

Why Ballet Specifically Geared for Skaters is the Best Choice

Written by Annette T. Thomas, with contributions by: Dorian Shields Valles,
Tai Babilonia and Deidre Arianne Kellogg

I have noticed around the web that a number of people have questioned why ballet specifically geared for skaters is even necessary, and that taking a “regular” ballet class should be good enough. I’d like to just share some thoughts and reasons here for you as a skater, coach or parent of a skater to consider:

THE SITUATION:

- The Classical ballet syllabus is comprised of well over 400 exercises, steps and poses not all of which are necessary or even beneficial for skaters.
- Most ballet teachers are not familiar with the needs and demands of skating and often criticize skaters unfairly (inaccurately) as they are not equipped to properly analyze why skaters do what they do or how to “fix” it.

A good ballet instructor can see a “million” things “wrong” with a skater’s alignment and execution of any particular ballet exercise, BUT only a ballet instructor well versed in WHY a skater does what he/she does (in particular the use of edges and movement direction) can discern what is germane to the demands of skating technique and if it is even necessary to “fix” something ...

- Many dance schools work for half the year on recital or competition pieces, which have no bearing whatsoever on actual training techniques. This is a waste of training money.
- Most skating students have very little if any idea how to take what they have learned in a regular ballet class and put it on the ice. The idea that they would take a class just hoping for some positive outcome is also not a good use of time or funds.

*In order to for the mind and body to absorb ballet technique purely by “osmosis” requires that a student take a regulation length (90 minute) class **at least** 3 times per week. I know of no skaters who take more than 2 ballet classes per week and from my understanding most skaters are only taking one ballet class per week, many of which are only one hour long. Besides a short education in “style” absolutely nothing can truly be gained with this approach.*

THE SOLUTION:

- Sports specific training targets what is most useful to the skater's training needs so that definable/measurable results are acquired more quickly....why should classical ballet be any different just because it is an "art form"? With the variety of competing types of off-ice programs available these days, having a sport specific ballet lesson is becoming absolutely essential.
- Having a knowledgeable instructor prepare ballet lessons especially for the figure skater targets what the skater's need to learn both physically as well as intellectually in a shorter amount of training time. (Intensity of purpose and focus). The teacher will have immediate sport specific corrections, analogies and helpful tips on how the skaters can transfer what they are learning in class onto the ice.
- The teacher will not be conflicted as to the purpose of the class (not torn between a correction for a skater as opposed to a correction for a strictly ballet student). Many of the corrections would be the same but the reasons behind the need for them and WHY, can be **entirely** different.
- In taking classical ballet lessons specifically geared for skaters, the skater is more engaged in the lessons because they recognizably have immediate relevance to their needs. The skater doesn't have to guess at what might work or help, doesn't come in with a bad attitude or an incorrect (myopic) notion as to why they are there... to improve "grace", fix posture and arms; for "style"...etc.
- Ballet for Figure Skaters lessons are usually offered at rinks making it much easier to attend and facilitating on site communication between the coach, the ballet instructor, the skater and the parent. *Good communication is a major factor in the success of the ballet program as continual cooperation between members of the training team is imperative to the success of the skater.*
- The skater, coach and parent can have confidence that everything the skater is learning in class is for the sole purpose of becoming a better skater. When the skater knows that the coach and ballet instructor are in frequent contact with each other and "on the same page"...the skater is much more likely to be fully on board with the program.

Having said all this, I feel that it is still better to find a pedagogically trained ballet teacher who knows very little about skating than to hire or take lessons from a

teacher who claims to know much about skating but does not exhibit good ballet pedagogy.

As I truly wanted to get to the root of this issue (and not just promote my personal interests) I have asked some prominent and knowledgeable people in the skating community to weigh in on this subject and they have graciously taken the time to respond.

Here, first, are comments by Dorian Shields Valles, former skater, coach, ballet aficionado (having taken lessons for many years by some of the best in the field) and now a USFS National Singles Technical Specialist. In her early years, Dorian Valles was trained by Mme. Tamara Elganova of the "*Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo*" and founder of the *Orange County Ballet Company*. Dorian later trained under Al & Harriet DeRea for ballet and jump class, and Roland Dupree and Steven Peck for jazz.

Dorian's off-ice teaching was intermittent but quite formidable. She began teaching off-ice ballet to her skating students in the early 1970's and began including some on-ice jazz and choreography classes in the 80's. Later, in the '90's, she also taught off-ice conditioning and music appreciation.

Here are Dorian's comments:

"I received a goal sheet for a couple of students that I work with from their main coaches. I added the goals for working with the ballet teacher at our rink as part of the goals for the year. I feel very strongly that ballet should be a component of any skater's training schedule if possible. Fortunately, I am able to discuss what my thoughts are as far as what the students should focus on for their individual needs and it is definitely helpful. I have seen improvement since the skater started to focus on the particular things I asked her to. These needs may change during the year as the skater's skills improve. Here are the few "bullet points" I posed to the head coach of these girls:

'Also, I'd like to include in "Skater X's" goals for the year what she works on with the ballet instructor:

- Continue work on core strength, posture and carriage with emphasis on "lift" in upper body.
- Continue work on facial expression, head positions and emotional expression to the audience.
- Continue work on explosive "push away" movement from the floor for jumps.

- Work at the barre on proper knee over foot alignment on pliés, which will help to establish stable landing positions (in “Skater X’s” case-no pronation).’

One of the students I work with comes from a family that has limited resources and they do their best to stretch their finances to allow their skater to take ballet once a week as I've emphasized how important I feel it is for her to help "feel" her body and the music better. The goals I listed are individualized goals for the ballet instructor to work on but they can also be applied to so many skaters as well.

I feel it is extremely important to have a ballet instructor in-house for skaters or if not, (as this is not always possible as a lot of rinks don't have a ballet studio available) then there must be a very good communication system in place on a regular basis. Having distinct, set goals while working with the skaters and their ballet teachers will not only help the skater but the coach as well.

As time is always a factor for most coaches to try and make use of every minute during a skater's lesson, having a skater who has been trained in classical ballet makes the coach's job much easier since the skater will know instinctively how to place their arms, how to hold themselves "up and lifted" for great posture and how to stay down in their knees while stroking.

The benefits of classical ballet training give the athlete a sense of carriage, musicality and body awareness that can all be translated to the ice and it is always very evident to a coach whose skater has had that training.

When a coach has a good working relationship with a ballet instructor who is willing to help the skater reach their goals it becomes so easy to communicate the skater's needs as they seem to always be changing as the skater progresses through each season.”

Here is what former pairs skater Tai Babilonia (who along with her partner Randy Gardner was the 1979 World Champion and the 1976-1980 U.S. national champion) has to say on the subject of ballet:

“We were lucky enough to have some of the best ballet instructors in Los Angeles. Our last ballet teacher, Terry Rudolph, was hired by our coach Mr. Nicks to work with all of his skaters in the ballet room giving a proper basic ballet class 3 times per week. Then she would (no skates) work on our programs on the ice from the starting position to the ending bow and skating off the ice, and would pick it apart. We didn't know any other way; this was all part of our training day.

It's the little things that count and I believe less is more, but that's just me. Look at John Curry, this is what skating should look like, isn't it called FREE style? John looked like a dancer who just happened to know how to skate.

Young skaters need to embrace their past skating legends. The innocence, care & love for the craft have been lost somewhere. I am so grateful and appreciate that I was part of skating when it was really all about the love of skating. Ballet is such a major and important ingredient to the Tai & Randy look; it set us apart from the Eastern Block skaters and also helped us through our whole professional skating career. Still to this day, I don't jump anymore but you can bet every time I lift my foot, that toe is pointed!"

And here is Deidre Arianne Kellogg who has been a choreographer and teacher of ballet specifically tailored to the needs of elite level figure skaters for over 25 years and Founder and Director of The Skaters' Consortium

"As a ballet teacher who teaches classes specifically geared towards figure skaters and ice dancers, I agree that there are many reasons to go with a specialized teacher, all covered by Annette.

To reiterate, a skater-focused ballet teacher can plan a class working on skater-specific issues, and can be especially helpful in explaining to the skaters how to assimilate the techniques and movement from the studio floor to the ice.

I created some exercises that could only be called "Skallet Technique" (pronounced "skallay" - too bad that name is taken!), exercises that mimic the skating experience and technique while adding in the ballet technique. As an example, I teach a spiral/penché exercise where the planted foot stays in parallel, as it would on the ice, and the free side opens into turnout. Skating-specific ballet training can offer many things like that, and, as Annette so rightly stated, there are so many exercises in ballet that are just irrelevant to skaters.

Also, when it comes to corrections, they will be more accurate and useful to the skater coming from a teacher with solid skating knowledge. That said, Annette's point about proper ballet pedagogy stands.

From my experience, skaters prefer to spend their precious time on the ice, thus they should optimize their time in the studio with a teacher and a syllabus that will be geared specifically to their needs. It only makes sense.

Thank you, Annette, for addressing this important topic. You would think this to be a no-brainer!"

COMMENTS FROM A FEW OF MY (ANNETTE'S) STUDENTS:

"The barre exercises have done so much to strengthen my legs and back, and the port de bras has really increased my body awareness. Mrs. Thomas explains what each exercise does for us as skaters and it helps me to visualize practicing the movements on the ice" -16 year old ice dancer

"I think that skating focused ballet is better than regular ballet because Mrs. Annette tells us how it helps and where it helps"
- 9 year old skater

"Sometimes Mrs. Thomas gives us an assignment and asks us to put a combination we learned in class to skating elements (especially the port de bras) and bring it in to show the class. It helps me to think more about what I've learned in ballet" -14 year old skater

IN CONCLUSION:

The fact is that skaters no longer have the money or leisure time to take 3 ballet classes a week plus keep up with their other off-ice training demands. So, given that time is of the essence and sport specific training is absolutely imperative, choosing a ballet program that is specifically adapted to the immediate artistic and technical needs of the figure skater is the logical choice.

Below are listed a few of my research and development materials which I have created over the past 20 years of study and experience to facilitate learning in this little understood area:

[Fundamentals of Alignment and Classical Movement for Figure Skaters](#)

[Lessons in Classical Ballet for the Figure Skater](#)

And

[Lessons in Ballet for Figure Skaters Level 1 Video](#)

All materials can be found on my educational website:

<http://www.balletforfigureskaters.com/>

Best Regards Always,

Annette T. Thomas

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http://www.danceteachonline.com/Annette_Thomas.htm

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