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INTRODUCTION

Although the writing of this book has taken far longer than I expected, it has been a rewarding experience. The project originally began back in 1999 with my Web site "Balletforfigureskaters.com" which, at the time, was quite unique. Through it I met many interesting and knowledgeable people many of whom later encouraged me to write this book. Between my father dying, our family moving, our children growing up, and a few career changes the book is finally finished. In the meantime many others have come along and written on similar subjects, but I am confident that my efforts will still afford something unique. My hope is that in passing along what is in effect my "life's work" to the readers that it will in some way kindle a new spark and a different perspective to their teaching, coaching, skating and movement in general. For me, perfection is met when art, intuition and science come together. Although I am primarily a teacher, not a writer, I have endeavored to put bits and pieces of each in this book.

Moving From "The Inside Out"

Knowing how your body works and moving with "kinesthetic intelligence" is foundational to learning any specific movement style. I often tell my students, "When you learn a particular dance routine you only know that one routine, but when you learn the technique of how to move from the inside out you can do any dance, any style, with real conviction and mastery. It's like the difference between memorizing how to play one song on the piano and knowing how to read music."

A Glimpse at the Holistic Approach: Synthesizing Knowledge and Intuition

It does both the skater and the coach a serious disservice to say that artistry can be added after skating technique is perfected. Both are true methods which should be learned concurrently from the ground up in order to be a part of the skater's "muscle memory." Just as there is a right and wrong way to jump, spin and execute footwork, there is also a right and wrong way to produce a vocabulary of biomechanically sound movements which will consistently serve both expression and technique.

Figure skating is often referred to as both art and sport, but let's compare the teaching and learning approaches used by each. All sports training involves measurable, quantifiable actions and results.

Music is based on mathematics, painting on color theory and perspective, classical ballet on biomechanical accuracy in classical forms. But art and sports diverge considerably when it comes to respecting and applying the intuitive sense to further the scientific process. Sports training often ignores or disdains the intuitive sense whereas fine art training has always understood that cultivating the intuitive sense actually improves scientific comprehension.

Most coaches require their skaters to do off-ice training to round out their skating “package,” but if the skater cannot synthesize all of these potentially disparate forms of training (i.e. ballet, Pilates, weight training and plyometrics) into something immediately useful to their on-ice training the effort, time and money are ill spent.

It is important to understand that how one *thinks* about movement training has everything to do with how effectively one can apply it. Holistic training involves the whole person – mind, body and spirit, so that through complete body awareness, accurate technique and expressive artistry can come to the fore in every skater.

What I mean by Classical Movement

The word “Classical” not only implies an era of historical time. It also means a specific, time proven method for achieving excellence.

I purposely didn’t put the word “ballet” into the title of the book because the word has become synonymous with a style of dancing rather than a scientific, internal training, encompassing the mind, body and spirit which the word “Classical” implies. Often skaters are told that they need to attend ballet lessons to develop poise, body awareness, musicality and an understanding of good body line. This can be a “hit and miss” process because too many dance schools today are gearing their classes more toward year end recitals rather than actual physical training.

Classically trained musicians, singers, actors and dancers often excel in a wide variety of related fields. “Method” actors often make fine public speakers, teachers and television personalities because of their intense training in diction, attention to the details of expression as well as physical and mental control. Classically trained dancers are often the first to be chosen in a Broadway musical audition as they are trained to immediately pick up the nuances of choreography and expression. The fundamental teaching in each of these methods prepares them for complete mastery.

Alignment and Total Body Awareness: The Keys to Long Lasting Success

Today, in both figure skating and dance, the attitude that “anyway

you can manage it, the faster the success the better” is often the approach. Unfortunately it has been proven all too often that the quicker the success the shorter the career as those who push too hard and too fast are more often than not plagued with recurring injuries and degenerative conditions. Proper body mechanics and good alignment are so important that young dance students and skaters who have poor body alignment, which has gone undetected and unrectified, frequently end up later in life with serious injuries and health problems. In most cases these problems cannot be traced back to their root cause.

Our body systems are so completely interconnected that each system profoundly affects the others. Consequently they are either working with us or against us depending on how well balanced our systems are. For instance we can't just talk about stretching or strengthening without addressing body alignment, synergy of muscle groups, proper timing, breathing, nutrition, growth spurts, hormonal flow and neural responses. Even in healthy persons our systems can be “off” just enough so that under the strenuous conditions of engaging in a competitive sport it can tip the balance causing a situation ripe for injury. That is not to say that we all need to be scientists, but even a young child can understand body connections and intrapersonal cooperation in a way that will help them to learn more effectively.

When I was growing up few girls were involved in sports and dance as intensively as I was. By the time I was in high school, I was competing in gymnastics, track and field, teaching my own dance classes as well as taking several classes per week of ballet technique, pointe work, variations and pas de deux class (partnering) at the Hartford Conservatory. I acquired sports and dance related injuries that, at the time, few had even heard of and they were dismissed as “growing pains.” By the time I was 19 years old I had contracted arthritis, scoliosis, “trick knees,” a torn ACL and PCL in my left knee, Osgood Schlatter's Syndrome and multiple hairline fractures in both ankles.

Through physical therapy, Pilates classes, Somatics, personal study and experimentation with my own movement techniques I began to rehabilitate and strengthen myself against future re-injury.

Today many young people are involved in sports and dance on an intense level and to go along with those statistics, there are also a record number of sports-related injuries in children. In teaching ballet to this generation of children, my students would often come to class with injuries incurred during another sport or dance activity. My “journey” in living, teaching and performing with so many injuries inspired me to focus on other's development so that, as

much as possible, progress with no harm would occur in my classes. By using a combination of the techniques I had learned and developed, I began using some of these exercises with my ballet students. Consequently the students injured in other classes would actually leave my classes in better condition than when they came in.

Working with skaters was no different. I saw injuries due to insufficient understanding of proper body mechanics related to growth, over training, and especially the lack of a holistic view of movement training. So when I was asked to help skaters with their arms, carriage and grace, my purpose became to methodically combine correct body mechanics, teach awareness of how to listen to their own bodies and draw out each individual's artistic/creative talents.

*The beauty to which
dance ought to aspire
is not dependent upon
taste or pleasure,
but on the immutable
laws of Nature.*

- August Bournonville

Each of Us Is Unique in Our Teaching and Learning Styles

Dr. Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligence Theory shows that each of us has a unique combination of learning and teaching styles, and that utilizing as many of the eight intelligences as possible can create a deeper level of understanding within the student. It has long been part of my teaching philosophy that training every aspect of a student's capacity to learn ensures the greatest success and satisfaction because *every part of them* is involved in the learning process. Knowing what our individual styles are can also help each of us to become better students as well as teachers.

My approach infuses the fundamentals of classical ballet training with dance kinesiology, massage therapy, mind-body integration and my own years of extensive research and experience as a teacher, artist, athlete and dancer.

Thousands of skaters across the country, who do not necessarily intend to train for the Olympics, nevertheless take all of their training seriously and want to achieve their personal best with the training available to them. Knowing what to look for and how to train in the most cohesive way possible is the goal of every serious skater. I created this workbook to be a progressive study for both mind and body which will touch on the full scope of human movement within the athletic/artistic context.