By dravora Posted February 17, 2015 In Blog

Athletes who incorporate dance as part of their training regimen is nothing new — in the 1970s, NFL great Lynn Swann was called “Baryshnikov in cleats.” He opened the door for professionals in every sport to participate in various forms of dance and related disciplines such as yoga and pilates to improve strength, balance, flexibility and body control as well as rhythm and timing.

Dance is Tough

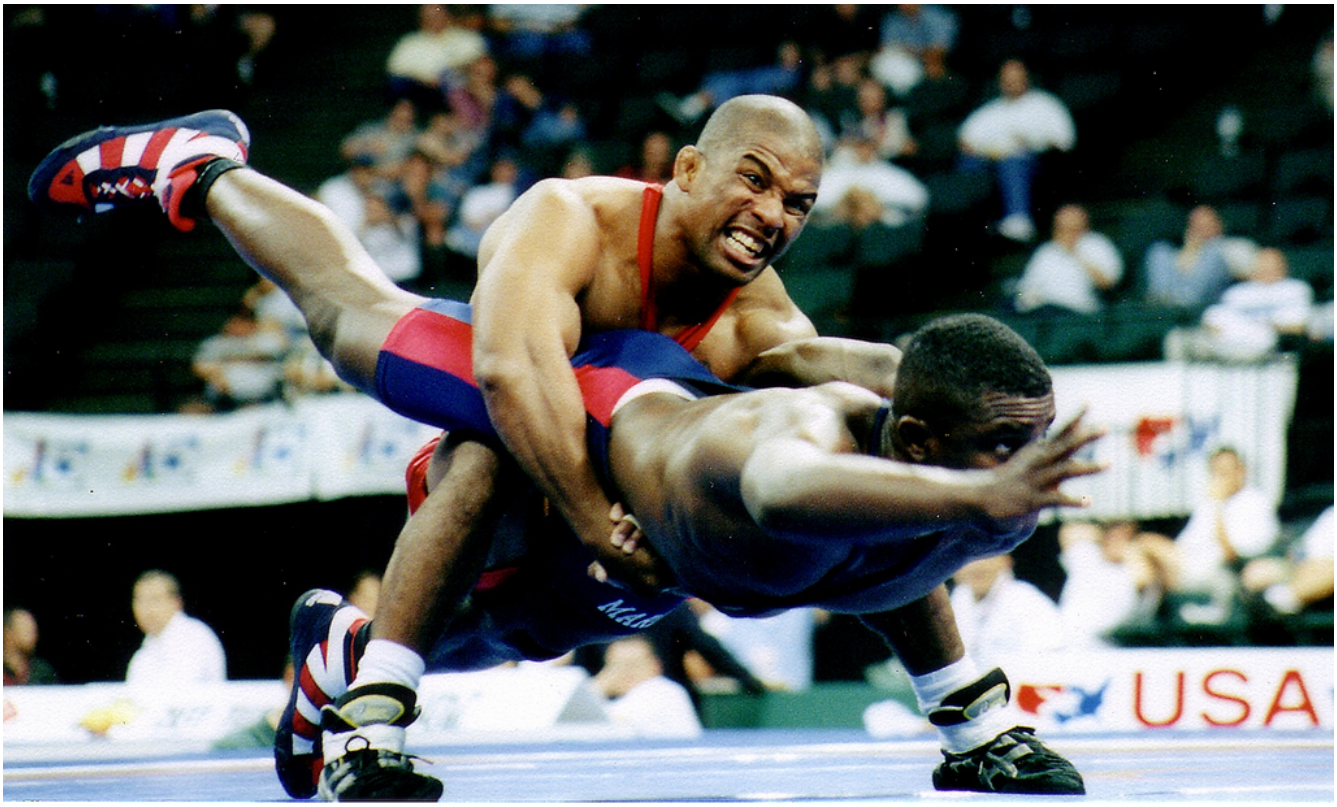
There’s a great discussion on Quora about the physical intensity of ballet. In it, one participant reports that Jean-Claude Van Damme, who studied ballet for years after obtaining a black belt in karate and kickboxing, said: “Ballet is an art, but it’s also one of the most difficult sports. If you can survive a ballet workout, you can survive a workout in any other sport.”

Dancing With the Stars … and Athletes

Another famous athlete, Emmitt Smith, the NFL's all-time leading rusher, ended any public misperception that dance is not something macho men do when he won *Dancing with the Stars* back in 2006. His dancing partner and coach, Cheryl Burke, was interviewed about the experience, and said that she initially "didn't think he'd be able to dance."

However, Smith used his assets from the football field, like rhythm and balance, and brought them onto the dance floor. Burke said that his ability to move "so fast from foot to foot" was also something noteworthy about the "big guy" and liked his hips too, saying Smith was good with anything that required hip action, like the samba or rumba, and "he never looked awkward."

Body Awareness and Coordination



So, does dance training really help professional and high-level athletes? David Franco, who played four years of baseball at Miami University and created the Next Level Ballplayer blog, says yes, dance training "helps your footwork, coordination and balance, which are all positives on the ball field."

While not a coach himself, Franco created the website as "a place for serious ballplayers who want to be the best baseball player they can be." He also says it's "a place for coaches to find excellent baseball advice to share with players, and stay up-to-date on what MLB players and top coaches are doing to get better."

Monika Volkmar, founder of The Dance Training Project, concurs, saying that there's an absolute benefit to adding dance to an athlete's cross-training regime. Dance "uses the nervous system differently" than strength training and gives athletes an opportunity to practice the turnout, a stance "seldom used by those who work in the gym." In addition to coordination, agility and flexibility, she adds that dancing "improves body awareness and gives you a new movement environment in which to hone in on your body's intricacies."

Stretching For Injury Prevention

Dance focuses on relentless stretching, and one professional football team that does the same is the San Francisco 49ers. In Why the 49ers Love to Stretch, Wall Street Journal reporter Kevin Clark says that since the team implemented stretching into every aspect of training, the player injury rate plummeted, with injury rates in other teams over the same period being as much as 176% higher than the 49ers.

Yoga In All Its Forms

Yoga is another discipline that incorporates stretching, and according to Breaking Muscle's Mindith Rahmat it can benefit an athlete not only by reducing the risk of injury but also by aiding in rehabilitation. She says that "athletes with physical imbalances, injuries, and weaknesses can use yoga as a tool to rebalance and strengthen muscles, joints and ligaments.

"Properly strengthening and lengthening the musculature of the body improves alignment, posture, and expose overuse injuries such as iliotibial band syndrome, tendonitis, plantar fasciitis, groin or hamstring sprains and more."

Famous athletes who have embraced yoga to increase flexibility, build core strength and remain relatively free of injury include retired NBA greats Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Shaquille O'Neal, as well as current NBA player Lebron James. Victor Cruz, wide receiver for the New York Giants and regular yoga practitioner, may have yoga to thank for his stellar performance to date and his flexibility, keeping him injury-free until last fall, when he tore the patellar tendon in his knee.

A new type of yoga has been developed specifically for boxers. A yoga-based training system, BoxingYoga "merges boxing technique with traditional and innovative yoga

postures" and directly targets improved performance. There is no actual fighting in the sports, though. "Rather, it is a slow, considerate approach working through the whole body with an emphasis stretching and alignment," its creators write.

Lexie Williamson of YogaSportScience says athletes make good yoga practitioners because they have body awareness, strength and determination. They benefit from yoga by learning injury resistance methods, breath awareness and increasing mental focus and relaxation. Williamson, author of *Yoga for Cyclists* and *Yoga for Runners*, is an athlete herself and has worked as a YogaSportScience instructor with runners, cyclists, sprinters and triathletes.

Pilates

Pilates too is being embraced by the NFL, NBA and MLB, says Balanced Body as "one of the best forms of conditioning a top-tier athlete can participate in." The benefit of this exercise method is that it allows "athletes to access each part of the body individually, and become familiar with the functional mechanics."

The site lists a number of professional sports organizations that use Pilates as a training method, with testimonials from players, former players, coaches and others detailing the benefits, including changing the way one athlete moves to increasing core strength, agility and overall flexibility.

Specific Dance Movements

The relationship between various sports and dance can be extremely specific. In his article in the Sports Performance Bulletin, John Shepherd notes that “the ballet position turnout rotates legs from the hips and helps to strengthen smaller, more injury-susceptible muscles, while using the changement and tendu positions helps to enhance ankle and foot flexibility, which is seen to enhance agility.”

He also cited the Cleveland Browns’ medical advisor, who “noted that groin injuries decreased in the season following ballet training. He believed that the training had taught the players, who had to crouch during games, an awareness of their pelvis positioning and that this had reduced injury potential by increased range of motion in their hips.”

Every Sport Is Dance

Similarly, dancer Guillermo Asca of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Company notes that "a parallel second-position plié is the same stance as a free throw in basketball, or a lineman's stance in football, or a batter's stance in baseball."

There's more: "A golfer's swing is like the turn-the-back in Graham technique. The other day, I was watching tennis player Rafael Nadal, and he hit the ball right at his feet and did a single tour with his arms down in fifth. I see dance in sports all the time."

In the same *Dance Magazine* article, "Leveling the Playing Field," Emily Macel Theys reports on a competition that "pits … dancers against University of California athletes to see who is faster, stronger, and more agile." Competing against basketball players, the water polo team, and track-and-field athletes, the dancers won.

Salsa Drills

Sport-specific drills, such as rapid changes of direction, are teachable in dance. In fact, DanceInTime Productions has developed a program called "Salsa for Athletes: Dancing to Promote Athletic Performance." The training program is run by DIT director Barb Bernstein, who led the University of Maryland field hockey team in 2013 in salsa footwork drills for cross-training. The Terrapins' coach said said the practice improved the team's "deception and balance."

Choose Your Dance Move Wisely

Ultimately, choosing the right dance class depends on what sport you're involved in and "which ability you'd like to enhance." In her article How Does Dance Class Make One a Better Athlete?", Janet Renee says: "Certain dance types improve specific abilities more than others. For instance, if you are a gymnast, you might want to take a ballet class to improve your balance. A basketball player can benefit from taking a modern dance class, which will help build stamina and endurance. A tap dance class might help you improve your coordination on the football field."

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