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Ducci, João

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How Pilates changed the course of my dance career

Somatic practices and cross-training can prevent injuries and increase a dancer's longevity, so why aren't such courses required in more university dance departments?

by João Ducci

I began my journey with dance quite late, starting at community college and then becoming a dance major at the University of California, Irvine. During my time as an undergraduate dance student, I was injured A LOT, and I didn't understand why. Starting dance so late didn't help, I was sure, especially with my body being so hypermobile. But the biggest factor turned out to be the lack of cross-training practices to supplement my dancing. Though the training I was receiving was wonderful, I didn't have the strength and body awareness to support the frequency and intensity of my dancing at the time.

As most of us know, technique classes often don't fully address the cardiovascular and muscular endurance needs dancers have, especially what's needed to get through rehearsals and performances. How many times have you reached the end of a tech week and realized you could barely summon the stamina to get through the work you're performing? Or you feel weak and somewhat unprepared for what the choreography requires of you? I always suspected that class wasn't quite preparing me for the demands of rehearsing and performing, and that technique classes “[do] not always provide a sufficient conditioning program for the prevention of injuries or skeletal imbalances” (Ahearn 2006).

Cross-training – the integration of exercise practices and regimens that differ from the athlete's main discipline (in this case dance)– can tackle such deficiencies by “[addressing] all fitness aspects, including strength, power, endurance, balance, speed and agility, as well as refinement of motor skills and movements” (Pepito, Liu 2022). Cross-training benefits also include “increased muscular strength and endurance, enhanced range of motion, increased joint stability, and refined body kinematics” and can also “help balance musculature functions, especially if a dancer has muscular imbalance or natural misalignment” (Pepito, Liu 2022). My development and growth as a dancer would have been significantly quicker and a lot less painful had I known the importance of cross-training from the beginning.

In the summer before I transferred to UCI as an undergrad I suddenly “developed” a chronic, debilitating back pain. It started out of the blue during a week-long ballet intensive and became progressively worse throughout that week. I did not fall or sustain any specific injuries. The pain just started, then increased quickly and exponentially over the course of 5 days. At first it was just pain, but by the end of the week, I could barely walk out of class and had to lie face down on the floor of the studio lobby for hours before being able to drive home. I should've stopped dancing the day I started to feel pain, but as dancers do with most injuries, I thought I would be okay “pushing through” the pain and finishing the intensive.

Most of my previous injuries (did I mention there were lots of them?) had been taken care of through rest, icing, elevation, taking time off, with some advice from teachers and fellow dancers. This time, no one knew how to help me, and the recovery steps I'd come to rely on were not working AT ALL. So, I began to look for help everywhere I could: sports massages, chiropractors, acupuncture, physical therapists, and sports doctors. No one could tell me what

was wrong. No scoliosis, no slipped discs, no stress fracture. Literally “nothing wrong.” Except every time I danced, I would end up in nauseating pain and then limp out of class and for several hours after. I would also be in an incredible amount of pain if I walked or stood for too long, or sat down the wrong way, or slept in a different position. It was honestly a nightmare.

Sadly, this was my reality for most of my first year at UCI. I missed so many incredibly opportunities because of this injury, including getting to work with Donald McKayle before his passing. And of course, as a self-deprecating, perfectionist dancer, I blamed myself for it for years. I only started to feel significant relief for my pain when I started to see a new physical therapist at a clinic that specialized in elite athletes. Through a strict regimen of sessions twice a week with deep tissue massages, adjustments, mobility drills, core and glute strengthening exercises (many of which I later realized were Pilates exercises, including some reformer work) followed by EMS (Electronic Muscle Stimulation), ice and compression, I finally started to see a light at the end of the tunnel.

This relief would be somewhat temporary and did not entirely get rid of my pain. For the remainder of the school year, summer and beginning of the following year I was able to dance a bit more and had a significant reduction in pain. But I was still struggling to make a full recovery. I had a high baseline level of pain at all times (even when not dancing), I had back spasms every few weeks (one being so severe I had trouble walking for a week, even on prescribed muscle relaxers), and wild spikes in pain incredibly often. Until I started Pilates.

Finally enrolling in Mat Pilates was the missing piece I had been searching for, for over a year. Within about a month in the class, my pain levels subsided. I started going for longer stretches of time without muscles spasms, and when they did happen, they weren't as severe. And to my surprise, something just as impactful started happening: my dancing got better! I started to improve in my dance classes faster than I ever had, I was more stable, more in control of my body, more aware of where my limbs were in space and most importantly, I was dancing without flinching in pain.

I knew these developments had to be attributed to Pilates. Though PT had given me a great deal of relief, I had plateaued for months. But on the days that I had Pilates, I would experience the least amount of pain and discomfort in my dance classes and the most obvious increase in control and stability. Pilates has had its effectiveness “recognized by physicians, physical therapists, chiropractors, sports and fitness trainers, choreographers, and performers,” and is “ideal for retraining, rehabilitating, and re-educating dancers' bodies” (Ahearn 2006). Several studies have “supported the effectiveness of Pilates in dancers with respect to muscular endurance, posture, alignment, and flexibility” (Bergeron et al. 2017). Specifically, “decreased overall postural misalignments,” “decreased prevalence of iliotibial band and hamstring inflexibility; and improved lower abdominal muscle strength” (Ahearn et al. 2018).

I remember at that moment, questioning: why hadn't I taken this class before? Why wasn't every single incoming student required to take Pilates? Why was it so inconveniently placed in the schedule and offered so infrequently that it took me so long to be able to enroll in it?

Many of the undergrads in school with me at the time could also barely fit the class into their schedules. Often not until their senior year, if at all! It was only offered twice a week, always at the same time, and conflicted with some required courses—and, it could only be repeated once. That class felt like it had changed my life, so it was disappointing that there was this barrier

stopping other dancers from experiencing it. I maintained progress with my recovery, taking the mat class again and later the reformer class. The following summer I got my Pilates certification and with my expanded knowledge of the Pilates method, I continued using Pilates as a form of cross-training to support my dancing.

Fast forward to last year, prior to returning to school to pursue my MFA. I had been dancing professionally for a few years and was teaching Pilates as well. I had access to Pilates equipment for free whenever I wanted. I got to practice quite a bit while teaching, used the studio for my personal practice and conditioning a few times a week and was also weightlifting at the gym. My body had never felt better. I felt strong, present and in control of my body, and was relatively injury-free for quite a while.

But when I started grad school a year ago, I started feeling the effects of not cross-training again. I couldn't fit any of the Pilates classes into my schedule, no longer had access to a reformer or other Pilates equipment, and had no spare time to keep up with my mat practice or go to the gym. I once again started experiencing severe back pain, several of my old injuries began flaring up, and the back and neck spasms returned. At the same time, I noticed so many of the undergraduate dancers around me were also injured a lot. I even had a dancer in one of my recent works experiencing the exact same recurring back problems I used to have, throughout the entire year.

That's when those familiar questions started to pop up again: Why isn't Pilates required of every student? Why doesn't the department offer more of those classes? Why isn't cross-training, conditioning, and fitness more integrated into the curriculum?

Many dance programs offer kinesiology and injury prevention courses, and though these are valuable in many ways, they don't quite give student dancers the physical, embodied skills they need when it comes to cross-training. College dancers need the space and time to be able to cross-train, which isn't a luxury most have without being enrolled in classes like Pilates, Yoga, etc. Academic classes in anatomy and injury prevention can emphasize the importance of cross-training until the cows come home, but that won't actually get students to apply what they learn. Theoretical knowledge has its value and place (we're at a university after all) but it can fall short in giving our students enough tools (i.e. the space, time, and physical practice) to keep themselves healthy and injury free. Dancers are embodied learners and often need to physically experience the benefits of such practices to see the value in them.

Though I am biased towards Pilates for many reasons, there are other valuable somatic practices to be included in this conversation. My experiences with yoga and Gyrotonics, as well as extensive physical therapy and weight training, have all shown me there are many different pathways toward the same goal: healthy, fit, anatomically conscious dancers that have the embodied knowledge to prevent and rehab from injuries much more efficiently. These practices, of course, are quite different from one another. However, yoga and Gyrotonics, much like Pilates, are low-impact forms that reinforce attention to alignment, proprioception, and control. They also increase core strength and offer active stretching and mobility work for the entire body.

I wondered if dancers from other colleges were also experiencing a lack of exposure to these forms. Let's take California for example: I looked at the curriculums of some of the more prominent universities offering bachelor's degrees in dance (often ranked among the top 10 dance schools in California) – UCI, Chapman, CSU Long Beach, UCLA, UC Santa Barbara,

LMU, CalArts, CSU Fullerton, UC Riverside and USC. Among these ten programs, only three of them have conditioning, cross-training, or Pilates in their degree requirements. The other seven programs only offer conditioning, yoga, or Pilates as elective courses. It seems like cross-training and conditioning are an afterthought, instead of being foundational to these curriculums and their students' well-being.

I recognize the challenges of implementing even more requirements for a dance major. With so many required courses already, adding anything else might overload dancers even more. But you could argue that the value of cross-training might be crucial enough to consider getting it onto the schedule, even if it means reducing the length and quantity of technique classes. "Ideally the preference is for dancers to have separate conditioning programs as part of their curriculum. Realistically, however, there is often neither time nor resources" (Ahearn 2006). So, if adding entirely new courses in cross-training isn't feasible, it would be a start to more actively integrate some of these somatic forms into our technique classes.

I would likely not be dancing today had I not been introduced to Pilates. Today, seeing so many dance majors feel burnt out and get injured so often is frustrating to say the least. I know there are many factors contributing to this issue, and much of it just comes with the territory—dance is demanding, and so is college. But implementing consistent and required cross-training options such as yoga, Pilates, weightlifting and other somatic practices to college dance curriculums would go a long way in giving dancers the fit, healthy, and balanced bodies they need to achieve success and longevity in the field.



João Ducci is a dancer, choreographer, and educator, currently in his second year as an MFA student at UC Irvine. He holds BFAs in Dance Performance and Choreography from UC Irvine and a comprehensive Pilates certification from Studio du Corps/Pilates Center of Orange County.

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