

Youth Outreach Understanding Dance

A joint initiative between Canada's National Ballet School
+ The National Ballet of Canada

Dance Isn't Just Cool, It's Awesome!

Dancers are not unlike hockey players, soccer players and other athletes in many ways. For example, they train on a daily basis with daily technique classes followed by rehearsals. Just like any athlete, they put in a full day of high-energy activity.

Like team athletes, dancers also belong to or work for a specific organization. In the world of sports we call them teams. In the dance world we call them companies. Because dance is an international art form, there are ballet companies around the world and it is not uncommon for dancers to join more than one company during their careers. However, in the dance world, unlike the sports world, a company member (dancer) may do guest performances with other companies. This allows them to perform under different directors, learn new roles or share roles that they are known for.

Depending on the sport, players are often trained for a specific role such as “guard” or “running back”. In a dance company we have the corps de ballet which is comprised of the largest group of dancers. Others will be second soloists, first soloists, principal dancers and character dancers.

We also have apprentices who are the “farm team of dance”. They are generally recent graduates of a professional dance training program who are in the process of adapting to a professional schedule. They dance the same ballets that a professional company does but they don't generally perform as often nor do they dance the lead roles.

The word “repertoire” refers to a collection of dance works a company presents. We call them ballets, dance works or choreographic works. A repertoire is not unlike a collection of paintings, sculptures or other works of art that are kept in a special place and displayed for the public to see. In this respect, a dance company is very much like an art gallery or museum because it maintains a collection of dance works (some old, some new and in a variety of styles) it can present over a period of time. It can also add new works to the repertoire.

In sports you play a game once and it is over. There is a winner and a loser. In the dance world we have what is called a season which is a relatively short period of time during which we repeat the same work or works nightly. While the corps usually remains the same, the key roles may be danced by different dancers. This provides the audience with an opportunity to see how different dancers interpret the same role. Furthermore, it allows the dancer to enjoy dancing the role more often. It is like playing a game that has the same rules and even the same score but arrives at that score differently every time. Every move is choreographed so the dancer knows what comes next. His or her creativity is in the execution of the movement coupled with the emotional quality used to tell a story or create a mood. Nonetheless, the ballet is a little bit different every day and their bodies respond differently to the challenge of performing depending on how the dancer feels.

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Like any professional athlete, a dancer works in seasons, however there are several differences. Dancers in a company generally have three or four seasons in a year. A season for a dancer means several weeks of performances in a theatre, performing eight shows a week. In between seasons (and often during seasons) dancers are generally rehearsing and preparing for the next one rather than relaxing. Because these seasons are spaced throughout the year, vacation periods are generally short. However, if they do have more than two weeks off, they need to take daily classes (training) just to keep in shape because the longer they are away from training, the harder it is to regain their previous performance level.

There are no playoffs in dance but most ballet companies put on a version of *The Nutcracker* around Christmas time. This is usually the busiest time for the dancers because there are more performances than usual and the season is longer.

Dance is also a spectator sport. We have an audience which sits in a specially designed building called a theatre. Athletes have locker rooms and dancers have dressing rooms. Sports have courts and fields upon which they are played; dance has a stage on which to perform. As in any sport, dance enthusiasts have their favourite players whom they look to for excellent and exciting performances. We call our fans "balletomanes" and like sports fans, they know all the players, where they were born, where they studied, which roles they have danced, companies they worked for, and so on. And we, too, spend hours discussing their performances. We have pre- and post-performance chats and often read the performance reviews in magazines and newspapers.

So, you see, dance and sports have a lot in common. They are both enjoyable and exciting. They both are cool! What makes dance awesome is that the dancers perform to incredible music, wear interesting costumes and tell fascinating stories. A performance is a place where anything is possible and your imagination can make it happen.

Another difference between dancers and athletes in the performance of their professions is that dancers are required to make their efforts look flawless and easy. The goal of a basketball player is to sink the ball. It doesn't matter how he or she looks or if they fall on the floor in the process. The basketball player just needs to jump high enough to make the basket. A dancer must sink the ball jumping in an exact position. The feet would have to be pointed and land in fifth position with arms in a particular position. It should look as if it is the easiest thing to do. You see, the dancer must create something beautiful that appears as if by magic. It must appear spontaneous and graceful.

Dance is a language without words. It is about movement. Dance challenges the body's physical limits. You will see movements which make you laugh and others which are tender, perhaps even sad. The movement in partnership with the music creates the mood and tells the story. That is what makes dance awesome!