Ballet Basics
An Educational Booklet for Teachers and Students

Prepared by

DANCE CHANCE
PACIFIC NORTHWEST BALLET SCHOOL
BALLET BASICS

BALLET HISTORY

Ballet began in Italy and France 400 years ago. The “Sun King”, King Louis XIV of France, began the first school of dance. This is why the official language of ballet is French.

WHO DOES BALLET?

In the beginning, ballet was only performed by royalty in the courts of kings and queens. Now, people of all ages and backgrounds learn ballet. Boys and girls around the world take ballet classes and dream of becoming famous dancers.

It takes ten years or more to become a professional dancer. Most dancers start training when they are seven or eight years old. Dancers typically start auditioning for jobs in ballet companies when they graduate from high school or college.
BALLET AND SPORTS

There are many similarities between ballet and sports. Both dance and sports require strength, speed, balance, flexibility, and endurance.

Male dancers have to be strong to lift women above their head and do big jumps and turns.

Women must have strong ankles and feet to wear pointe shoes. Often, dancers use exercise machines and lift weights to build their strength and endurance.
In ballet, one of the most common movements is called a plié [plee-AY]. Plié means “to bend”.

Many athletes also use plié.

Speed skaters plié to increase the push of their legs and skate faster.

Basketball players must do a plié before making a jump shot and while on defense.
Another common step that dancers do is called grand jeté [grahn zhuh-TAY], which means “big throw”.

Track and field athletes do a similar type of jump. Hurdlers jeté to leap over the hurdle on their course.
In ballet, **grand battement** [grahn bat-MAHN] means “large beating” of the leg. It is a big kick with a straight leg and pointed foot. Grand battement is very similar to the kick a football player does to punt the ball for a field goal. Many professional football players take ballet to help increase their flexibility and coordination.

Do you think that you could do a grand battement like these dancers are doing?

Lesley Rausch in George Balanchine’s *Agon* ©The George Balanchine Trust

Seattle Seahawks punter Jon Ryan

Jerome Tisserand, Lindsi Dec, and Andrew Bartee in Ronald Hynd’s *The Sleeping Beauty*
Ballet IS AN ART

Ballet and sports have many similarities. However, unlike sports, ballet is an art form. Dancers are able to tell a story, play a character, and communicate emotions with their dancing. Can you tell what the dancers are trying to communicate in the pictures below? Do their costumes give you any clues?

Carla Körbes and Ezra Thomson in George Balanchine’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* ©The George Balanchine Trust

PNB Company dancer with PNB School student in *George Balanchine’s The Nutcracker®,* choreography by George Balanchine © The Balanchine Trust
A TYPICAL BALLET CLASS

All dancers, including professionals, attend classes to strengthen, stretch, and practice technique. Each class follows the same format. Class begins with the dancers holding onto a ballet barre, which gives them extra balance. The instructor will demonstrate and explain each exercise or combination, and the dancers will repeat it, accompanied by music.

Barre exercises start slowly with the dancer standing on both legs. As barre progresses and the dancers’ bodies get warmer, the movements become faster and more difficult, often including balances on one leg.

After barre, class then moves to the center of the room where students practice turns and jumps.

First-year students will generally spend one hour in class, two times per week. As a dance student improves and develops a stronger body, the number of classes required per week will increase.
BALLET BASICS QUIZ

Answer the following questions True or False.

1) ___ Professional dancers only train for 5 years.
2) ___ Ballet is an art form, not just a sport.
3) ___ Plié means “to jump”.
4) ___ Speed skaters do plié when they skate.
5) ___ Grand jeté means “big throw”.
6) ___ The official language of ballet is Russian.
7) ___ Hurdle jumpers do grand jeté.
8) ___ The “Sun King” of France began the first school of dance.
9) ___ Grand Battement means “to bend”.
10) ___ Men have to lift weights to be strong enough to lift other dancers.

We hope you had fun learning about ballet!

(Answers on last page of packet)
RECOMMENDED Books, CD’s and DVD’s about DANCE

Books


**CDs & Music**


• *Tchaikovsky Complete Tone Poems including Romeo & Juliet*

**DVDs & Videos**


• *Sleeping Beauty: Royal Ballet*

**Online Resources**

• DanceChance information and videos
  

• Teacher Resources from PNB’s Community Education Programs
  
  [http://www.pnb.org/Community/Teacher/](http://www.pnb.org/Community/Teacher/)

**ANSWER KEY to Ballet Basics Quiz:**

1)F 2)T 3)F 4)T 5)T 6)F 7)T 8)T 9)F 10)T