

Dance Fundamentals

– Basic to Advanced Skills

by Kelli Woodruff

I am a strong advocate that dance technique begins in the center during warm-up, not through progressions across the floor. If a dancer does not know the basics of how the foot should leave the floor or how the body should align, a pirouette, kick, leap or other movements will not be executed with proper dance technique and more advanced movements will not be achieved. I also feel it is imperative that dance directors should incorporate dance technique into as many rehearsals as possible. Scheduling time each day for dance technique is essential for dancers to develop strength and skill to perform advanced movements. If a detailed schedule is used during each practice you can find time to incorporate dance technique into practice. Utilize time during spring training and summer practice to teach basic technique combinations that you expect your dancers to execute. Keep the combinations simple, focusing on dance technique instead of choreography.

I have developed a center barre warm-up that has helped my team increase their dance technique and allowed them to be able to learn more difficult dance movements and execute them with efficiency. I start in the center because I want my dancers to focus on alignment of their body and have their muscles remember how to align properly before executing more difficult skills.

During summer practice I teach the center barre warm-up and do it almost every day for 2-weeks of summer practice. It is a set center barre so that once the dancers know it, they do not have to think about memorizing combinations -only focusing on their body alignment. Once school starts it is often difficult to incorporate a long technical warm-up into practice, but I schedule it in at least once a week. I also have my officers incorporate sections of it on their warm-up days. Besides describing center barre, I have broken down several basic dance skills for you, such as pirouettes and jetés. Again, I go back to the basics during summer training to make sure everyone knows the mechanics of each movement instead of jumping right into the movement. Also, once the combinations are taught for center barre, the officers can lead the movements and demonstrate, leaving the teacher free to walk among the dancers to correct alignment.

Dance technique can be taught many ways, but this is what works for me and I have seen very positive results. I am constantly revising my warm-up and learning new ways to train my dancers and strengthen their dance technique. Some of the combinations change, but the structure of the warm-up stays pretty much the same. (Pre-warm up to wake up the body and get the blood pumping, isolations, standing stretches, center barre, and floor stretches.) You will find that dancers get a much deeper more efficient stretch after doing the center barre because their bodies are VERY warm! Then I move the students across the floor for progressions. I alternate turn days with kick/leap days. I do continue to throw more advanced skills at the team even if I know they will not be executed properly because students NEED to have a challenge.

Working on dance technique might seem impossible each day with the need to clean choreography, but if you schedule it in to each practice you CAN make it happen, and you WILL see an enormous improvement in your dancers. The benefits ARE worth it!

PRE-BARRE WARM-UP: *Initial Warm-up to increase heart rate and wake up the body*

HEAD CIRCLES & ROLL DOWN

- 8 Head circles R 2 X (2nd time add the upper body)
 - 8 Roll down 1-2, Plié 3-4, Stretch 5-6, Roll-up 7-8
- REPEAT LRL

SIDE STRETCH – keep it moving

- 8 Lateral stretch 1-2, Flat back 3-4, Combré back 5-6, Flat 7-8
 - 8 Bend L leg 1-2, Straighten 3-4 Drop Swing all the way down to the floor and up center 5-8
- REPEAT LRL

PULSES IN SECOND – inner thigh strength & shape of foot in forced arch, prevent sickling

- 8 Plié 2nd with arms 1st 1-2, plié 2nd arms to 2nd 3-4, plié pulse 2nd 5-8
- REPEAT MANY TIMES
- 8 Stay low and pulse progressively getting lower
 - 8 Hold plié 2nd – lift R heel off 1 and down 2 continue LRL (MAKE SURE STUDENTS DO NOT SICKLE FOOT AS THE HEEL LIFTS)
 - 8 In plié 2nd – lift both heels off and replace every 2 counts
 - 8 Hold heels off Straighten knees to demi pointe



ISOLATIONS: *Learn to move one body part independently of others*
Head, Shoulders, Ribs, Hips

CENTER STRETCH: *Runner's Lunge Combination (hold the stretch for longer if desired)*

- 8 Runner's Stretch - R leg back, R elbow down L arm reach to ceiling
- 8 Switch for L hand on floor & R arm reach to ceiling
- 8 Center & Stretch back sending back heel to the floor and knees straight
- 8 Flex front 4cts, Back heel 4cts
- 8 Flex front turn out and lunge with elbows down
- 8 Return center and push back to yoga Down Dog - Feet together
- 8 Tread RLRL
- 8 Ponché R & pulse the leg up
- REPEAT TO THE OTHER SIDE
- 8 Walk feet together parallel stretch
- 8 Bend R - 4 cts, L - 4cts,
- 8 Bend in 2 cts RL, then alternate RLRL
- 8 Tuck - stretch over the feet for the arches
- 8 Stretch and roll-up

(Sometimes I add in abdominal exercises at this point in the warm-up in order for the dancers to feel where their center is located and are able to hold it correctly while performing center barre)

CENTER BARRE

BREAK STEP

(Use as a breather step, to stretch the back, and work on turn-out)

- 8 In turned out 1st, Circle arms back and arch 1-2, Stretch over legs nose to knees 3-4, hold 5-8
- 8 Plié 1-2, Stretch 3-4 Roll up 5-8

FOOT ARTICULATIONS - Parallel & turned out 1st

(Strengthen the foot and learn how the foot should leave and return to the floor)

- 8 R foot - Ball 1, point and take the toes off the floor 2, ball 3, heel down 4, Repeat L 5-8
 - 8 REPEAT R&L
 - 8 Push the foot off the floor to a point 4 X R & 4 X L
 - 8 REPEAT R & L
- TURN OUT AND REPEAT ALL IN 1ST

PLIÉS - 1st, 2nd, 5th R & 5th L

(Works turn-out, alignment of leg in turn-out, strengthen legs to maintain stability in demi pointe)

- 8 2 demi pliés 1-4, grand plié 5-8
- 8 Elevé with arms to 5th 1-4, Lower heels and change positions 5-8

ELEVÉ - 1st position

(Strengthen the legs to maintain balance for turns, alignment of torso, begin balance transfer to 1 leg)

- 8 Curl toes 1, Flatten 2, elevé up 3, lower 4, REPEAT
- REPEAT 2X
- 8 Balance in 1st
- 8 Elevé up and down 8 Xs
- 8 Balance on demi point
- 8 Transfer weight to R & take L foot back to coupé
- REPEAT TO L

TENDUS - 1st position

(Works to knee straight as the leg leaves the floor, point the foot, not put weight on extended toe, balance on one leg)

- 8 Tendu, plié en croix R
- 8 REPEAT L
- 8 Tendu, flex, tendu, close en croix R
- 8 Continue R
- 8 REPEAT L
- 8 Continue L



DEGAGÉS 1st position

(Work to keep knee straight as the leg leaves the floor, use the brush of the foot along the floor, shape of the foot, & balance on one leg)

- 8 4 each position en croix R
- 8 Continue R
- 8 REPEAT L
- 8 Continue L

Break Step

RONDE DE JAMBE – Legs in 1st, Hand on supporting hip and other arm in 2nd

(Stabilization of pelvis, rotation of leg in hip socket (prepare for fouettes), elongation of leg, shape of the foot, & balance)

- 8 2 slow rond de jambs on the R 1-4 & 5-8
- 8 1-4 R off the floor rond de jambe, 5 brush leg front to 90 degrees, 6 retiré, 7 lower 1st, 8 change hands
- 8 REPEAT ON L en dehors
- 8 Continue L
- 8 REPEAT R en dedans
- 8 Continue R
- 8 REPEAT L en dedans
- 8 Continue L

PASSÉ WORK – parallel and turned out 1st

(alignment of body for pirouette parallel and turned out)

- 8 Coupé R parallel 1-2, bring to passé 3-4, pulse the knee up to the shoulder 4X 5-8
- 8 Passé with arms 1st 1-2, Elevé and hold 3-7, lower 8
- REPEAT LRL parallel, REPEAT RLRL turned out

Break Step

FONDU, ATTITUDE, DEVELOPPÉ- from turned out 1st

(Strength in supporting leg, alignment of torso, strength in center, extension of legs, shape of foot)

- 8 Fondu en croix with R leg
- 8 Passé 1, attitude 2 en croix
- 8 Passé 1, flex foot developpé 2, élevé and point 3, lower to 1st 4 CONTINUE EN CROIX
- 8 CONTINUE
- REPEAT ALL ON LEFT

FLOOR STRETCHES: Any of the usual floor stretches but it is also a good time to partner stretch because the dancers are VERY warm. Pretzel, Second, Parallel, Butterfly, etc....

❖ **PIROUETTES** – Break down each element of a pirouette before performing the turn and definitely go back to the basics when more advanced turns are looking sloppy.

- **Balance in passé** – effective to use partners, 1 person balances in passé with the arms in 1st while the other holds under the fore arm and corrects alignment of the person balancing
- **Spotting Exercise** – Beginning dancers often do not understand the concept of turning the head and focusing on a spot.
 - ◆ Have the dancers stand in first parallel focusing on a spot on the wall.
 - ◆ Combo: 1-4 Take 4 small steps to the R positioning the feet to the back while holding the focus, 5 whip the head around “spot”, 6-8 catch the feet up to the head before repeating.
- **Beginning the rotation of the turn** – (balance, —, —, whole)
 - ◆ Combo: 1&2 Kick ball change into pirouette prep, 3-4 Balance hold in passé, REPEAT 4 X
 - ◆ Add four 1/4 -turn to the balance 4Xs
 - ◆ Add 1/2 turn to the balance 4Xs
 - ◆ Add full pirouette single with balance 4Xs
- **Pirouettes across the floor**-- cross ball change 2X, prep, pirouette (oldie but goodie)
- **Add to the simple combo more advanced elements**
 - ◆ Change the pirouette to a coupé turn, pencil turn, leg grab turn, etc...
 - ◆ Perform only 1 cross ball change to the prep, perform a pirouette then plié releve into another type of turn: attitude 2nd, turned out passé with different arms, 2nd turn, fouetté, etc....
- **Group work for pirouettes:** Group work is wonderful to be able to concentrate on balance, strengthening, and turning all at the same time with no one waiting for their turn. Very efficient use of time!



- ♦ 1 group is performing elevés at the barre to strengthen the supporting leg (could be in any position - also can focus on fouette preps)
- ♦ 1 group is practicing balancing with a partner (any position)
- ♦ 1 group is in the center working on a turn combination

❖ **JETÉS** - Break each element down into the following: strength of bottom foot to push off the floor, Front leg straight, back leg straight, height of jump

- **Chassé** - I like to start with simple chassés for beginners in order to work on toe-ball-heel action as well as momentum and height
- **Chassé Battement Sauté Combo**: Works the bottom foot to push off the floor, front leg extension, and coordination of arms to keep shoulders down
8 1 & Chassé R, 2 Brush the L leg (it was in back at the end of the chasse) through 1st to 90 degrees and sauté so the bottom foot is pointed. (Arms 2nd 1 &, circle down and up to 5th 2).
Continue repeating as it alternates legs
- **Piqué Arabesque Combo**: Extension of back leg, maintaining stability and alignment in torso, rolling through the foot to plié at end of a jeté
8 4 Walks RLRL 1-4, Piqué arabesque and roll through the foot into plié 5-8
REPEAT as it alternates legs
- **Combine the elements together into a jeté combo**:
COMBO IDEAS:
 - ♦ Chassé, step, jeté - alternating legs
 - ♦ Only do 1 Chassé step jeté then continue to step jeté repetitively across the floor on the same leg - this helps with stamina for multiple leap sequences and getting the hips up
 - ♦ Step, hop in passé, 2 Runs, Jeté 2X or more

❖ **ADVANCED SKILLS**

- **Fouettes** - have students repeat many times at the barre or holding on to a partner the following prep:
8 (Begin on relevé with R leg in passé) Plié and extend R leg to 90 to front - 1, stay in plié and open R leg 2nd - &, bring the R leg into passé turned out 2
CONTINUE TO REPEAT (Same prep can work on 2nds just leave the leg out instead of bringing into passé)

* Let students just go for the fouette in the center of the room doing as many as possible for a particular amount of music. I have found that the repetitiveness helps them to continue trying to correct the alignment issues that I am mentioning.

- **AXLE**
 - ♦ 2 Steps pick up to passé and lower
 - ♦ Chainé passé step prep (Kick bottom leg up the next time)
 - ♦ Chassé, plié rond de jambe to passé
- **CHAINÉ, PIQUÉ, SOUTENU, LAME DUCK**
 - ♦ Teach each of the above traveling turns individually without having the students perform the rotations. Then perform each turn individually with the rotations going across the floor. Third, work toward adding all four of the turns together. Practice without the revolutions in order to work on placement and alignment then add the revolutions.
- **LEG GRAB & LEG TURNS** (traveling across the floor)
8 Step L 1, Kick R front 2, step R 3, kick L front 4, step L and turn to the front 5, kick R to second facing front 6, step R 7, half turn and dig the L foot 8
8 Walk LR 1-2, Lunge on the L leg to prep for a R leg grab or leg turn 3-4, Brush R leg up for leg grab & hold 5-7, step 8
REPEAT 2X with just a leg grab / REPEAT 2 times with a leg turn
- **RUSSIAN** - tombé pas de bourre Russian, step back and turn out of it
- **REVERSE JETÉ** - 2 runs & reverse

