

## Nicole Zenobia Graham

### IFBB Figure Pro

**Age:** 35

Personal Trainer and Posing Coach for all divisions

### Competition Highlights:

Four-time Olympian, highest placing 4th  
From 2019-2022 - Five 1st place finishes  
2017 earned Pro card at NPC Universe

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### IFBB FIGURE PRO NICOLE ZENOBIA GRAHAM

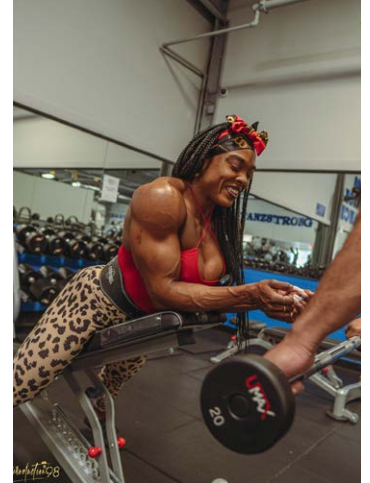
is a four-time Olympian, personal trainer and posing coach and host of podcast Beyond the Barbell. She shares her story of eating disorder from fashion model to Figure Pro in hope that others can learn how to manage their struggles.

### Did you play sports growing up, Nicole?

Yes, I was a gymnast, I ran track track and was also an all star cheerleader. The funny thing is, I was really a tomboy until the school I attended didn't offer gymnastics, so I started cheerleading. I still got to flip around a bit and I also discovered a more girly side of me. I believe having a strong foundation of muscle built through these sports has played a big role in my success in bodybuilding.

### I understand you have a history with an eating disorder; did that begin before you started competing in the sport of bodybuilding?

Yes. Before I got into the sport of bodybuilding, I was a fashion model for quite some time. I was living in upstate New York but was booking a lot of jobs in the city so I moved and quickly discovered how different it was. The designers were so hell bent on their models being super thin. I've always been an eater and never deprive myself of food. Of course, I told myself, I can eat whatever I want, but I'll just get rid of it so I can still do fashion modeling. I was bulimic for three years before I hit that wall. I'm glad that I hit that wall before it got to the point of affecting my organs due to the acidity vomiting causes. I believe the turning point for me was when I had booked a show for Fashion Week, and a designer says, "I'm going to put you on this cleanser and



when you come to me next week for your fitting you're going to be smaller and then for the show you're going to be even smaller." I couldn't believe it. I mean, he chose me to be in his show to model his new designs. But in order to do it, he wanted me to do a cleanse not for my health but just to be smaller. That's when I decided I was tired of trying to be in an industry that I just don't fit into.

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## How did you go from fashion model to bodybuilder?

I still had a desire to pursue modeling. So I thought with this sports background and athletic build, maybe fitness modeling would be a better choice. I joined a gym. A very long time ago, my mom was a bodybuilder so I've always been around the gym but never really took it seriously for myself. However, when I walked in and saw people in there really training, I knew it was the place I belonged. The atmosphere, the daily regiment and most importantly I could learn how to have a better relationship with food because I no longer had to be super, super skinny. By consistently working out I was able to slowly put the weight back on. One day I was approached by a guy in the gym and he asked, have you ever thought about competing? While I was familiar with the sport, I had never thought about stepping on stage myself. He told me that there were several different women's divisions now.

I decided to see what this guy's talking about so I googled it. The first thing automatically that pops up was Nicole Wilkins, Tori Watts, Candace Carter and Cydney Gillon. Just looking at them, I was like, Holy crap, like, this is it. This is what I want to do. I want to try this. Since I had no idea where to start, I knew I needed a coach. My first coach was Roxanne Edwards, known for having the best abs in the business. I had seen her at Mid City Gym, now closed. She had on a black fleece but was so chiseled I could see her definition through the fleece. I was convinced she needed to be my coach. Together, we won my first show and kept going from there.



## How were you able to stop the bulimic cycle? And then how did you get to a point where you could even talk about it?

Well, I stopped the bulimic cycle because I pretty much made up my mind that's what I wanted to do. I truly believe bodybuilding helped me in terms of my eating. Bulimia is like other addictions, there's no real cure, it's always there but you can learn to manage it, learn to control it rather than it controlling you. The structure of contest prep is something that I feel like I need. It's helped me have a better relationship with food.

## So you diet hard, compete in the show and step off stage and just like that, you realized, I can eat now. Going from huge weight loss for competition to unrestricted eating can lead to huge weight gains and yo-yo dieting can be problematic especially for someone that has suffered from bulimia. How did you or you and the coach handle that?

So, in my first few shows, the coach just said, "show's over, don't go too crazy with the food." Reverse dieting for me, wasn't really a thing until I switched coaches to Johnny Catalina, Team Pro Effects. He's very big on reversing out of the show. I never really had the type of structure that everyone needs after a show but even more necessary for someone that has a history of an eating disorder, specifically bulimia, so a sudden freedom to eat whatever I want triggers those binging behaviors. I told myself, I'm not in prep, so I'm just going to eat whatever I want. Unfortunately, that led to excessive weight gain, excessive water retention, excessive sugar intake, or an influx of sodium. It can get to the point where you end up having an edema. I know because I have experienced it all. That's why I'm so open and transparent about sharing my story now, so that other athletes don't have to go through that. While I do believe that every athlete probably goes through a bit of a "spillover" post show, especially if you're new to the sport, the hope is that you learn from it. For some of us, it takes a little bit longer to get out of those binging habits post show. At some point you have to decide, it's not worth it. I've worked too hard and I feel better if I can stay in shape. Not stage ready, but closer to it rather than putting on unnecessary weight that I'll just have to take off again.





**I agree, I heard numerous athletes talk about choosing to stay fit all the time including IFBB Bikini Pro Ashley Kaltwasser and 6x Ms Figure Olympia Cydney Gillon.**

They must be doing something right based on how successful they are. When they begin their prep, their starting point is from a place the average person would love to be at. They stay photo shoot ready, that's how they live. So I'm sure that when you got with your second coach, you told them everything and together you worked on a plan to reverse diet. Absolutely!

I will say, it takes time to discover what works for you because just like getting ready for the stage, everyone is different. This time, before we got into the offseason, we discussed our approach to reverse dieting. I'm not perfect and I go through struggles just like everyone else. I abt about that but learning how to manage the offseason has always been an issue for me. This season we tried to combat it with more check-ins. For me it's always a learning experience. I have been focused on learning why I have binging habits, what's the science behind those habits? Why do I have this behavior? And how can I fix this?

**So what exactly did you learn?**

Well, for starters, I am fortunate that my coach is very knowledgeable and understands the science behind nutrition. Basically, I love sweets. After a show, I have a tendency to take in an influx of sugar. For me, it's not just a little, it's a huge amount of sweets. This creates a dopamine effect. Sugar is a pleasurable food and triggering that sensation in the brain creates a feeling of pleasure. The more you have, the more you want, basically it becomes a sugar addiction. And it's very, very hard to break. If the behavior continues, eventually you eliminate the beneficial bacteria in your body resulting in an imbalance that further increases sugar cravings.

The Greek word for sugars stems from the Hebrew word that means intoxicating. So the Greeks and Romans actually recognize sugar as a drug. So when you say sugar addiction, it's actually quite literal. You know, it actually takes six weeks to cut down the cravings from sugar.

**That's longer than I would have thought. I've always thought 21 days of doing something or not doing something to create a habit. So the fact that it takes six weeks to cut cravings from sugar illustrates just how powerful this "drug" is.**

I've spent a lot of time researching just how powerful sugar can be, you know, on the body. Now that I see what the problem is, the next step is figuring out how to eliminate the problem. How can I combat the issue? I can and do drink lots of water, use an infrared sauna to sweat it out, and eat whole foods. My research also led me to discover the benefits of colonics, or hydrotherapy. Knowing that sugary foods eliminate good bacteria, I wondered if a colonic would basically put me at a restart in helping to alleviate the sugar cravings. So myself, and another athlete, tried a series of three colonics. Afterwards, I felt the craving was gone. I had no desire for sugar, cookies, cakes, etc. It actually worked. I've actually been free of sugary desserts for about two months now and I haven't even wanted anything sweet.

**What difference has it made in you physically, mentally, and emotionally?**

Mentally and emotionally, I'm in a great headspace to get ready for prep. I'm not craving anything. I'm actually excited to start prep, because I'm not thinking about oh my gosh, I'm going to be restricted. I think having a better understanding of the science of what was going on in my body gave me the tools to manage the desire for sweets. Physically, am I still a little fluffy from off-season, of course, but I feel so much better that I don't feel like I have a need for sugar and I can make a better choice of foods with nutritional value.

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For this upcoming season my plan is to have my two days off, enjoy food and do the cleanse and begin the reverse diet. Would it have been great if I had discovered this a long time ago? Sure, but of course, everything happens for a reason and learning is a process. I hope that those who are dealing with similar issues can walk away with a better understanding of their own unhealthy behaviors and can work towards managing those behaviors. For me, colonics have been great, they benefit your gut health. Good health starts from the inside so I am a proponent of a good cleanse. But I am not a medical professional and you should always ask your doctor first if this is a good option for you before doing so.

**In January of this year, you spoke at Berkmar High School, are you scheduling more speaking engagements? Do you have plans to do more of that in the future to share your message about eating disorders and managing them? What kind of impact do you hope to make on athletes or people in general?**

I would welcome the opportunity to do more seminars beyond the Posing Seminars I currently do. I believe eating disorders are more common than people realize. People just don't happen to talk about them. So, I would love to help open the conversation. Currently, I am one of the three hosts on our podcast, Beyond the Barbell. We are a platform for the figure division, both NPC and IFBB Professional League but our overall goal is to be informative about athletes, the prep process as well as topics that go beyond the stage and especially those topics that people are afraid to talk about. It provides a great opportunity for us to be able to share facts, fears, experiences both good and bad, and the knowledge we've learned along the way.

**That's so awesome Nicole! I look forward to hearing your podcast. So what is on your agenda for competition this year?**

I'll be prepping for Tampa Pro, the Tupelo Pro and the Texas Pro, three shows back to back and then I'll have a little break before the Olympia in November.

**Do you typically do about 4 shows a year?**

I've been trying to do more shows. In the past, I would do maybe two shows but since my goal is to stay more fit year round rather than having huge weight loss and weight gains I figured I can do a couple more shows. The strategy this year is to do shows back to back to get tighter and it's just easier in that way for myself. The plan is to come in a little more conditioned this year especially in the glutes.

**What does the future look like for you? Five years from now? Will you be looking at Masters Olympia? Do you see yourself competing that long?**

I'll compete as long as I feel I can but I definitely plan on being involved with the sport for years to come. I want to continue posing athletes, and I plan to grow the podcast. Beyond the Barbell is definitely my legacy. I love being a part of the sport and being able to support the athletes, especially in the Figure division. No one else was showcasing the Figure athletes so I decided I would. I believe it's important to the growth of the division to share who the Figure Pros are, who the rising stars in the NPC Figure division are. The more familiar people are with these athletes, the more popular the division will become. I teamed up with Hannah Robinson and started Beyond the Barbell in the summer of 2022 covering a variety of topics from tanning to posing to competing. We began incorporating interviews and now we've added seminars. So far we've gotten great feedback and we are focused on increasing our following. Demontae, my significant other, and I also hope to start a family at some point.

**From learning how to manage her eating disorder to creating her legacy, Nicole Zenobia Graham inspires through the determination to improve in everything she does. Her patience and willingness to work hard for what she wants no doubt has led to success in her sport and beyond. And she's not done yet! You can reach IFBB Pro Nicole Zenobia Graham @worldofzenobia and @beyondthe\_barbell**

