

Dance Class warm-ups—Denise Lachowski

I start my class the same way every time. I do six basic warm ups that focus on core stability and the use of breathe, spinal articulation and movement, and articulation of the foot. They are:

1. Pilates 100's. An exercise done on the back that concentrates on the core and breathe.
2. Alternating leg extensions done on the back for core stability.
3. Bridges. Also done on the back, this focuses on core stability and begins to move the spine in a sequential manner, articulating all parts of the back.
4. Cat/cow. Done on the knees, the dancer arches the back then moves to a flat back. This moves the spine in a sequential manner, beginning with the lumbar region of the back each time.
5. To warm up the foot, dancers lie on their backs and raise one leg up and make slow circles with their foot in both directions. I then have them go through the motion of pointing and flexing their foot, very slowly, articulating each part of the foot. This will help them understand and perform the tendue movement when they get to the barre.
6. Planks. The students hold the plank position for 15 seconds, progressing to 30 seconds and then a full minute. This is one of the best core exercises.

In all of these warm-ups, the breath is always stressed. If a student holds their breath, they will tighten up and fluid movements will not be possible.

The plié is one of the most important dance steps in any form of dance. When in demi plié in the turnout position, I always have students look over at their knee and ask them if they can see their foot. If they can, they are turned out too much. They should never see their foot, because when done correctly, the hips are always in line with the knee and the knee over the foot. (The same would be true if a dancer is standing in parallel). If too turned out, the dancer risks hip, knee and foot injuries.

Alignment of the body is of utmost importance in preventing dance injuries. The rib cage should be lifted, the abs activated and the pelvis dropped to avoid a sway back. Shoulders should be relaxed and the student should always be breathing. No position or movement should ever be forced. This is stressed throughout all barre and center exercises.

Stretching is always done halfway through class when the body is warm. Stretching when the body is not warmed up can lead to pulled muscles and tendons and other injuries.

And finally, I always stress that students get adequate sleep, eat right and drink plenty of water.