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Do you need to cross-train if dancing is your real passion?

Only if you want to improve stamina, strength, and performance skills—and to deal with stress along the way

by Laura Hanlon

All my life I have been an extremely active and physically fit person, and despite my love for dance, I know I will always yearn for more in the way of movement. Is it necessary? I find it crucial to take part in other forms of exercise to remain in good health both physically and mentally. Being healthy is especially important for dancers, because we use our entire body as our instrument and means of artistic expression. According to the *Dance Fitness* article featured in the International Association for Dance Medicine and Science monthly magazine, “Good fitness is key to reducing the risk of injury, enhancing performance, and ensuring longer dancing careers. A healthy dancer is one who is in a state of being ‘well’ in both body and mind. A physically fit dancer is one who has the ability to meet the demands of a specific physical task at an optimal level.” In order to meet all of these demands it is important to find the ideal form of cross-training that works best for you and your own body and its needs.

Allison Gomes, a Certified Pilates and yoga instructor who graduated from the University of California, Irvine with her Bachelor of Arts in 2006, states, “I believe there are two main functions that cross-training in any sport or activity serves. The first is to enhance and increase the skills required for the activity [in this case dance], and the second is to counteract the imbalances or areas of the body that are left vulnerable or weak from the activity.” Lauren Warnecke, a dance writer and educator with both Dance (BA) and Kinesiology (MS) degrees, compares cross-training to eating a balanced diet in her article, *Is Cross-training A Good Idea?* stating, “For maximal health, you need a healthy balance of strength, endurance, and agility-based activities just like vegetable, grains, and proteins in the diet.”

While I enjoy a diverse regimen of physical activity, I feel very strongly about a few types that I practice on a weekly basis, including Pilates, yoga, and running. Each of these forms of conditioning exercise offers a different benefit for the mind and body. First, although the Pilates Method has grown over the years into a major phenomenon, this somatic practice has actually been around since the early twentieth century. Pilates offers a movement experience especially attractive to dancers due to its therapeutic, low-impact approach. I have found that Pilates dramatically helped me to strengthen various parts of my body and visibly enhance my muscle tone and definition without adding bulk. It has also increased my flexibility, promoted a balance of working my body evenly, and has provided me with ways to work through minor injuries.

Both Allison Gomes and Barbra Bean, former dancers and now Pilates teachers at Studio du Corps/Pilates Center of Orange County, mentioned the excessive amount of external rotation in the hips, hip flexion, and back extension that most dance techniques require, as well as the imbalance of the lower body versus upper body and core activity. Pilates works to foster correct parallel alignment and upper body strength, which greatly helps to counter the disproportionate tendencies in dance. Dance training in general, and more specifically the rehearsal process, can be extremely asymmetrical. Gomes states, “It is so important to cross-train in a way that brings

attention to working all ranges of the body, on both the dominant and non-dominant sides, for equal amounts of time with equal attention.” Pilates is ideal for this.

Dancers tend to put a great deal of pressure on themselves to be the best they can be in their field, leading to an overabundance of stress, especially when added to the daily demands faced by a college student. Some people find dancing helps to relieve their stress, but with grades being given in our movement classes at the university, it often has the reverse effect. Everyone has their own way of dealing with tension, and yoga is one of mine. The practice of yoga has been around for thousands of years, with its earliest signs appearing in ancient Shamanism, where the primary goal was to “heal members of the community and act as religious mediators” (Bance). While its original focus was on understanding the outside world, the goal of the work soon became one of self-enlightenment (Bance).

I have found the meditative qualities of yoga to be especially calming, allowing me to focus my mind and body together. While one’s thoughts are put at ease, the somatic practice ensures a full body workout through the extended periods of time at which one must sustain poses and positions. Something that sets yoga apart from most other supplemental exercise programs is that there is very rarely a mirror in the studio. I have learned that this practice is intended to be very noncompetitive and focuses much more on one’s self rather than others in the room. As dancers, we are very used to seeing our bodies at work in the mirror every day, so taking a step away from this constant reminder of what we need to improve upon and comparing ourselves with others, can boost self-esteem instantaneously.

In a *Pointe Magazine* article, Jennifer Stahl discusses yoga for dancers, pointing out the benefits that exceed strengthening and improving muscle tone. Stahl states, “In yoga [especially vinyasa] I was finally able to find a feeling of fullness to my movement—something I had struggled to attain in modern class, but never quite ‘got.’ Once I became used to finding length in every position during the slow flow through the poses, I could translate that sensation back to the studio, and became able to move bigger, with longer lines.” Something that both Stahl and Gomes mentioned was how yoga allows them to really “feel” what their bodies are doing. This helps the dancer to become more aware of where they place their body in space both in the studio and on stage.

When discussing this matter with Gomes, she commented, “Dancing is so largely based on how we see our bodies, and not what we feel them doing. This not only encourages taking physical shortcuts to produce a desired aesthetic, or get somewhere on a certain musical cue, but can be quite damaging to our self-esteem!” The way in which yoga allows us to go inward and feel some gratitude and connection to the astounding things our bodies can accomplish is a wonderful feeling that I strongly believe every dancer should experience.

A *Dance Fitness* article by the International Association for Dance Medicine and Science emphasizes the benefits of aerobic exercise for dancers. The authors declare that, “Because the average dance technique class is too intermittent in nature for any positive aerobic effect to occur, research suggests that dance will only elicit an improvement in aerobic capacity in a very unfit group of people” (Irvine). Therefore, it is important for dancers to take part in some type of activity that will improve their aerobic potential, which occurs when the body needs to work hard enough to cause change or adaptation within the body. This type of movement is valuable because, “The greater a dancer’s aerobic capacity, the longer they can work at moderate heart rates before becoming fatigued” (Irvine).

While I enjoy many forms of aerobic training such as swimming and cycling, running is by far my favorite. I have been a runner my entire life and enjoyed racing competitively on my

high school's varsity track and cross country teams. There is much speculation regarding whether running, in particular, is good for dancers. Warnecke distinctly asserts the ways in which a dancer can make a healthy and educated choice to run when stating, "Your primary form of exercise is still dance, and your body can only benefit from introducing alternative forms of activity provided you aren't fatigued or over-training." Warnecke also claims, "Cross-training can serve as a preventive measure from certain injuries, such as adductor strengthening to prevent knee injury," despite the numerous myths implying that running can be harmful to a dancer's knees.

Taking a daily ballet class may provide us with the knowledge and tools needed to succeed in our craft but according to Warnecke, "The desire to advance the field has pushed choreographers to create increasingly difficult and intricate movement that requires strength, endurance, and agility outside of what a typical ballet class can provide." By engaging in some type of aerobic activity, whether running, swimming or cycling, a dancer can increase stamina, in addition to helping them stay physically fit.

Throughout my dance career thus far I have grown to love the art form more and more with each class and performance. It can, however, be very demanding on the individual, both physically and mentally, and I have found it increasingly important to take care of your mind, body, and spirit in order to stay healthy and happy. Everyone has their own ways of doing this, but I strongly believe that some of the best methods are Pilates, yoga, and running. Back in college, I managed to include each of these supplemental movement practices in my daily dance routine. Together, they still help me to stay physically fit, strong and centered, and most importantly, sane.

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Laura Hanlon graduated in 2014 with a BFA in Dance Performance from UC Irvine. She has since moved to New York City, where she is pursuing her dance career, while practicing various forms of cross-training. After going through the Pilates Teacher Training Program at Studio du Corps/Pilates Center of Orange County, the studio her mother, Diane Diefenderfer, founded in 1987, she began teaching both there and at Equinox. Laura is now a Pilates Method Alliance (PMA) certified teacher, and the Pilates Manager for Equinox Flatiron.