inset, cheering with Navarro in 2019). "I don't have allergies, so I can manage my asthma very well, because it's only when I exercise."

Athletics—especially cross-country track—was Morgan Simianer’s passion in high school.

“Sports has been a part of my life ever since I was a tiny kid,” says Simianer, now best known as an alumna of the award-winning Navarro College competitive cheerleading team on the Netflix docuseries *Cheer*. So when, in her senior year, the then-18-year-old began struggling to breathe during her daily track team practice, she knew something was terribly wrong. “I kept wondering why it was so hard for me to breathe,” says Simianer. “I didn’t know what was going on.” Still, she kept showing up to train, even as her symptoms worsened—until one day, when she simply couldn’t catch her breath. “I was coughing, and I couldn’t get air in,” she recalls. “I felt like I was about to pass out.”

A trip to the local clinic led to a diagnosis that would change Simianer’s life: Doctors told her she had asthma, the chronic lung disease that affects more than 25 million people in the U.S. In Simianer’s case, it was exercise-induced asthma, the kind brought on by physical exertion. “When you exercise, you increase your breathing,” explains Dr. Elliot Israel, professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School and director of clinical research in the Division of Pulmonary and Critical Care Medicine at Brigham and Women’s Hospital. “Air goes in and out much more quickly, drying out the lining of the lungs.” That in turn, says Israel, can stimulate the muscles, causing them to tighten and narrow the airways. “But most people with exercise-induced asthma are able to manage their condition and still participate in the sports they love.”

Like many sufferers, Simianer has learned



Sports and Family

1. “After I got my inhaler,” says Simianer (running track in high school), “I didn’t have any issues.”
2. “I still see my grandparents often,” says Simianer (with Kyle and Pam in June 2021).
3. Simianer says she and brother Wyatt “stay in pretty close contact.”

to recognize the signs of an oncoming attack and uses an inhaler to manage her symptoms. “When I start wheezing or I can’t take a deep breath, I can use my inhaler and control the asthma,” says Simianer, now 24. “I feel like it’s gotten a lot better in the years since I’ve learned to listen to my body.”



Growing up in Loveland, Colo., Simianer had to learn how to take care of herself at an early age. Her mother left the family when Morgan and her older brother Wyatt, now 26, were very young. By the time Simianer was a sophomore in high school, their father, William, had remarried and started another family—and installed Morgan and Wyatt in a trailer where he left them to live on their own. When Wyatt turned 18, he headed to California in search of their mother, leaving Simianer alone to fend for herself. “It was a very hard time in my life. I was confused and felt very alone,” says Simianer, who is still close with Wyatt. “I did not reconnect with my mom,” she adds, “and my dad’s living his life, and I’m living mine.”

Not long after, her paternal grandparents—Kyle and Pam Simianer, 69 and 68, respectively, and both retired—learned of their granddaughter’s plight and brought her to live with them in Wellington, Colo., and later Upton, Wyo. “They’re a huge part of my life,” says Simianer, “and we’re incredibly close.”

She admits that, following her asthma diagnosis, she feared that she’d have to quit the sport she loved. “There was no way I couldn’t run, I had to,” says Simianer, adding that she



“
I’m so glad that
I’m still able to do
what I love, but
I know I have to
have my inhaler
with me 24/7”

initially felt self-conscious about using her inhaler. “I didn’t want people to judge me, so I would always hide it in my track bag,” adds Simianer, who nevertheless used the device on a daily basis during peak track season. “I had it with me 24/7. And I learned that it’s okay not to care what other people think. Once I realized how important my inhaler was for my health, I didn’t pay attention to any of that.”

Following high school, Simianer attended the University

of Wyoming, where she joined the cheerleading squad. Enthrilled with the sport, in 2017 she transferred to Navarro College, a junior college in Corsicana, Texas—where coach Monica Aldama’s reputation for leading the team to 15 national junior college championships was well-established. “It’s one of the best decisions I ever made,” says Simianer, who was a rising star at Navarro when a film crew arrived in October 2018 to document their training for the 2019 NCA

HAIR & MAKEUP: LISA MARTENSEN; STYLIST: JAMES BRONIE (PREVIOUS SPREAD); DRESS: FREE PEOPLE; SNEAKERS: ZARA; JEWELRY: KENDRA SCOTT; FRILLS: ROUTIQUE; INSET: JERRY HUGHES PHOTOGRAPHY/COURTESY MORGAN SIMIANER (THIS PAGE); COURTESY MORGAN SIMIANER (3)



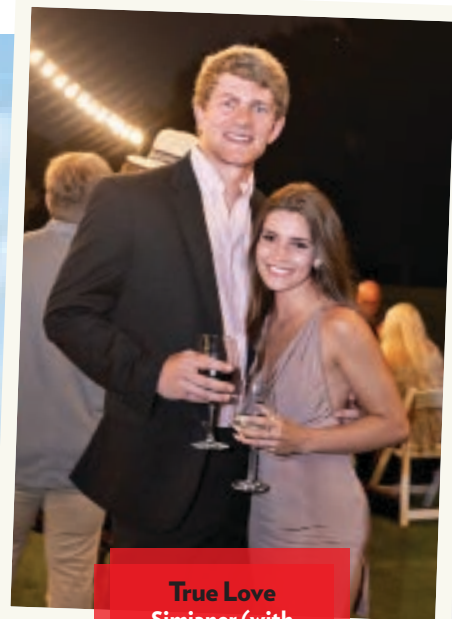
“
**Trying out for Navarro
was one of the best
decisions I ever made. It’s
such a close-knit family”**

National Cheerleading Championship in Daytona Beach, Fla.—a project that became the Netflix series.

Simianer graduated from Navarro in 2019 and has since moved to Dallas, where she’s now on the Cheer Athletics Dallas competitive team. “I decided to ride the wave and see where it took me,” says Simianer, who was one of the stars of *Cheer Live* this past summer, a two-month nationwide tour featuring many of the *Cheer* favorites and other elite cheerleaders. “I was the gym mom,” says Simianer, who still keeps her inhaler with her at all times. “I carried everything anyone might need—safety pins, Band-Aids, hair ties, so much stuff. I think my bag weighed 400 pounds....

a big Texas wedding in May 2023. “I haven’t gotten as much done as I thought I would, so I’m looking forward to being able to focus on it 100 percent.”

Beyond that, she admits she’s not sure what her future holds. “I don’t know where I’ll be in five years,” says Simianer, who knows that, whatever lies ahead, her love of sports and her support for young athletes will be an important part of it. Having learned to successfully manage her asthma, she’s now encouraging other young athletes to take care of themselves—and make their health a priority. “I know that you can’t be the best version of yourself,” she says, “if you don’t take care of yourself.” ●



True Love
Simianer (with fiancé Stone Burleson in June 2021) can’t wait to focus on their May 2023 wedding. “It’s all going to be so pretty!”

Every day there was something exciting to do,” she adds, “so I managed to keep myself pretty busy.”

That goes for her life at home too—where she recently got engaged to her boyfriend of more than a year, Stone Burleson, 26, a real estate loan originator. “It was crazy trying to do wedding planning while on tour and living on a bus going from city to city,” says Simianer, who’s decided on

Staying Active With Asthma

PHYSICAL EXERCISE CAN TRIGGER AN ATTACK, BUT THERE ARE WAYS TO MINIMIZE THE RISKS

Asthma affects over 25 million Americans and is caused by a narrowing of the bronchial tubes that bring air in and out of the lungs. Symptoms include breathlessness and a tightness in the chest and are often triggered by pollen, smoke, pollution—and exercise. “Eighty percent of patients with asthma report that exercise sets them off,” says Dr. Elliot Israel, director of respiratory therapy at Brigham and Women’s Hospital.

The condition is known as exercise-induced asthma, but experts prefer the term exercise-induced bronchoconstriction (EIB)—because people who don’t have asthma can experience EIB symptoms when physically active. Most people breathe through their nose, which warms and humidifies the air. But during exercise, many switch to mouth breathing, and the colder, drier air can trigger difficulties—especially in people with sensitive airways.

But avoiding exercise is *not* the solution. Instead, EIB sufferers should work with their doctors to find the physical routine and treatment plan that lets them stay active. Treatment usually involves an inhaler: Reliever inhalers immediately alleviate severe asthma symptoms, while controllers are used regularly to minimize inflammation. “Except for the mildest cases of asthma,” says Israel, “using both types of inhalers can improve quality of life.”



CREATE A SAFE EXERCISE ROUTINE

In addition to proper treatment, here’s how to control EIB symptoms during exercise

1 / GET READY

Warm up for 10 minutes before exercising, then cool down afterward to help airways adjust gradually.

2 / COVER UP

Avoid outdoor activities when it’s cold or wear a face mask or scarf over your nose and mouth to warm the air you inhale. “Breathing in dry, cold

air takes moisture from the lining of the lungs,” says Israel.

3 / AIR QUALITY COUNTS

Exercise indoors when pollution or pollen levels are very high.

4 / PACE YOURSELF

Consider exercise that involves moderate, steady movement such

as walking, hiking or golf. Swimming is also recommended for patients with EIB.

5 / BUILD STRENGTH

Sports that involve short, intermittent bursts of energy—think baseball, tennis and volleyball—improve fitness without overstraining sensitive airways.

1 in 10

HEALTH
STAT

Number of people who experience asthma-related symptoms during physical activity, according to the Allergy & Asthma Network.