

## A Sport with Finesse

*If dance is as athletic and time-consuming as basketball or soccer (and it is), why don't universities support dancers as much as they do students who play sports?*

by Geneva Cannady

Day long practices, physical and mental exhaustion, skill, strength, dedication and hard work. Consider combining all of these qualities with 18 to 20 units of academia complete with homework, midterms, pop quizzes, finals, early morning and late night courses. What does this description sound like to you? A student-athlete perhaps. That answer is, indeed, correct. Any collegiate athlete will tell you that they have endured everlasting practices, day-long physical fatigue and mental defeat, but they must still maintain qualities that show a desire to succeed and nothing less. However, while writing this description I was not describing a sport—I was describing a dance major.

As a dance major at the University of California Irvine (UCI), I have rehearsed late at night, withstood physical exhaustion through re-shaping the natural anatomy of the body, and mental tiredness from striving for perfection. Dance majors are hard workers, diligent, committed, focused and passionate: all the same qualities that a collegiate athlete also has. However, as dance majors, we are not given the same respect or care. What people do not see, including institutions such as UCI, is the strength and pain that goes in to a single practice or as we like to call it, a rehearsal, let alone a performance. It is the same strength and pain that goes into a single basketball practice or game. In a performance, dancers must show effortless athleticism without a single grimace and authentic vulnerability without sacrificing technique. We must be artistic athletes, which leads me my main point: Dance majors are student-athletes and should be treated as such in a university setting.

There is no doubt that student-athletes and dance majors are treated differently. Student-athletes are spoiled at the collegiate level, given priority registration, excused finals, and multiple scholarships, whereas dance majors are offered none of these privileges. In an interview with UCI men's basketball player, Jaron Martin, we discussed the different types of treatments that he received throughout his four-year college career: priority registration, scholarships, free athletic and college apparel, private academic centers, trainers, and special equipment for physical therapy. Martin described how if a basketball game fell on a day of a midterm or final, he would either be excused from the exam or he was able to take the exam on the road with him and take the test under the supervision of his assistant coach. When asked how strict his coach was about abiding by university policy of academic honesty, Martin stated: "Coach did not care, he just said take the test."

Dance majors, on the other hand, under the same amount of physical stress and required to complete a certain number of performances in order to graduate, are not offered take-home finals or midterms, priority registration, or free college apparel to advocate for one of the nation's most prestigious dance departments. I have had performances the week prior to finals week where I was required to attend tech rehearsal from 5 to 11 p.m. each night, thus making it hard to study for my upcoming exams.

One note to mention is the amount of money that is granted to each department. Martin described how the process works for men's basketball in regards to scholarships. For a team that

only accepts 16 players, 13 of them are on scholarships. Considering that every sports team has approximately 16 plus athletes, the number of scholarships given to the athletic department may seem outrageous compared to the amount of scholarships in the dance department. In the senior class of the dance department, there were only 3 scholarships given among about 40 dancers. It seemed unfair considering dance majors are expected to do just as much as athletes.

Sports have an unchangeable structure and regimen. There is a coach, or set of coaches, multiple players, an objective and ultimately a winner. These players have practices, eating regimens and specific attire for their particular sport (cleats, basketball shoes, jerseys). Basketball, for example, has five different positions: point guard, two shooting guards, a center, and a power forward, each with its own purpose. Has anyone ever compared the similarities of structure to the organization of dance? We have instructors and ballet masters instead of coaches and call our practices “rehearsals.” We also follow healthy eating regimens for our bodily upkeep, and we have special attire: pointe shoes, leotard and tights, socks (what would we do without those?) and tap shoes. In a ballet company, there are also official “positions”: the principals, soloists, and corps de ballet.

Those who say that dancers are not athletic have either never seen a dance show or have never known a dancer. We training our bodies to defy their natural anatomical structure by turning out legs that are meant to be parallel. Opposition is preached: lifting up yet pushing into the ground, along with engagement of the abdominals and strong carriage of the arms. These technical qualities touch just the surface of technique; there are also jumps, pirouettes that many refer to as “twirling,” and high extensions of the leg that only the naive seem to view as just simply flexibility.

Then, don’t forget there’s a performance aspect of dance, what every dancer strives for. There are no time-outs, commercial breaks, substitutions, moments of rest or a half-time. There is dancing for two straight hours (if we are talking about company work), no water breaks, no “take me out because I am having a bad pirouette day or jump day.” There is a 15-minute intermission, just enough time to get a sip of water, change costumes, and warm up again rather quickly so that your muscles don’t get cold. John Brenkus, host of ESPN’s *Sports Science* once studied India Bolds, a dancer on the Broadway show *The Lion King*. He found that Bolds “walks 2.68 miles during every performance, which is a longer distance than Golden State Warrior Stephen Curry travels on the basketball court during every game (2.44 miles)”.

Dance is a sport because, according to the definition, it is a “physical activity involving physical exertion and skill.” Dancers are athletes because they endure some of the same processes as athletes who play sports do, such as long practices, physical exhaustion, and mental fatigue. In my opinion, dancers are artistic athletes and deserve to have just as much recognition in media and in advertisement.

#### Works Cited

- DisneyOnBroadway. "ESPN Sport Science Meets THE LION KING: Stamina." *YouTube*. YouTube, 01 Nov. 2016. Web. 11 May 2017.
- "Is Dance a Sport." Personal interview. 10 May 2017.