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Dumbbells and Dancers?

Did your ballet teacher ever warn you that skating or weightlifting could ruin your muscles? Cross-training has come a long way, and it's now recommended for dancer strength and versatility—but you definitely need some guidance to get started.

by Natalie Palmgren

As a young dancer, I remember my ballet teacher subtly shaming several of my classmates and me for attempting fun activities like running, swimming, skiing and skateboarding. She warned us that engaging in these activities might result in injury that would negatively impact our abilities as dancers; or perhaps, the activities would bulk up our thighs or upper bodies and work against the long lean muscles ballet dancers strive for. In a serious tone, she encouraged us to thoughtfully consider which activities to participate in outside of class.

As a young, impressionable student, this message deeply impacted me. I would intentionally avoid games that required a lot of running and would try to limit skiing to once or twice a year. My effort to please this ballet teacher limited many fun childhood opportunities and diminished my confidence in the physical capabilities of my body. Over time, this message of caution cemented into my brain, and I continued to shy away from physical activities. I reframed my inquisitive, adventurous mind to relate non-dance exercise with something dangerous to my body. The natural, healthy desire to challenge myself with new physical activities disintegrated, and that feeling started to permeate my approach to dancing as well. I felt nervous doing advanced steps across the floor and often held back from fully surrendering into gravity and trusting the strength and technique within my body. Also, avoiding complementary exercises resulted in a lack of cardiovascular ability and an imbalance of my muscles, caused by only doing ballet, resulting in persistent knee injuries.

As I continued my dance training in high school, a new ballet instructor challenged my concept of caring for my dancing body. At the beginning of class, this instructor praised one of my classmates for learning how to skateboard. In fact, she encouraged students to explore a variety of physical activities in efforts to grow and enhance their physical knowledge and command of their bodies. She said that having these experiences equipped dancers to accept the challenges of the evolving dance world. She explained that choreographers, in their efforts to expand the movement vocabulary of dance, often valued the kind of physical abilities best facilitated by experiences and training outside of the studio. She challenged us to remain open to opportunities for physical learning because it would enhance our dance practice and encourage our growth as well-rounded individuals.

In an effort to follow our new ballet teacher's advice, a classmate and I began running a couple of times a week in preparation for a performance. We wanted to build endurance and thought running would be the best way to achieve this. Unfortunately, we chose to run on concrete, with improperly fitting shoes, for unsuitable amounts of time. Initially, we felt proud of ourselves, yet

that accomplishment soon caused unexpected results. My classmate began to develop shin splints, and I experienced intense irritation in my right ankle due to an impingement. These injuries carried over into our rehearsals and left us feeling frustrated and confused.

This experience deflated my excitement about the benefits of cross-training. Even worse, it increased my fears of injury and diminished my confidence. Sadly, I am not alone in this experience, as improper cross-training is a relatively common issue for dancers. Tanya Trombly, a professional dancer, fitness expert, and creator of Anti-Bunhead Fitness, mentions that as the popularity of cross-training for dancers has grown, studies indicate overall higher rates of injuries for dancers and a substantial increase of injury in younger dancers. An avid supporter of cross-training, Trombly explains these numbers saying, “Dancers have a tendency of taking things to the extreme, thinking more is better. But, this overachiever quality, with regards to cross-training, will have you tearing down and destroying your body in your very efforts to enhance it.” Trombly warns that cross-training without proper education and intention might result in more harm than benefit.

Kathleen Davenport, a physician at Miami City Ballet, echoes Trombly’s reasoning and stresses the importance of educating dancers on how to cross-train effectively. For Davenport, “A regimen that is started without guidance from a dance medicine expert could theoretically result in more harm than good.” Davenport explains that a flexible dancer attempting cross-training in yoga may run the risk of overstretching and weakening her muscles. In order to reap the benefits of yoga, which are numerous, the dancer must maintain a focused, educated approach to avoid overstretching.

The overachieving nature of dancers places them at a higher risk for injury— especially when they are not provided with education to train safely and effectively. As I continued my dance training at university, the course *Injury Prevention* deepened my understanding of cross-training and guided me to develop an effective approach to safely implement it. Because of my first negative experience, I was skeptical when reading articles in class that stated how cross-training prevents injuries, improves cardiovascular ability, flexibility, bone density, fights against type 2 diabetes, and improves memory (Moore). However, my desire to enhance my dance practice, as well as my curiosity to explore the rising popularity of cross-training, pushed me to educate myself on proper forms of supplementary training for dancers. While researching, I was struck by the surplus of information and suggestions available for proper cross-training both on the web, with articles from *Dance Magazine* and *Dance Spirit*, and also on social media. I started following several professional dancers who posted their exercise workouts, which helped me develop a personalized approach to cross-training. I created a manageable list of exercises that targeted specific muscle groups and structured the exercises for maximum effectiveness and efficiency. As I implemented this personalized approach to training, the knowledge and specific intention behind my workouts allowed me to confront my fear of injury with confidence.

After cross-training for a couple of months, I noticed that I felt stronger and more coordinated, and my endurance increased. I also noticed that my body more easily shifted between various dance styles, and the persistent knee injury from my youth was no longer irritating me. Also, I

realized that during rehearsals and performances, my increased stamina allowed me to focus more on my artistry instead of getting lost within the physicality of the work. New York City Ballet's principal dancer Sara Mearns mentions, in relation to cross-training, "Working that hard is very mental. Once you tap into that, you're mentally stronger onstage."

Perhaps the most important benefit I noticed from my cross-training was how it re-motivated me. Dancers spend so much time in the studio repeating the same movements. Unfortunately, this can lead to burn out because they are unable to see improvement in their work, which can drain their passion and love of dance. I noticed that when I spent quality time cross-training and building strength, I felt re-invigorated in the studio. I could easily notice small improvements like higher jumps or increased leg flexibility. These seemingly small improvements made an immense difference for me and increased my motivation in class. This motivation then impacted the rest of the class and set a positive trajectory for the following days. Overall my experience with proper cross-training increased my flexibility, balance and strength and also provided mental benefits of re-motivation and a growth mindset.

As I prepare for my fourth year at UC Irvine, I am incredibly thankful I pursued personal education in cross-training, as I am continually reaping benefits that elevate my dance practice and encourage physical confidence and a positive mind set. I am disappointed I missed these benefits at a younger age, though I am thankful for the words from both of my earlier ballet teachers, as I have found truthful elements within each of their ideologies. As my first teacher said, a dancer's body is their instrument, and a dedicated dancer must work to maintain their optimal physical condition both for individual satisfaction and as a respectful service to the art form. I know that it's a dancer's responsibility to thoughtfully care for their body. Nonetheless, I agree with my second teacher in that dancers should pursue extracurricular physical activities, because the physical knowledge, strength, and coordination derived from these activities allow dancers to maintain a competitive and unique presence in the dance world. Even outside of the dance world, it's useful to gain exposure to a range of activities in order to build confidence and flexibility.

Overall, this is a call to dance teachers to understand their responsibility in educating their dancers well with respect to cross-training. As the dance world evolves, the physical demands placed on dancers has increased. Cross-training helps dancers achieve their optimal physical potential. If dance instructors feel inadequate when it comes to "outside" exercise, they might consider directing students to helpful articles in *Dance Magazine*, or perhaps have a specialist come to class and educate students about safe, personalized approaches to their workouts. Because dance students are incredibly driven, instructors have an increased responsibility to impart wisdom to their students with regards to caring for their body. Importantly, teachers should also avoid breeding fear in their dance students but rather empower them to know and trust their bodies.



Natalie Palmgren will start her senior year at UC Irvine in Fall 2021. She is pursuing her Bachelor of Fine Arts in Dance Performance and is simultaneously working on her application to Physical Therapy school.

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