



by Stephen Roberts

Stephen Roberts and our host of experts offer advice for teaching better Acro in the studio.

Go with your gut – words of advice given for many occasions in life. For a studio owner or teacher, mixing the business side of performing arts education and the passion for dance can be an on going challenge. This challenge is extended when delving into one of the riskier, and less regulated and formally educated disciplines, such as acrobatics. However, after interviewing several studio owners, acrobatics instructors, examiners and acrobatics associations, it seems “go with your gut” (thank-you Joanne Chapman), is perfectly fitting.

For a new studio implementing or boosting their acrobatic program, many of my interviewees referred to the big T – technique. We use this word as teachers in our jazz, tap and ballet classes, and it seems to be just the same for acro. For Nancy Dinner of Jaymor School of Dancing, she noticed a huge difference in her acro program when she introduced a separate technique class from competitive choreography classes. An hour and a half spent working on form and condition for example will give students the strength and physical vocabulary needed to excel in their choreography classes.

Strong acrobats start in the classroom. Joanne Chapman stresses the importance of starting each warm-up focused, giving 100%, so when it's time for tricks; kids are in the right state of mind. Being patient, spotting and actually teaching kids hands on, are the fundamentals for **Christine Tavares of Protégé Dance Company**. For **Christine**, acro skills must be broken down using a language of the body children can understand just the same as a single pirouette is broken down in ballet class.

Finding qualified acro instructors is where a strong acro program begins. Incompetent teachers leave both the students (and themselves) at risk of injury. Acro is something a student must truly want to learn, or else they will not progress. Acrobatics training, and acrobatics in choreography come first over gymnastics. A smart teacher does not put a skill practiced on a gymnastics floor onto a bare stage. There should be no risk in choreography. Teachers should be confident the student has a solid and clean preparation and landing before putting that trick on stage. It should be about quality tricks not quantity tricks. And most importantly, go with your gut!

BENEFITS

I asked my panel what differences they noticed in students who train in acro verses students who do not train in acro. The differences seem to be very clear. Increased core strength, upper body strength, all around flexibility, especially lower and upper back flexibility, power during grand allegro and pirouettes, control in and out of jazz skills, body awareness, balance, versatility and agility. One quality that **Christine** notices is a fearless quality (one of the most desirable qualities Sergio Trujillo looks for in a dancer he is hiring). It seems the benefits are not only in the tricks learned, but also in the qualities developed through the acrobatics training.

LATE STARTERS

Many studios, regardless of starting new or having existing acrobatics programs, are faced with the dilemma of late starters. My panel was in agreement, that no matter the age, all beginners must start with the basics. Conditioning the body to improve back and shoulder flexibility as well as core strength is also necessary. For Shara Kim (freelance acrobatics instructor), she finds smaller class sizes as well as experienced assistants help are a big help with late starters. Doubling up on technique classes as well as private lessons are two necessities for Nancy. **Christine** focuses on building confidence through fundamentals to ensure injury prevention. One of the biggest challenges with late starters, notes Joanne, is the fear factor. Once a child knows

the risk of a skill, it becomes mind over matter.

LEFT VERSES RIGHT

Left verses right is a topic that arises in all disciplines, and for acro it is no different. This outlook is exactly the approach **Christine** takes when training her students and setting choreography. Both sides are practiced in technique class. In a jazz piece, everyone executes a right pirouette or a left battement altogether, the same goes for a walkover or a cartwheel in an acro piece. Joanne encourages her students to call their subordinate side their “other side” as opposed to the commonly heard “bad side”. Nancy will spend an entire class once a month on the students “other side”. Although patterns and choreography can be played with to hide a mixed group of “Lefties” and “Righties”, my panel will often go with majority.

COMPETITIVE GROUPINGS

When grouping students for choreography, some studios will make selections based on performance in the first few weeks of technique class. Some will hold auditions for competitive acro. For Nancy, she chooses her acro team at the end of the school year going mainly with skill level and age. The odd time she will have the exception of a younger student who is at an advanced level. Joanne does not believe in auditioning, but assesses students in skills classes in September. Across the board, younger students who can do limbers, chest stands and cartwheel variations make the Junior team and students thirteen years and older who can do walkovers, elbow stands and are moving on to ariels and tumbling passes, make the Senior team.

MAT TO FLOOR

If it isn't Right verses Left, then the challenge in acro is transitioning from mat to floor. My panel describes the mat as well as all other teaching equipment just as such: devices used for teaching a skill, not for regular practice and maintenance. As soon as a student has a controlled landing and controlled preparation, Joanne moves them to the floor. She does, however, recommend investing in a professional wrestling strip matt (Apple Athletics) as opposed to traditional karate folding mats. The cost may be from \$1 500 to \$2000, but will last at least twenty to thirty years, if not longer. Joanne also uses a long strip of a beach towel to spot tumbling. She finds it's too risky giving a stationary spot, as students may pull away at the last minute and injure themselves. Moving alongside the student during their prep, gives her students the confidence and freedom to execute passes with full speed. For Nancy she may use barres for chin-ups or leg lifts, a crash matt for jumping exercises, folding mats or benches for over splits or skipping ropes for cardio, but she does not keep her kids on the mat very long. She uses the mat to teach a skill, but does not want her students relying on the mat. For Tiffany Ratz (freelance gymnastics and acrobatics instructor), a dream set up would include a cheese wedge, stacking boxes, a back handspring circular spot,

and tumbling mats. However, if she could pick one, it would be the cheese to help teach back walkovers and back handsprings. **Christine** likes to integrate on and off mat training into every class, leaving time at the end of class for floor work. She also finds having “no mat day” once a month, very helpful.

GYMNASTICS VERSES AEROBATICS

From speaking with my panel of acrobatics instructors as well as the Ontario Gymnastics Federation, acro is very different from gymnastics. Are you squaring the hips or keeping them open? Are you powering through using your legs and shoulders, or utilizing lower back flexibility maintaining a full split? For Tiffany, as a gym coach at a gymnastics club as well as an acrobatics teacher at several dance studios, she uses the differences in her training and the methodology to her advantage. When teaching her acrobats a cartwheel, she teaches open hips, but will modify the technique when moving on to ariels. Tiffany also recommends her acro students come to the gym so they may utilize the equipment she has there. Shara also suggests her students attend to the gym where she trains, so they can benefit from the equipment while she is there. Across the board, the panel does suggest advanced students attend a gym, but stresses finding a gym that caters to dancers or that offers a “tumbling for dancers” program. This is an extra push for students whom are ready in mind and body. Summer training at a gymnastics facility can be a positive supplement to the school year acrobatics program.

SYLLABUS OR NO SYLLABUS

Many teachers find following a syllabus a great tool for progress reports, recreational programming and training new acrobatic instructors. However, for the elite dancer and acrobatic, often acrobatic syllabus work is not enough.

PERFORMING ARTS EDUCATORS OF CANADA

Syllabus designed with proper acrobatic progressions, yet with freedom (especially at higher levels) for the teacher to design their own exercises and sequences to show off individual talents of the students. Both medal tests and exams are offered. Medal tests are aimed at recreational students with set limbering exercises, and basic dance steps. Graded Exams are more detailed and must show ballet technique, barre work, and more complicated limbering exercises. Students also show only a required number of exercises from each grade. Improvisation is also a component to train students to deal with tricks not going as planned. Finally, theory is also assessed through a question and answer section about trick alignment and execution.

To become a teacher, candidates must teach a junior or elementary class in front of two examiners. Knowledge of warm-up, acrobatic limbering, strengthening exercises, trick progressions, proper spotting technique and the ability to combine dance and tricks is examined. Anatomy is also tested. Teachers must pay an exam fee and then subse-

quent, annual membership fees. It is recommended, teachers study privately or in a group from an experienced PAEC Acrobatics member.

TEACHERS EXAM FEE – \$175
ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP – \$175
TEACHER TRAINING FEE – set by coach

CANADIAN DANCE TEACHERS ASSOCIATION

CDTA offers an acrobatics syllabus from Primary to Advanced with Graded Examinations (and soon to have Medal Testing). CDTA works with proper alignment of spine and joints when teaching acro. All skills are taught from a place of length, strength and control. Pedagogy is strict similar to a ballet technique as to prevent injury. Flexibility of legs and spine is also a focus.

An examiner of the CDTA syllabus must coach teachers, seeking to become a member. Knowledge of ballet and or jazz is an asset. During the exam, teachers must prepare class plans (written and demonstrated with students) for beginner and advanced classes including warm-ups, tricks and combination tricks and dance steps. Teachers must have knowledge of entire student acrobatics syllabus including Terminology, Barre and Limbering Exercises as well as Elementary Teaching/Anatomy Questions. Musical knowledge and demonstration of dance/acro will also be included.

TEACHERS EXAM FEE – \$275
ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP – \$90
TEACHER TRAINING FEE – set by coach

BRITISH ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS OF DANCING

BATD offers both Graded Exams and Medal Tests within their acro syllabus. Components of the syllabus include a dance and acrobatic section, tumbling as well as controlled and contortion acrobatic skills. Students are given the opportunity to advance at their own pace while gaining knowledge of technique, conditioning, acrobatic and tumbling skills, rhythms and dance in a safe and controlled atmosphere. Exams include both technical and theory work from Primary to Advance level including three levels of Teaching examinations.

To become certified, teachers must study under a current, certified BATD Acrobatic Member. The exam consists of a practical section (demonstration) and a verbal theory section. Teaching questions are also included at the Membership and Fellowship levels. Anatomy is also included in theory. Fees can be less if you are already a member in another division.

TEACHERS EXAM FEE – \$175-250
ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP – \$50-100
TEACHER TRAINING FEE – set by coach

ONTARIO GYMNASTICS FEDERATION – Coaching Certification (NCCP)
www.ogf.com
http://www.ogf.com/documents/content_6231.pdf

The OGF does not offer a syllabus for acrobatics, but does offer coaching certification and training for spotting in gymnastics and is creating a program for acrobatics. Just recently was acrobatics it's own discipline under the Gymnastics Canada umbrella. Canada is at the forefront of developing and regulation judging and coaching credentials for Acrobatics. Although NCCP Acrobatics is still in final stages of development, NCCP does offer a gymnastics certification program. Level One covers basic technique and practices used in all disciplines of gymnastics. Level two divides between gymnastics and trampoline, teaching spotting technique for all skills up to twisting for each apparatus. Level three goes to a provincial level gymnastics.

For the OGF, acrobatics focuses more on dance, strength and agility within gymnastics incorporating some rhythmic elements. All levels can be completed over 2 weekends (per level) with a workbook as well as practical coaching hours.

OGF Acrobatics Philosophy:

Spot everything, be creative, get certified, use mats, have fun. Acrobatics at Gymnastics Ontario is a bottom up grass roots development program. OGF is taking the steps to develop the sport at an international level through the promotion and creation of a strong base. Through the program development and incorporation into gymnastics clubs, the OGF will ensure Acrobatics stays, is easy to incorporate into all types of facilities and offers something for everyone.

TEACHER TRAINING FEE –
\$481 (Level 1)
\$359 (Level 2 Men's & Women's)

PANEL

Joanne Chapman/Nancy Dinner/Shara Kim
Tiffany Ratz/**Christine Tavares**

