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## Boys Who Get the Pointe

*Although Friends May Poke Fun, Some Youths Have Found a Love for an Activity Americans Link More Often With Girls*

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STAMFORD, Conn. — Drew Fishback sprints up the stairs to the Ballet School of Stamford dressed in a karate uniform. His cheeks are flushed from martial arts practice. He's late. And hungry. He wolfs down a handful of McDonald's fries and slurps some soda through a straw. Then he changes into black tights, white muscle shirt and dance slippers, and rushes to join the boys at the barre. Drew, 11, has been chosen to dance the pivotal role of the Prince in the annual production of "The Nutcracker." He comes to the studio several times a week to practice with about nine other boys who will interpret George Balanchine's choreography.

In a mirrored room above a downtown McDonald's, the boys, who range in age from 7 to 17, begin stretching to classical arrangements of Beatles tunes. As they slide their pointed toes across the floor and arch their arms over heads tilted backward, they whisper about Adam Sandler's hit film "The Waterboy" and a raunchy "South Park" episode. They compare notes on who eats the scariest food. Between sets of grand plies, someone swears he once ate an entire eel. The response is an appreciative chorus: "Gross," "No way."

Tony Williams, their instructor, sits on a stool taking in this graceful machismo. He shrugs and silently mouths to the rehearsal audience, "Boys will be boys." Then he asks for attention. It is time for these boys to behave like danseurs.

"We want straight backs and chests," says Williams, pushing out his broad chest for effect. "Think Arnold Schwarzenegger." Seven-year-old Andrew Jamison studies his image in the mirror, drops his outstretched arms from second position and pauses.

"You mean Mr. Freeze?" Andrew quizzes, pumping up his tiny frame like a bodybuilder.

"That's right," says Williams, acknowledging the "Batman" connection. "Look like Mr. Freeze."

This boy banter is how Williams, a hulking former Boston Ballet principal dancer, connects with his students.

Every Friday, Williams travels from his eastern Massachusetts home to teach this boys-only class, intent on cultivating the talents of American ballet's most endangered species: promising male dancers.

"There is a lot of social pressure for boys not to dance. By the time they are 11 or 12 it can become unbearable," says Stephanie Marini, the Stamford Ballet School's artistic director. "This is the age when we start to lose them. And if we do, we don't want it to be because they feel ballet is something only for girls in pink tutus."

The Ballet School of Stamford has about 10 male students, a mere fraction of its enrollment of girls, who flow in and out of adjacent studios in their pale pink tights and seafoam green leotards. While the ratio of boys to girls is small, it is actually good for a suburban ballet program to have any male students approaching adolescence, Marini says.

"And it is rare to have this many boys, outside of a metropolis, who take ballet this seriously. But they are just an incredible bunch who are not afraid to express themselves," Williams says.

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Included in the ranks of these dancers are boys who excel in sports. Michael Ludeke, 10, is a competitive swimmer. Drew has a black belt in karate and is a shortstop on his Little League team. Chase Finlay, 8, plays soccer and figure skates. James Holiday, 17, says rugby is his favorite sport "because it is as intense as football, without padding."

Like several of his students, Williams discovered the athleticism of dance by accident. At age 17, he was a competitive high school gymnast, intrigued by the skills of Russian masters who dominated the sport.

"I wanted to know why they were so good, what was different about their training," Williams says. "It was ballet."

Although he came to dance late, his career blossomed. Besides his affiliation with the Boston Ballet, Williams has performed with the internationally noted Joffrey Ballet and with companies in Europe and Canada.

"Not all of these boys are great at sports. Some don't really like them," Williams says. "But that's why it's wonderful they are here. At this age, when kids' lives are so frenetic, they just need to move and stretch and be creative. It makes them stronger in more than one way. . . ."

Holiday, the oldest of the dancers, says he simply loves to dance.

"I started when my sister was taking ballet," he says. "But she stopped, and I kept coming. I really liked it more than she did."

Drew says he is often teased about his dancing. Andrew nods and says, "They say to me, 'Ha, ha, Andrew. You take ballet.' "

"My friends often ask me when I'm going to quit. They say it's gay or stupid," Drew says. "But they don't bother me for too long, because they know I have a black belt."

Adds Andrew, who is making his debut in "The Nutcracker's" party scene, "It's too bad they're so mean. They are not going to be in 'The Nutcracker.' "

Drew says firmly that he tells his buddies, "I dance because I like it. And I'll stop when I want to stop."

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Although Drew worships New York Yankees shortstop Derek Jeter, he says dance is actually more challenging than baseball or karate.

"I just learned how to do a triple pirouette. I mean, that was just so much fun."

"And hard. Hard to know. Hard to do," chimes in Chase, who listens to Drew as he rests on a couch after finishing his second hourlong class of the evening.

Chase, a third-grader, takes ballet classes four times a week. He began to dance seriously at age 5 after seeing a performance of "The Nutcracker" and announcing, "I can do that. I want to do that."

"He begged for lessons," says his mother, Jeanne. "And he's hooked."

"I realize that it is unusual, and I don't push it either way," she adds. "But it is what he loves to do. This is a kid who keeps a 6-foot poster of Baryshnikov over his bed."

Chase says the appeal of ballet is its intensity.

"The minute I saw 'The Nutcracker,' I thought it looked fun--all those springs and jumps." And it has made him strong beyond his years. His biceps are toned like a diminutive weightlifter's, his calves ripple with sinewy muscle.

"In soccer, I'm fast. I'm good at running and kicking. Especially kicking," he says. "Ballet helps, because you use your feet all the time."

The suggestion that dance is a feminine endeavor does not wear well on Williams, who comes to the studio in baggy sweats and T-shirt.

"I give dance lessons to three members of the Worcester High football team," Williams says. "They come to class in baggy everything. They want nothing to do with the ballet look. That's fine. Because they've made the connection that dance makes them agile, supple and flexible."

In his Stamford class, Williams speaks in two languages: sports metaphors and the fluid French names of classical ballet moves and positions.

"I want them to make the connection between dance and other things they do," he says.

The boys spring up and down on their toes, and Williams assures them that the rigors at the barre pay off. He has them drop to the floor for push-ups and says, "You have to be strong if you're going to be lifting girls over your head. Stronger," he adds, "than any football player."