

What Makes Teaching/Learning Classical Ballet Different

There are many opinions/misconceptions about what a ballet class is supposed to “do” for a skater, how effective it really is as a training tool or even how “safe” it is for skaters to even take ballet. I have had skaters’ parents come up to me and tell me that their skater has been injured so they will not be taking ballet for X amount of weeks ...but the coach suggested that the skater still take the strength training class during those same weeks!

While I’m not suggesting that anyone (especially children) train while injured, classical ballet training, if taught correctly, is one of the safest most effective off-ice conditioning classes obtainable. Over the years I have had students come into my classes who were injured in other sports. Every one of those students recovered quickly and effectively because the movement patterns taught in a proper classical ballet lesson are biomechanically sound and take into account the development of the individual.

One of the reasons why classical ballet is such an effective and virtually injury free training tool, is that it is a very slow, methodical process which trains the mind-body connection in a very specific process for maximum permanent results.

In many studios across the globe ballet is approached merely as a style of dance and NOT as a viable training tool. Recital or competition based studios pass along their “knowledge” of ballet technique as if it were like playing the “telephone game” (from person to person) without ever taking pedagogy courses. Naturally then, these misconceptions have been passed down to the skating community as well. Since ballet training and the concepts revolving around ballet training have been misunderstood even in the dance world, educating the public as to what real classical ballet instruction has to offer is one of the major tasks pedagogically trained ballet teachers through out the world find themselves engaged in....and especially so to the skating world!

A Bit of History:

The originator of the Russian Teaching Method, Professor Agrippina Vaganova, unified the classical ballet experience of generations and offered a clear and concise system of a virtually infallible way of teaching (pedagogy) and performing the entire ‘alphabet’ of classical dance. Vera Kostrovitskaya, who was one of Vaganova’s closest disciples, and most trusted assistant, was one of the leading figures to further develop Vaganova’s method of teaching. Incorporating the best techniques from French, Italian and Danish ballet schools, the Vaganova or Russian Teaching Method as it is called today is the most meticulously systematic and scientifically accurate in its approach to achieving both technical and artistic mastery. Vaganova never meant her teaching method to be solely the “Russian Method”; she meant it to be “The” teaching method of classical Dance. (1)

Russian Method: Why it is different and why skaters can benefit from this method

I believe the Russian Teaching Method to be most helpful to figure skaters as its goals are essentially identical: high effortless looking jumps, well centered and multiple revolution spins, high extensions, smoothly executed intricate footwork, and artistic/ expressive use of the entire body ...all with a clear emphasis on injury prevention through careful body development. To me, Classical Ballet Training is analogous to Albert Einstein's "Unified Theory" or "The Theory of Everything" when it comes to physical training...you learn this and you learn the fundamentals of everything that comes afterward.

For example:

- In the Russian Teaching Method each exercise is broken down much as a sports scientist would "slow-mo" a perfectly executed movement in order to analyze, moment by moment, the progression of a step or element. But instead of looking at the movement from a purely external point of view, it is analyzed by the internal structure of the movement. This analysis (breakdown) is the beginning of the progression of A before B, and B before C and is then translated into specific exercise forms which are practiced by the student in a precise fashion with calculated repetitions to form the muscles, ligaments, tendons and correct neurological pathways.
- Each step and exercises has several "forms" which are taught separately and in progression...combinations of steps (called enchaînement) are never taught until the individual steps are completely mastered, including head, eyes, arms etc. for that particular step.
- The Method teaches that when a movement isn't broken down into its most basic forms it is immediately practiced as a piece of choreography rather than as an exercise being done for a specific purpose. This leads to bad habits and sloppy technique when trying to build on those fundamentals with more difficult steps. Inaccurate teaching can also lead to injuries because the actual intent of the exercise is not understood.
- The Russian Method recognizes that the area of the 5th lumbar vertebrae is the center of all body control. Training all the muscles of the lower back for strength first, then articulation (controlled flexibility), is fundamental in preventing injuries as well as acquiring aplomb and artistic nuance. Many dancers as well as figure skaters these days have an unprecedented number of back injuries due to poor training and overuse of the back muscles as they try for "tricks" before their backs are strong enough.
- The Method specifically instructs never to raise the free leg any higher than 90° in the first year and a half of training as this is the "magic strengthening angle" for the lower back and pelvic muscles. Even (and especially) if the student shows a potential for great flexibility this angle is kept in order to strengthen the area first.
- The Method teaches that continually demonstrating the steps to the students causes the students to mimic you, and by doing so they will neither internally nor intellectually understand the precision or intent of a movement. Mimicking does

not train the neurological pathways which create the mind-body connection. This is also why doing one's exercises by following a video will never produce the quality of results provided by "live" instruction.

- The Method specifically breaks down and limits the number of repetitions of certain jumps, high kicks, deep knee bends and the like done in a single lesson in order to prevent over-use injuries.
- From the very first lesson the head, eye focus, arms and shoulders are trained with as much attention to detail as the legs and feet. "All possible inclinations and turns of the head accompany all the movements of the exercise(s), beginning with the first exercise at the barre"
- The Method also teaches that too much stretching can weaken ligaments, muscles and tendons to the degree that strength may never be achieved. Since it takes great strength and stamina to execute high jumps, passive stretching in particular is kept to a minimum with the majority of active stretching being placed within the lesson as part of an exercise. Too much stretching without first strengthening those exact same pathways will lead to eventual weakness and injury.

One of the main reasons for the rise in injuries of both dancers and sports people (and the rise in turn of the sports medicine profession) is the lack of following a precise and progressively detailed daily syllabus. A second reason is impatience in the desire to do difficult and fancy "tricks" before the body is ready, and to have the instant gratification of acquiring a medal or leading role before one is truly ready for it.

What a Classical Ballet Lesson Entails

A classical ballet lesson is 90 minutes long with very few exceptions (beginning children's class can be a slightly shorter). This is necessary in order to provide adequate time for every muscle, tendon and ligament in the body to warm-up, stretch, and to coordinate with other muscle groups in a cohesive, productive manner (remember that there are well over 400 muscles in the body...every one of them is used to dance and to skate!) This is not "mindless exercise": the intellect as well as the sensibilities are always fully engaged so that the mind and emotions grow along with the body... this takes time.

Classical ballet is first and foremost concerned with the stabilizing muscles (not the mobilizers) of the body. The stabilizers must be active, well aligned, strong and flexible before giving primary attention to the mobilizers (choreography). Practicing "Figures" used to do this for skaters.

Strength training may provide added strength without the knowledge of how to use that strength in a coordinated and effective way in skating (having a strong core may not preclude that you will always have good posture and "lift" during jump landings).

Flexibility training may make one more flexible without supplying the ability to sustain amplitude or a bend of the torso while simultaneously maintaining balance and whole body control.

I have had coaches also ask me to do some “core work” with their skaters along with the ballet! When taught and applied correctly Classical Ballet training provides both strength and flexibility training in just the right balance in a harmonized and progressive manner incorporating flow of movement, whole body awareness and coordination (head and eyes to arms and feet) all in time to music.

No other single discipline can be seen to provide the skater with all of these necessary physical, intellectual and emotional tools to develop their fullest potential WITHOUT INJURY

What each ballet lesson provides:

- At least 8 progressive barre exercises (first learned facing the barre and then with one hand on the barre) which warm up the entire body in a methodically prescribed manner.
- At least 10 progressive center exercises including center-barre, port de bras (carriage of the arms, head and upper body), adagio and allegro.
- Music education in tempi, music character, with feeling and personal expression (not just as part of “choreography”)
- Teaching of the internal workings of movement training: why each exercise is practiced, what it produces in the body when done correctly.
- Whole body movement coordination in time to the music: head, hands/fingers, eyes, arms, torso, legs, feet. Teaching the importance of attention to detail, observation skills and objective personal assessment
- Extensive aerobic training: advanced levels contain 20 minutes of almost continuous jumps as “de rigueur”.
- Supervised stretching to increase range of motion at the end of every class
- Daily assessment of the class as a whole and of each student as an individual with one on one interaction for “problem areas”.

As proven by over 100 years of ongoing scientific analysis and refinement, these qualities cannot be obtained by a once a week lesson, a 45 minute or one hour lesson, or a lesson combined with other material. To see the best results in the least amount of time WITHOUT INJURY this format must be upheld and practiced at the very least 2X per week. If taught and applied correctly it is a proven “formula” which works without exception.

In closing I would like to say that I think the difficulty in understanding what Classical Ballet training is all about stems from what the current media has been feeding the public about dance in general. The current trend is to present ALL dance as doable by the general public so we forget the fact the Classical Ballet in particular is a fine art form and not a “reality show” set of “moves”(after all, we don't have a show called “So You

Think You Can Play the Violin"!)). The word Classical means "of the highest standard" or "perfection"...this is not to exclude or discourage any one from taking classical ballet but to encourage you to become aware of and embrace the challenge of the high standards and discipline for the rewards (as in the discipline of figure skating) are well worth the effort!

(1) Vera Kostrovitskaya and Alexei Pisarev, School of Classical Dance (Dance Books Ltd., 1995) p. 16

New material and excerpts taken from a previous article entitled "Russian Teaching Method and Why it is Different" and portions of "Fundamentals of Alignment and Classical Movement for Figure Skaters" pp.5-4 – 5-6 © 2011 by Annette T. Thomas all rights reserved.