

Areas of Dance as they Relate to Gymnastics

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Many gymnastics programs in the United States do not emphasize the importance of learning dance basics as they relate to gymnastics. Dance incorporated into a gymnastics program will help make the gymnast aware of the correct body alignment and use of feet and legs while executing various skills in her routines. When a gymnast has complete control of her body by using a tight body alignment during training and execution of skills, it results in fewer injuries. By using the following dance basics in your training program, your gymnasts will experience a dramatic improvement in a safe and effective manner.



FIGURE A

Proper body alignment throughout the execution of every skill is something that needs to be expected from all of our gymnasts from the moment they walk into the gym. The gymnast should be expected to maintain and think about body alignment throughout her workout, including warm-up and conditioning. For example, if the only time the gymnast tries to hold her stomach in and maintain a flat back is in a handstand on bars and a scale on beam, then there are going to be problems with other types of skills. If a gymnast is standing in line waiting to do a floor pass with her belly out and back arched, she will be unable to do a tight body round-off, much less anything after that; so the whole pass will most likely be loose and sloppy. It is very important for the coaching staff to emphasize proper body alignment at all times so that the gymnast will naturally maintain good alignment with very little thought. The gymnasts must create a good habit of correct body alignment at all times. **(Figure A)**

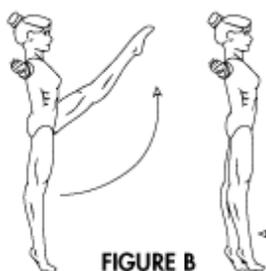


FIGURE B

Another area of dance that needs to be taught is that of fast leg drives, called Grand Battement in dance. Many times we, as coaches, expect the gymnast to perform high level leaps, tumbling and vaults, yet we do not address the issue of fast leg drives in all directions and all of the leg positions that are used in gymnastics skills. It is very important that we emphasize the following dance skills before the gymnast attempts to execute certain gymnastics skills in order to prevent leg strain or pulled muscles. Many gymnasts have legs that are so slow that they are unable to perform the skills that we expect. By adding fast leg swings with full range (overhead) in all directions, you can improve many skills quickly and safely. These leg swings need to come from a push of the foot off the ground and free of the ground (swinging action), but not lifting. Lifting is considered a different action! You want to simulate all the actions needed to be used in every skill. All actions of fast leg swings in gymnastics come from two areas: the push from the ground, the beam or the board and the swing action free of the floor, bar swings, gainer skills and switch skills. Have your gymnasts do 10 fast leg swings forward, side, and back from a 5th position or parallel at the same time emphasizing the push of the foot off the floor on every swing. The next exercise is swinging the leg in a continuous fashion forward and backward very quickly and aggressively, passing through 1st position. **(Figure B)**



It is very important for the gymnast to master the correct use of the foot off the ground so that a tight Achilles is achieved (i.e., fully extended ankle/foot) as soon as possible and maintained as long as possible. **(Figure C)** Many

ankle injuries are due to a loose foot in the air, which causes the gymnast to land on the side of the foot, rolling the ankle.

A tight foot and ankle in the air makes it easy and safe to land on the correct part of the foot. If the gymnast is reminded to "make a calf muscle," it usually helps her with the tightening of the Achilles; however, the best way to achieve this correctly is by "hands on" work of the coach or dance teacher. This really helps the gymnast to better understand and quickly achieve maximum results. **(Figure D)** Performing Battement Tendu Simple (extending the working foot with the toe still in contact with the floor) assists the gymnast in thinking of a tight Achilles. Use this exercise as you would a conditioning program, with a lot of resistance of the leg during opening and closing. This exercise should be done slow at first and then fast in the 5th position forward, side, and backward.

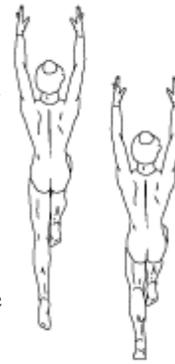


FIGURE D

The next area to address is the breaking down of the parts of the foot so that the foot can be used efficiently and correctly for dance and tumbling. The gymnasts should perform ball of the foot snaps from 1st position, striking a soft mat. This exercise helps the gymnast feel the dynamics and speed necessary in the foot in order to do gymnastics correctly. Doing 10 slow and 10 fast is recommended. The gymnast usually has trouble with the fast snaps at first, but after a little practice she will improve.

Many times a gymnast has trouble with fast foot action, which can be corrected by performing toe raises properly. The toe raises must be done full range and with the correct weight displacement on the whole foot, not just one side of the foot. If the toe raises are done incorrectly, the gymnast then develops the foot incorrectly, which results in a dangerously weak ankle. Toe raises should be performed on one foot and two feet, straight and bent legs (a pli ), slow and fast, parallel and turned out. If done correctly, the development is very noticeable and improvement happens quickly. This exercise can be done at any time during the workout as long as it is supervised and corrected. These toe raises can be done 8 slow, 16 fast, and held 8 counts at the end, but there must be resistance as in any conditioning program.



FIGURE E

The final area to cover is the pli . It is very important to incorporate pli s at some point in the workout. Most gymnasts do not have any degree of bend (pli ) in their legs while maintaining good body alignment. They usually have too much bend or not enough bend to be efficient; therefore, the control of the muscles which handle changing the levels of bend is lacking. Performance of pli s in 1st and 2nd position, both demi (half-bend) and grand (full-bend), is essential. Pli s must be done with resistance and with the heels down (in second grand position) to allow for maximum benefits. Not only does it increase the flexibility in the Achilles, but it also develops the quadriceps and hamstrings, as well as increases the range of motion in the hips. **(Figure E)**

I sincerely believe that if the above dance elements are included in your training program, it will be of great benefit to all of your gymnasts. Remember that these exercises only scratch the surface of what should be included in your gym's dance program. I hope you will consider placing more emphasis on dance as an integral part of the training of your gymnasts!

This article appears in the March 1998 issue of *Technique*, Vol. 18, No. 3.