



PUCKS AND

Pirouettes

When It Comes To Improving On-Ice Skills, Ballet Is Youth Hockey Team's Secret Weapon

By Shaun Hathaway

WHEN ANATOLY TARASOV TOOK OVER THE BURGEONING SOVIET HOCKEY PROGRAM in 1946, he had little experience and even fewer resources to work with. But that didn't stop the father of Soviet hockey from building an international powerhouse.

The grace, strength, precision and style demonstrated by the Soviet brand of hockey transcended and changed the modern game. Often described as an intricate and flowing approach that emphasized puck possession and teamwork over brute force and individual achievement, Tarasov used a multi-sport approach to develop the athleticism of his players.

One of their most important secret weapons was learning and practicing ballet.

Known as the building block of dance technique, ballet uses precise and highly formalized set steps and movements. Classical ballet, which originated in Renaissance Italy and established its present form during the 19th century, is characterized by light, graceful and fluid movements.

At its most basic level, ballet promotes and develops the key traits necessary to achieve success in hockey: leg and core strength, balance training, fast footwork and coordination, body awareness and injury prevention.

Ballet dancers utilize their own body weight to develop strong leg and core muscles. The knee bends and leg extensions develop significant muscular strength that require continuous core muscle engagement.

The jumps and turns provide additional benefits to hockey players by strengthening the lower and upper body, which ultimately improves power and stability on the ice. Balance is the key component to mastering ballet, as the center of gravity is continuously changing.

The emphasis on strong footing and self-awareness directly correlates to absorbing or avoiding body checks on the ice. The quick footwork taught in ballet (including explosive jumps, pivots and turns) leads to faster and more versatile footwork needed to maximize on-ice coordination and ultimately performance. The need for ankle strength and align-

ment increases range of motion and strength, and creates faster more powerful skaters.

With posture heavily emphasized, hockey players are able to better understand their core, torso and pelvic alignment, which correlates to an improved skating stride. The heavy emphasis on stretching and flexibility training in ballet has a direct effect on injury prevention.

Ballet exercises are designed to lengthen the leg muscles, making them more pliable and resistant to strain and tears. Ballet also improves the range of motion in the hips. Specifically, working from a turned-out position of the femur in the hip socket works the rotator muscles, which is coincidentally similar to the mechanics of skating.

Arguably, the most important correlation between ballet and hockey is the unique demand for discipline and confidence in both practice and games.

Still, the perception that ballet isn't masculine tends to create the stigma that works against the training benefits for male athletes, including hockey players.

Data compiled by Doug Risner, a professor of dance at Wayne State University, revealed that only 32 percent of male dancers have fathers who support their desire to dance, and only want their sons to be athletic on the sports field. This stigma has kept ballet in the hidden background for many elite athletes and teams that utilize the practice to enhance athleticism for a competitive advantage.

Relatively few articles have been published about the use of ballet for cross-training purposes; however, more teams and athletes utilize ballet as their secret weapon.

Along with the Red Army, football legends in the 1970s, 80s and 90s like Lynn Swann, Barry Sanders, and Hershel Walker utilized ballet to advance their hall of fame careers on the field. Baseball legend Mickey Mantle and boxer Sugar Ray Robinson were also known to utilize dance in their training, and Edward Villella, a celebrated star of the New York City Ballet in the 1960s and 70s, was also a boxing champion.

Today, Elena Segal, who studied at the famed Russian Bolshoi Academy, works at the Anaheim Ducks facility with NHL players, USHL players, AAA players, coaches, and referees.

Although she does not disclose the names of her clients, the athletes she trains are very receptive.

"After teaching my students, many hockey coaches are surprised to see that the players are not just skating—they are actually flying on the ice with the grace of a dancer," Segal said.

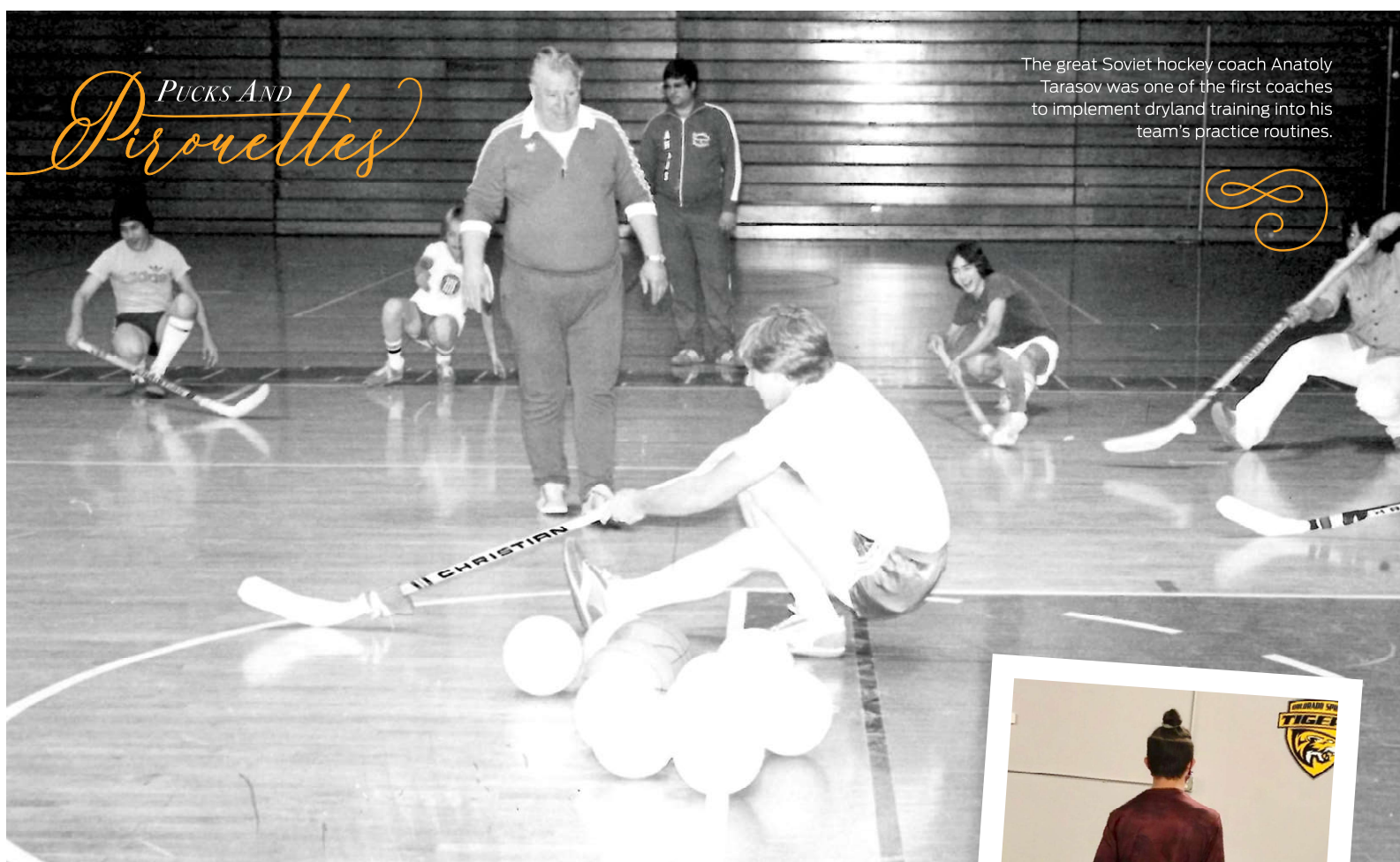
"I simply smile to myself with the knowledge that I have succeeded in bringing out the function of the intrinsic muscles—which were previously dormant and underutilized—to now become well-aligned, strong and prominent."



The Colorado Springs Tigers 14 & Under AAA team has discovered ballet as a new form of off-ice training.

PUCKS AND *Pirouettes*

The great Soviet hockey coach Anatoly Tarasov was one of the first coaches to implement dryland training into his team's practice routines.



This season, the Colorado Springs Tigers Bantam AAA team joined in the dance craze. Led by Antonia (Matchefts) Freehling, a world class professional dance instructor and owner of Revolution Dance Academy, the team spent one day a week practicing in the studio.

"I love bringing ballet technique to athletes, especially hockey players," Freehling said. "Ballet is about gaining skill, fine muscle details, alignment, strengthened core

"Ballet is about gaining skill, fine muscle details, alignment, strengthened core and refinement of movement, something I believe all athletes should strive for."

—Antonia (Matchefts) Freehling

and refinement of movement, something I believe all athletes should strive for, including dancers of all levels and genres."

As the daughter of U.S. Hockey Hall of Fame inductee John Matchefts, she is highly in tune to the demands of hockey and the benefits of ballet.

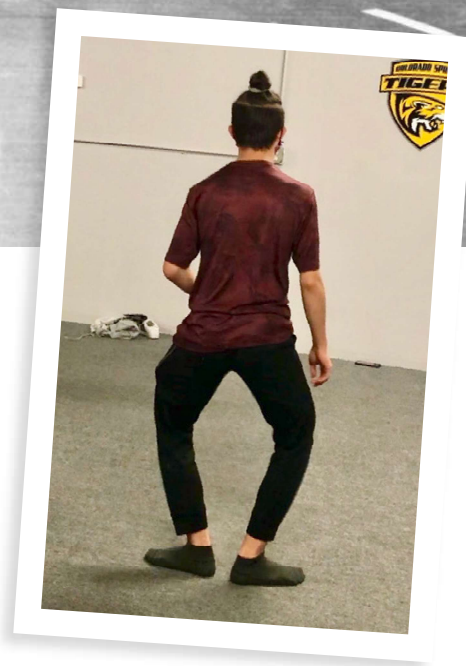
"I have witnessed practice immediately after a ballet class with the team and the high energy level, maneuvering on the ice, speed and coordination is measurable," she said. "And the strength, coordination, flexibility and agility that is gained over time is exciting."

With her son, Cael, on the Tigers team, and years long connections with his teammates, Freehling had immediate trust and buy-in, and all the players are learning quickly.

"Teaching the 14U AAA Tigers has been especially fulfilling and rewarding. The team's openness to learn has created a unique and fun atmosphere," she said

The team has embraced this new cross-training opportunity as its secret weapon for player development. Standout defenseman Ryan Seder attributes his time in the ballet studio to noticeable improvement on the ice.

"I feel like with the ballet I'm using different leg muscles that I haven't used before, and I've already noticed a difference in my skating," Seder said. "I've also noticed an improvement in my balance, which we spend a lot of time working on in classes."



Ignoring the stigma associated with ballet and masculinity, Seder recognizes an important aspect of ballet that has helped the collective success of his team.

"Practicing ballet together has given our team another opportunity to bond away from the rink," he said. "Everybody has embraced it, and looks forward to the next class; it's been a lot of fun."

Following the season, Revolution Dance Academy plans to continue providing ballet classes for hockey players.

Tarasov would be proud of this approach to player development. ☆

Shaun Hathaway serves as the American Development Model coordinator for the Colorado Amateur Hockey Association.