



DANCE

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# STRENGTH AND CONDITIONING

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## DEVELOPING ARM STRENGTH IN YOUNG DANCERS

Working on strength of arm movement is forever a work-in-progress for many dance team coaches. When you consider that the qualifying standards for 16-year-old females to win the Presidential Fitness Award list a mere 24 push-ups and one pull-up, having a team of anomalistic-strong young women may seem impossible, but don't give up hope! Here are some things to look for when working with your dancers on strong, clean arm movement.

### Arm movement originates from the back.

Each dancer should concentrate on using their latissimus dorsi (the triangular muscles from the shoulder to the spine) as a foundation for arm extension. What does that mean, they ask you? Consider the snowman. When you make his arms, you never just tack the sticks right on the outside of his body. One strong wind will blow the arms right off! Experienced snowman-makers poke the branches deep into the snowball to create a sturdy base, no matter what the weather brings!

### Alignment, Alignment, Alignment...

Watch for those dancers that pull their shoulders up and hunch their backs in an effort to hit motions sharp. This tendency generally indicates that the dancer is not maximizing the benefits of proper alignment, so their arms are getting tired, and they're using other muscles to help them out. Not only does the hunched shoulder mar the clean visual appearance pressed shoulders and stretched necks provide, this dancer may suffer from chronic sore trapezius (muscles connecting neck to shoulder) and even the occasional pinched nerve. Keeping the back straight and hips tucked will allow the dancer to change direction quickly and isolate the arms with ease because their center of gravity is very concentrated.

### Fist Strength = Lower Arm Strength.

Tennis players learn early on to carry and squeeze a tennis ball to improve their serve, and a dancer can learn from this example when working on powerful arms! Consider making your dancers home-made hand exercisers with round balloons and birdseed. You can layer the balloons for added resistance.

Much of a dancer's forearm power is jeopardized by the weakly clenched fist or the limp dance hand. When you're checking your pom squad for proper fist grip, make sure that the thumb is placed firmly over the middle phalange of the ring finger. When using many other hand positions, dancers should maintain the appropriate tension. Some common imagery used may include

bolts of energy coming from the fingertips, someone pulling the fingers, or pressing through a wall of gelatin.

### Good, Old Fashioned Exercise!

Incorporate push-ups and pull-ups into your warm-up routine. Invite each dancer to bring two cans of soup from home and add bicep and tricep curls as well as side raises to improve the deltoid strength. Make strength conditioning part of your daily fitness regimen!

## INCREASING YOUR TEAM'S FLEXIBILITY

Before you can hit that hyper-extended toe touch and before you can catch air in your jump split, you must spend some "quality time" stretching to achieve your maximum flexibility levels. It's best to stretch for thirty to forty minutes before you execute dances full out. Do this in an organized, consistent fashion. Your dancers must first learn the proper stretching techniques and their partners so they are not wasting their time or provoking injuries by stretching the wrong way.

The best way to explain how to stretch your legs before attempting to execute your splits, leaps, and tricks is to discuss a few specific stretches. These stretches can be performed with or without a partner. Good luck!

*Note: As with any stretching, a proper warm-up of the muscles is required before stretching in order to prevent injury.*

### I. Sitting Stretch\*

Spotter stands with feet in a turned out position, supporting the back. Spotter stands straight up, helping stretcher keep her working leg straight while flexing and pointing her foot.



*Stretcher* needs to sit with back straight, keeping resting leg's knee towards ceiling. *Stretcher* should be looking up at foot or straight forward. Relax shoulders and pull leg towards your face, not your shoulders or to the side.

*Do at least two reps on each leg.*

## II. Standing Stretch\*

*Spotter* stands to side with feet in a small second position stance. Hand should be in the small of *stretcher's* back. *Spotter* should help stretch leg up. The *spotter* in this stretch is very important!



*Stretcher* needs to stand up straight and first bring her leg into the hook position. From there, she should stretch the leg up from the knee as high as they can towards her face, keeping supporting leg straight. Don't be discouraged if it takes a while to stretch leg high. The key is to keep legs straight, stretch and hold it for at least twenty seconds, and perform this stretch often.

*Do at least two reps on each leg.*

*\*Sitting and standing stretches can be performed without a partner. Stretcher needs to use some type of support to keep back straight.*

## III. Split Stretch\*

Most of you probably already have favorite stretches that you do to work out your splits. These are just a few of our personal favorites.

**Laying Stretch** – Lay straight down on split with both legs straight and both shoulders down. Keep toes pointed! Hold, and then move upper body only to inside of split. Don't rotate hips out! Perform this exercise on both legs.



**Inverted Stretch** – Execute split, then bend front leg ninety degrees. Gently lay down with shoulders square. Point back foot and keep back leg straight. This position, if held, should stretch out your hip and enable you to sit in your split longer.



**Back Stretch** – Execute split, then slowly arch backwards. Arms can relax on floor either in front or behind hips. Stretching out your back while in split helps to keep shoulders and posture correct while in a split, jump split, or toe touch.



*\*Any of the split stretches can be performed with a partner when lying over onto split. Partner gently pushes down on sides of back behind rib cage.*

Anyone can pull muscles if they rush, no matter how experienced or inexperienced they are. Building flexibility and perfecting technique takes time, patience, and consistency. If a dancer rushes and is injured, she could be out for three days to three months. Stretch at home, build stamina through aerobics or other dance classes, and use free weights to build muscles. Preparing to dance and practicing dance should not end when you leave the dance room!