



Soccer, Superheroes, and Dance

Boys-only classes offer fun, male bonding, and athleticism—and a gateway to formal training

By Brian McCormick

Attracting boys to dance has never been easy. It doesn't matter that football players like Hall of Famer Lynn Swann or the New York Jets' Steve McLendon took ballet and it improved their game, or that Lionel Messi looks like a ballet dancer when he shows how to control the soccer ball. With some exceptions—hip-hop is the most obvious—there are deep-

rooted obstacles to getting boys into the studio.

Some of it is the optics: little girls all in pink aren't a welcoming sight for little boys. It's not dance that's uninviting, say some, but an environment tailored for girls.

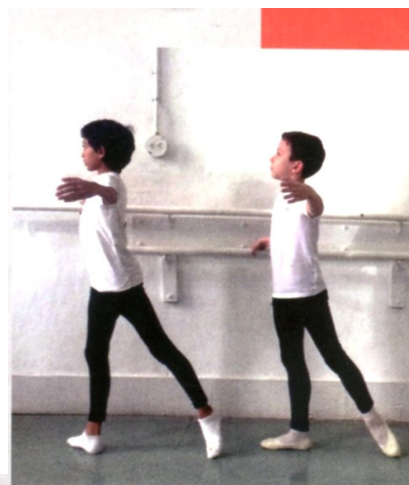
Plus, boys are simply different, and they require a different kind of attention and energy, especially when

they're young. Just as girls like being with other girls their age, boys want, like, and need to be with other boys.

But, as Nikolai Kabaniaev at City Ballet School in San Francisco notes, "It's not lucrative to have boys-only [classes] in this country." He's fortunate that his directors have made the commitment to "do whatever it takes."

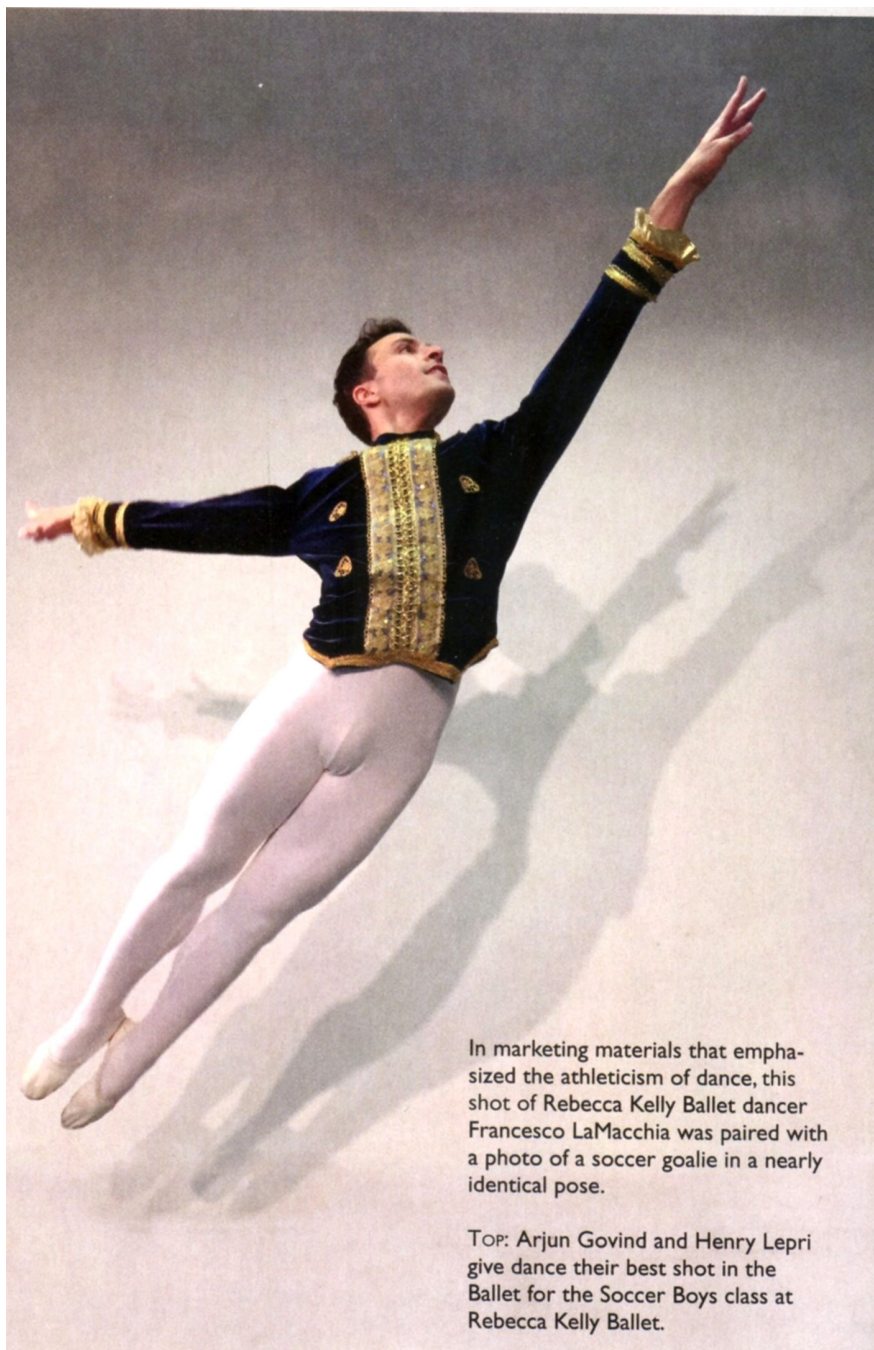
Below continues an extract from the longer 5-page article
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Rebecca Kelly Ballet’s BALLET FOR THE SOCCER BOYS



Rebecca Kelly teaches a Ballet for the Soccer Boys class for 9- to 13-year-olds at Rebecca Kelly Ballet in New York City. The once-a-week class, which runs in two eight-week sessions from January through mid-May, is focused on cross-training, taking advantage of off-season time, and looking at ballet through a sports lens: speed, balance, coordination, core strength, jumps, kicks, and dodges. The class ad, in fact, features a photo of the Cavalier from *The Nutcracker* side by side with a soccer goalkeeper deflecting a shot—practically a mirror image. Kelly researched some of soccer’s technical moves and adapted ballet exercises to them.

She also talked with a soccer dad/coach, who said that many families understand that cross-training and between-season training is key to developing new skills, utilizing knowledge, preventing injuries, and obtaining an “edge.” “They can test out our dance methods for pushing off the ground through the foot in a particular sequence, how the timing of an arm movement earns them extra height in a jump, how core strength speeds them in a turn, how the inner thigh muscles add dexterity and coordination,” Kelly explains. “We talk about the speed of the hunting animal in chase, the grace of a leaping gazelle, the effortless landing of a cat.” She also literally lowers the bar(re) to make it easier for the boys to get their legs up: “They need to be able to see immediate results.”



In marketing materials that emphasized the athleticism of dance, this shot of Rebecca Kelly Ballet dancer Francesco LaMacchia was paired with a photo of a soccer goalie in a nearly identical pose.

TOP: Arjun Govind and Henry Lepri give dance their best shot in the Ballet for the Soccer Boys class at Rebecca Kelly Ballet.


Top photo by Appleby; bottom photo by Rebecca Kelly

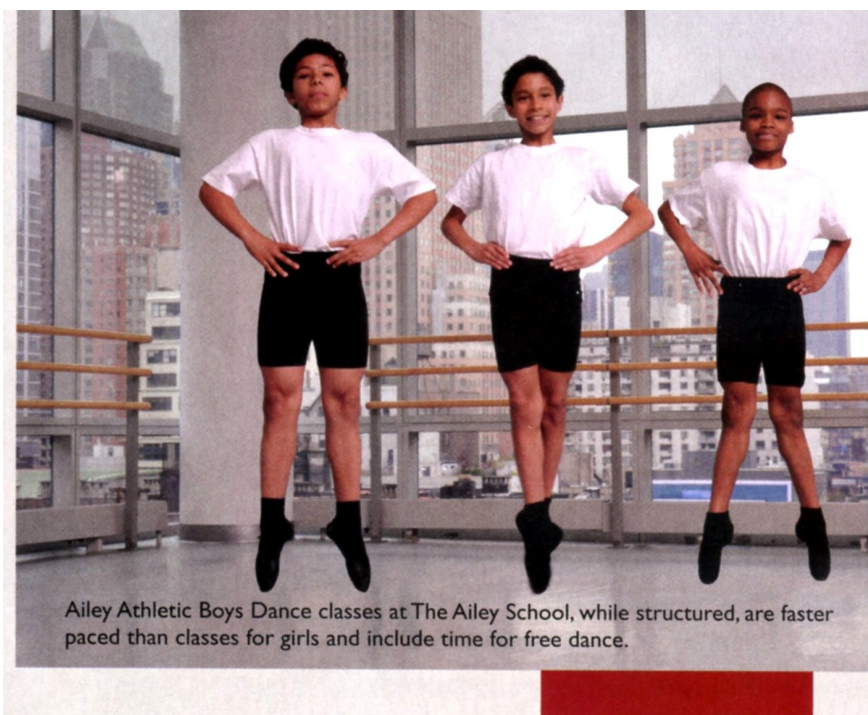
Likewise, Kelly's class was initiated by the persistent families of two boys, each with an older sister who danced. "I didn't want to teach a private class or semi-private class," Kelly says, "so I told one dance mom. 'Find me more than two and I'll think about it.' "

Keeping boys in dance is a different challenge. Barnes says that demand for 4-year-olds fluctuates, but it's consistent for 5- and 6-year-olds. She refers to the bridge year between ages 6 and 7 as a time when boys begin to change their focus and need to know there's going to be some action.

Rotating the techniques taught helps to keep the boys engaged, akin to the way athletes and weight trainers use muscle confusion to keep themselves interested and physically tested. (By changing workouts you "confuse" your muscles and increase stimulation and adaptation.)

Among these school owners and teachers there is widespread agreement that the main way to market dance to boys is to offer a boys-only class. Community associations, flyers, and ads in parenting magazines help get the word out, but, mostly, boys need to see their peers doing it.

"Nobody becomes a dancer in two or three eight-week sessions; we have no illusions about that," Kelly says. "But these boys are developing a huge respect and enthusiasm for what can be achieved through the discipline of ballet, and they experience joy in my class. If that is considered a success, we'll start with that." 



Ailey Athletic Boys Dance classes at The Ailey School, while structured, are faster paced than classes for girls and include time for free dance.