

## Eat Sleep Breathe Dance - Coach Brandi Taylor Johansen

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From coaching a successful high school drill team at Cottonwood High School in Salt Lake City to developing a successful college dance team at Utah State University Eastern in Price defines Brandi Taylor Johansen's drive to be the best.

In her third year at Eastern, Johansen continues to develop a successful dance program along with almost 40 students involved on her 2018-19 spirit squad. Her stakes for success are higher this season because her dance team placed first in hip hop and second in dance, respectively at the United Spirit Association's Collegiate Nationals competition held in Anaheim last February. She returns to the collegiate competition in February 2019 to defend her team's title.

Her dance resume reads like the classic goal-driven coach who excels in everything she sets her site on. While coaching drill at Cottonwood HS in 2008, her team was named the 4A Drill Team Region Champions in Region 6 after taking first in military, dance and novelty. Her team placed third in the UHSAA state drill competition.

In 2009, her team again became the Region 6 Champions sweeping the competition by placing first in military, dance and prop, then placing second in state. Johansen was named 4A Coach of the Year for the Utah Dance and Drill Association. Her team traveled to Florida to compete in the Champion Drill Nationals competition, walking away as the overall Grand National Champions.

In 2011, Cottonwood moved to the 5A division and Johansen's team was named 5A Region 2 Champions, placing second in military; first in dance and kick. They placed second in the state competition that season and she was again recognized as 5A Coach of the Year for the Utah Dance and Drill Association plus presented with the 5A Sportsmanship Award. Johansen and her team traveled to compete in California and were named the Small Division Overall Champions for the Champion Drill Nationals competition. Her final year of high school coaching was in 2012 where her team placed fifth at the Utah High School Athletic Association's Drill competition, given the 5A Sportsmanship Award and named the overall Grand National Champions at the Champion Drill Nationals in California.

Her own personal repertoire of awards include Miss Drill Top-Ten solo finalist, Ririe-Woodbury Step-Up Program scholarship, UHSAA Drill Team All-State member and Deseret News Sterling Scholar Dance Finalist to name a few of the awards she has earned. Johansen has taken training from Repertory Dance Theatre, Salt Lake Community College, Utah State University and the University of Utah along with master class trainings from companies across the United States including Alvin Alley American Dance Theatre, Broadway Dance Center and Behind the Curtain Broadway Productions, in New York; Southern Strutt, in South Carolina; and Tremaine, in Los Angeles, California.

The choreographed many winning region, state and national routines for drill teams in Utah and Idaho plus won innovative choreography awards for studios and soloists across the state. In reality, she's been involved in dance since she was 4 and started teaching as a sophomore in high school. Johansen has always lived to choreograph and teach dance throughout the Western U.S. So when she met her husband Jonathan, from Castle Dale, Utah, while country dancing at Trolley Square in Salt Lake City, she thought her dance world would end.

Jonathan recently graduated in civil engineering from USU in Logan and wanted to move back to his hometown to work as an engineer in the family business. Besides engineering, he wanted to raise cattle and live on a farm like his father and grandfather had done.

Brandi was raised in the Salt Lake Valley and loved everything about living there. In fact, she loved every aspect of city life including spending weekends in downtown SLC, taking classes at the Rose Wagner Theatre and engaging in the urban dance scene. Her favorite vacations were visiting cities and never envisioned living in remote Utah on a ranch.

Jonathan and Brandi dated for the next few years because she said, "I thought I could not move to a rural area and be happy." When she finally took the plunge and married Jonathan, the two moved to Castle Dale so he could pursue his dreams.

"It was a culture shock moving here," she said. "I've always thought I had to live in a community surrounded by dance." Brandi continued choreographing for high school drill teams, dance companies, colleges, studios and dance camps in Utah and surrounding states, raking up to 40,000 miles each year in her car. Her salvation came from a small university 40 miles north of Castle Dale: Utah State University Eastern.

Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs and Enrollment Management, Greg Dart, hired Brandi to bring a spirit squad back to the athletic program and recruit students to fill the slots. She took over the dance team, hired Kelly Bradley to be over the cheer program and started a drumline with Ben Jones at the helm.

Recruiting for the program included establishing spirit squad social media accounts, plus performances at the UHSAA's drill team competitions and Epic Dance officer clinic college fair where dancers look at colleges to attend. "The dance community is big, but small when networking. We always find a connection in Utah's dance community," she said.

Designing unique costumes for her dancers is another priority. Brandi tries to be on the cutting edge because the dancers always perform better if they feel good about how they look in the costumes they wear. "It's kind of a superficial analogy, but I believe it is true.

I follow fashion to help design ideas, but also have connections in the dance world if I need to rent or trade. Costuming has to portray the theme or mood, it pulls it all together." Constantly on the go, she begins practice at 6:30-8:45 a.m. M-W-F and on Tuesdays from 6:30-8:30 p.m. with soccer, volleyball and basketball games to cheer at on weekends. In February, her team competes at nationals in California and in March they perform their spring concert. She brings choreographers in some weekends to teach additional classes.

Every routine she designs is based on her creativity. "Creativity for me comes from my surroundings along with music that can inspire me. When I designed the video of my students dancing at the San Rafael's Wedge (Little Grand Canyon), I found the music while on vacation walking through a Starbucks. "I was standing on a table with my phone to the speaker trying to Shazam the song. I knew immediately this was going to be the music I used. While listening, the entire piece came to me.

"When we came home, my husband and I scouted locations to film the video which also provided some inspiration. My cousin, Logan, had the equipment and editing skills. He filmed my dancers late in the fall as I directed it. The video turned out better than I ever expected; the response to it has been amazing."

She used the backdrop of Joe's Valley in her dance video this year which debuts at her concert in March. All the dances this year will revolve around the perception of art. "Every piece represents a painting, sculpture or photo," she said. "I challenged all my students to be creative with more in-depth thinking. I want them to incorporate story telling in their student choreography pieces." Many genres of dance will be showcased at their concert to show the versatility of what these dancers can do.

Discussing the future, Brandi hopes that her program builds to a team of 20 and continues to be reputable, recruits itself and competes in Daytona, Florida. "That competition is televised on ESPN and has some big name dance programs from colleges and universities from throughout the United States competing there." What still drives her is the creative process and seeing her work come to life. "I love challenging myself to create new ideas and to push myself as a choreographer. I live by the mantra, 'Leave your heart out on the floor' and I tell

my dancers this each time they go out to perform. If they do that, then they'll be happy with their performance and that's all I can ask of them. It all comes down to having passion for what we do."

Music continues to inspire me, but film, poetry, current events, props, lighting...I am just open to my surroundings and can be inspired to whatever comes my way, she said.

When extra time is on her side, she loves to travel and visit other cultures. She quoted Alan Watts, "It's better to have a short life that is full of what you like doing, than a long life spent in a miserable way."

\*The San Rafael dance video can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xkXLmFXBBqY>.

~ *Susan Polster*