

With great beauty comes great pain: ballet looks good but can hurt a lot

By Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 06.02.17

Lauren Lovette is one of the New York City Ballet's lead ballerinas. And her feet are killing her.

"I feel like I'm always in a battle with my feet," says Lovette, with a sigh.

She has injured them many times. She underwent surgery to correct a bone abnormality. Yet, even with daily ankle exercises, ice baths and ointments, the 25-year-old still hasn't made peace with her feet.

Lovette shares this struggle with many dancers. Their feet take serious abuse. They may run, jump, squat, leap and pivot like any NBA basketball star, but they do it without any foot comfort features like arch support or shock absorption. Most athletes get to wear shoes that are protective of their feet, but not dancers.

Dancers speed around the stage barefoot, in heels or in thin slippers with a thin leather sole. Or, if they're ballerinas, they wear tight-fitting pointe shoes.

Stronger Than Football Players

Pointe shoes may look delicate, but there's a seriousness to their purpose: helping the dancer do what no human is designed to do.

Overall, "dancers are just as strong as football players, if not stronger," says Lisa M. Schoene, a Chicago podiatrist, or foot doctor. She's also an athletic trainer who treats dancers and Olympians. Ballerinas must balance all of their weight on the tiniest tips of their toes, known as dancing "en pointe." "Getting up on pointe is one of the most athletic things you can do," Schoene says. "They're exerting 10 to 12 times their body weight, going up and down on that pointe shoe."

A ballerina has to have an incomparable amount of strength.

Dancing on the toes changed ballet forever starting in 1832, when Italian ballerina Marie Taglioni first wore a type of homemade pointe shoes. She stood up high on the tips of her toes, seeming to briefly walk on thin air. As her trick caught on, dancers began exploring the possibilities of performing their own steps "en pointe." Shoemakers started stiffening ballet slippers from the inside with layers of fabric and glue.

Rituals For Breaking In Pointe Shoes

Pointe shoes are still made that way today. Since the shoe and the foot must work together as one, it's up to each dancer to customize her pointe shoes. Even the most famous ballerinas sew on their own ankle ribbons and elastics, which secure the shoes. Like when baseball players break in new gloves, dancers have rituals to make their shoes rubbery and quiet. Nothing destroys a graceful ballet performance like hard pointe shoes making a loud clop-clop sound.

Unlike ballplayers, ballerinas in the major companies have to sew and break in new shoes almost every day. At a cost of around \$100, a pair of pointe shoes may last a pro for a full day of class and rehearsal. But if she's starring in an important show like "Swan Lake," or dancing in a couple of short ballets on the same evening, she may go through a few shoe changes.

Claire Kretschmar is a member of the New York City Ballet. She has her own ritual for breaking in her

pointe shoes, which she starts by laying her new shoes on the ground and stomping on them. After that, she pours quick-drying glue on the tips for extra hardening. To protect her toes, she wraps them in a brown paper towel, like the kind found in public restrooms. She used to use foam pads, but found that the paper towel allows her more flexibility.

"Pointe shoes are never comfortable," says Kretzschmar, who is 25 years old.

Lovette bangs her shoes against a wall about 20 times to get rid of clunkiness: "If I feel my shoes are loud, I get self-conscious and I dance in a different way."

Dancing Through The Pain

In such a competitive profession, rest doesn't come easily. Ballet dancers often dance through pain, says podiatrist Stephen Pribut. Kretzschmar has had multiple stress fractures. Lovette has amazing foot flexibility, but she was in constant pain in her early years at the New York City Ballet. An X-ray showed she had an extra bone in her left foot, and it took her six years to face surgery.

After that last performance before the operation, "walking out of the theater was scary," Lovette says. "What if I'm forgotten about? That's always a dancer's fear." That was two years ago — after months of recovery, she returned to the stage, her foot problems behind her. That was until she started having trouble with her other foot.

How a ballerina treats her feet every day is important, Pribut says. And it's true for any of us. Our footwear is an essential tool no matter what we do. Some shoes, worn too often, can cause more strain than pointe shoes, the doctor adds. Common culprits are flip-flops, high heels and what few dancers would ever wear outside the studio — ballet flats.

1. Summarize this article.

2. Which of the following pieces of evidence BEST explains the cause of foot injuries and pain in ballerinas?
 - a. Yet, even with daily ankle exercises, ice baths and ointments, the 25-year-old still hasn't made peace with her feet.
 - b. Dancers speed around the stage barefoot, in heels or in thin slippers with a thin leather sole. Or, if they're ballerinas, they wear tight-fitting pointe shoes.
 - c. Ballerinas must balance all of their weight on the tiniest tips of their toes, known as dancing "en pointe." "Getting up on pointe is one of the most athletic things you can do," Schoene says.
 - d. To protect her toes, she wraps them in a brown paper towel, like the kind found in public restrooms. She used to use foam pads, but found that the paper towel allows her more flexibility.

3. Which section of the article highlights the idea that the desire to be the best can lead dancers to delay treatment?
 - a. Introduction [paragraphs 1-5]
 - b. "Stronger Than Football Players"
 - c. "Rituals For Breaking In Pointe Shoes"
 - d. "Dancing Through The Pain"

4. Read the selection from the section "Rituals For Breaking In Pointe Shoes." *At a cost of around \$100, a pair of pointe shoes may last a pro for a full day of class and rehearsal. But if she's starring in an important show like "Swan Lake," or dancing in a couple of short ballets on the same evening, she may go through a few shoe changes.* How does this detail develop the CENTRAL ideas of the article?
 - a. by demonstrating the importance of pointe shoes and the stress ballet puts on them
 - b. by describing how many performances a ballerina typically does in one day
 - c. by explaining the cost of pointe shoes and how hard ballerinas work to afford them
 - d. by emphasizing how delicate and replaceable a ballerina's pointe shoes can be

5. How does ballet affect the feet of ballerinas? Find 2 examples that show how their feet are affected. What can ballerinas do to ease the pressure on their feet while dancing?