THE NINE STEP CONNECTION MODEL AS ONE OF THE METHOD OF DANCE SPORT PSYCHOLOGICAL PREPARATIONS

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Abstract
Psychological preparation is one of the most easily neglected parts of sports training in Standard and Latin American dances. Due to the large number of stress factors that affect sports dancers, psychological preparation is an essential part of success on dance competitions. As for the techniques that help dancers to achieve higher levels of psychological preparation, many can be borrowed from other sports. This paper presents Winkelhuis’ Nine Step Connection Model, which enables dancers to achieve the optimal levels of relaxation, concentration and connection with the partner. By using The Model, dancers can lower their stress levels and have better time management in between dances, which contributes to the quality of their performance on competitions.

Key words: psychological preparation, dance-sport, The Nine Step Connection Model

Introduction
Psychological preparation is one of four segments of sports training, and psychological skills are considered to be a crucial segment, without which any other aspect of an athlete preparedness cannot come to the fore (Barić, 2006; Hardy, Jones, Gould, 2003). The higher the skill level of athletes, the more important role the mental factor plays. Sports dancers are usually mostly devoted to technical preparation, then physical, and least of all tactical and psychological preparation. Psychological preparation is an unduly neglected part of sports training, although dancers are affected by many stress factors – those one cannot affect, such as judges, other competitors, music, competition schedule etc, as well as those that may be prevented in time and which are associated with the dancer’s body, costumes, choreography, etc. The psychological preparation of sports dancers includes different psychological techniques used in other sports (e.g. breathing exercises, relaxation techniques, visualization of goal achievements, autogenic training). This article will present a specific mental technique called „The Nine Step Connection Model“, developed by Maximiliaan Winkelhuis (2001).

The Nine step connection model
People react differently under pressure; some dance couples exhibit bad habits like drinking water or soaking the soles of their shoes in water in between dances. These habits are not necessary, as it is possible to get the body used to dancing five dances in succession, and shoes can be prepared before entering the dance floor, but they are an inadvertent way of coping with stress. Although the levels of experienced stress may be reduced through better preparation, stress will still be there. Therefore, a stronger focus on potential factors that can be controlled must be put in practice.

The way in which this can be accomplished was introduced by Maximiliaan Winkelhuis (2001). It is The Nine Step Connection Model, which helps dancers to repeat what they can do in between dances, helps them to minimize stress and facilitate the dance performance in the finals. It helps the dancer to achieve the necessary relaxation and concentration, and improve relationship with the partner. The dancers have only a few seconds in between dances in the semi-finals or finals. In those few seconds they must go through nine steps of The Nine Step Connection Model. Consciously following each of the steps should lead to a significant decrease in stress levels. Following this routine, a dancer does not have time to think about the previous dance, the partner’s or his mistakes, he does not have time for peremptory thoughts about the quality of the performance. The dancer’s body and mind must be focused on one thing and one thing only – preparation for the next dance. The dancer must go through three important stages of the mind and body to maximize his performance. These stages are: the ending of the last dance (including the actual end of the dance and applause), physical and mental preparation for the next dance (including relaxation, concentration and charging with new energy), and entering the next dance (involves connecting with your partner, positioning and call).

1. Step: FINISH
The beginnings and endings are moments people remember the most. The beginnings and endings are, in general, one of the most memorable moments in life. Endings are also the most memorable moments of the dance. These are moments when the dancer can make the biggest impression. Many dancers tend to practice the beginning of the choreography, which is much easier because one can never know when the music might end.
For that reason it is important to find a natural end when the music stops so the dance is not abruptly interrupted, but also not prolonged too much.

Table 1. The nine step connection model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STEP NUMBER</th>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>STAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>FINISH</td>
<td>ENDING OF THE LAST DANCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>APPLAUSE</td>
<td>PHYSICAL AND MENTAL PREPARATION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>RELAXATION</td>
<td>ENTRY TO THE NEXT DANCE</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>CONCENTRATION ENERGY</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>ENERGY</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>RELATIONSHIP</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>POSITIONING INVITATION</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>ACTION</td>
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2. Step: APPLAUSE
The applause of the audience is the most special gift and dancers should be grateful and enjoy the moment. This can also be the first chance to recuperate for the next dance. By concentrating on the applause, for a brief moment the dancer will forget about the last dance, other competitors, judges, next dance etc. To each dancer this will be a brief moment for recuperation. While receiving the applause, it is desirable not to place hands above the shoulder line, and the female partner should be located diagonally in front of the male partner. It is undesirable to move towards a position for the next dance while the applause is still going on. It is advisable to look at the audience while the applause lasts, swiftly glance over the audience, or raise hands in a gesture of gratitude.

3. Step: RELAXATION
Although the idea of relaxation during competition might sound a bit strange, it helps the dancer to do the next six steps. After completing each dance, it is advisable to forget about that dance as soon as possible and concentrate on the next one. Without such relaxation, dancers will go through the finals without the opportunity to recuperate or a chance to make a few adjustments. Adjustments are necessary because the character of each new dance is different from the one before. If the dancer focuses too much on the result and not enough on the dance itself, it may have a negative effect on his dance performance. Dancers need to think about the next dance in positive terms. It is important to focus on what is essential for a successful performance and to concentrate fully on breathing - inhaling through the nose and exhaling through the mouth, slowly and deeply.

4. Step: CONCENTRATION
It has been scientifically proven that mental activity precedes physical activity (Winkelhuis, 2001). For good performance, it is desirable to maintain a good emotional state, which depends on the dancer’s mental image, i.e., his cognitive assessment.

By consciously thinking about the next dance before the music starts, the dancer prepares his body for the dance. Concentration for the next dance must also be practiced. Only through repeated practice of concentration during training one can create a habit which can help the dancer to maintain stress on minimum levels. Concentration means making the choice of what to think or not to think, as well as choosing what is important among the multitude of available information. Optimal concentration is achieved through the use of “key words”. The dancer should choose a word or a phrase which reminds him of what he must take into account during the dance to make a good performance. By doing this, he can achieve the right state of mind and body for the next dance. For each dance, a different key word is needed. Finding five or ten key words takes time. To most dancers it takes six to twelve months to create a positive habit of using key words in all of the five dances. The dancer needs to decide in the beginning what is his long term starting point. By trial and error, the dancer must next find a keyword that inspires him the most. Once the keyword is found, it needs to be used for several times during the trainings to see if it inspires the dancer. If the key word is not inspirational enough, the process must be repeated until a successful key word is found. Seeking key words can be based on the following principle: visualization of the beginning of the choreography, compensation of a weakness, emphasizing the advantages of the dancer, and the characteristics of a dance.

5. Step: ENERGY
The toning of the body follows after the concentration step. By creating the needed energy, the dancer will be ready to dance even before music starts or before physical contact with the partner. If the previous step is practiced well, the dancer’s body will start creating the tone for the next dance.

6. Step: CONNECTION
During the dance the dancers should constantly be aware of their partner. In the third, fourth and fifth steps of the connection model, dancers are more occupied with themselves, therefore the sixth step is necessary to re-establish a relationship with the partner. This connection can be visual or physical, e.g. partners hold their hands. This step is of vital importance for the performance. The partners are sending messages just by looking at each other or holding hands. If those messages are not positive or sincere, but rather mechanical and automatic, no connection will be achieved. By recognizing the connection, a more permanent partnership can be build and it will ease movements while dancing in a couple.

7. Step: POSITIONING
Positioning on the floor can be stressful and the dancer can reduce that by controlling where the dance begins, rather than simply depending where others are positioned on the dance floor.
There are many options: the couple can find the most accessible spot on the dance floor or strategically position themselves so they have optimum visibility towards judges or audience. Opinions differ on whether it is desirable to move close to the strongest competitors in order to try to overshadow them or to move away from them. By choosing the starting positions before the competition, the dancer helps his mind and body. After a few rounds the dancer’s body is used to what his mind chooses. Walking up to a starting position has a big impact on how judges perceive the couple. Both members of the couple should know the starting position in order to have a clear focus of where to go. A straight line is much more convincing than zigzags. It is a good thing not to start each dance from the same starting position or with the same part of the choreography. Also, it is not advisable to leave from the chosen place on the dance floor if it is too crowded with other dance couples. It is good to start earlier or later than other couples. In stationary dances such as rumba, a couple can start with the basic moves. One should bear in mind that the partners should move together to the next starting position and that the couple can increase its space by keeping a strong visual connection.

8. Step: INVITATION
During Invitation both members of the couple make their contribution and bear a certain responsibility. In this step, the partners develop awareness of each other, which raises the quality of the dance.

Standard dances: five touching points – actions and responsibilities of the dancers:
1) The dancers need to establish visual contact that carries a certain quality of energy connection. This action is performed by both members of the couple; 2) The male dancer’s left hand is associated with the female partner’s right. The male partner initiates the action, but both members of the couple should maintain hand contact; 3) The female dancer approaches her partner and closes the gap between the two bodies. This is the action that is performed solely by the female dancer. The male dancer must accept it in fourth step; 4) The male dancer’s right hand closes the figure only when the female dancer is in the right position towards him. As long as the dancer does not close his right hand, the female partner will know that a necessary correction is required. This action begins with the male dancer and finishes with the female dancer’s acceptance in step five; 5) The female dancer keeps her left hand on the male dancer’s shoulder. The male dancer should not start the dance before the female dancer gives him the signal. The connection is not optimal until the female partner gives her signal by placing hers left hand. The male dancer might a have too strong or a too weak grip and necessary correction must be made before the next dance. A bad start leads to bad performance and any correction is harder as the dance continues.

Latin American dances: two to three contact points: In Latin-American dances, all dances do not start with the same positions. Sometimes partners are unable to have visual contact on the start of the choreography. Hence, next steps are important. 1) Visual contact: partners should not only maintain visual contact, but really see each other and be aware of the partner; 2) Energy connection: when there is no physical contact at the beginning of the dance, the connection can still be established by synchronized movements. It is advisable to establish a sense of invisible elastic connection between two dancers; 3) Physical contact: in some dances (such as paso doble) physical connection can be part of the starting position. All points of contact should be visible whether it is hand, leg or any part of the body. It takes time to develop a good partnership. This process requires concentration, awareness, patience and practice. It must become a habit. As the dance nears end, its quality is decreasing. The higher the qualities of the dance on its beginning, the higher the chances of it remaining on high levels until its end. Any correction is easier made on the beginning than towards the end.

9. Step: ACTION
After all eight steps are completed, dancers must do everything in their power to decrease stress levels. They are the ready for the next dance. It is good to start the dance in the moment music starts, although it is preferred to start dancing a few moments after the music starts.

How much time is required for all nine steps?
Nine steps may seem a lot to do in a few seconds. All steps are equally important and must be rehearsed in order to be controlled. In the beginning it takes around 30 seconds, later the gap in between dances should suffice. Not all steps are equally important. Two steps are of key influence. If the other seven steps are taken and these two aren’t, the dance will not be performed with optimal quality. These steps are the fourth step and eighth step. Concentration gives strength to focus on the important parts of the dance and Connection is crucial for obtaining a connection between two partners. This connection must be obtained before the dance starts. If this connection is omitted, the dance might seem as mechanical.

Recommendations before using The Nine step connection model
This model is useful only if it is exercised frequently. By doing so, dancers can see how much they have improved over time and what needs to be done to push the performance to the next level. This technique will effectively reduce stress levels to a minimum. By forming this routine, dancers have considerably less time in breaks between dances to deal with negative thoughts and different distractions. This routine enables the dancers to successfully apply the model to gradually focus only on the important parts of their performance.
To successfully apply this model, it is important to practice its use, which requires months of training. A good start would be to begin with only the third and eighth steps, adding the fourth and fifth steps later. In time, other steps can be included.

**Conclusion**

In a situation where athletes compete, dancers in this case, with equal physical preparation, the one with better psychological preparation will most surely win. The Nine Steps Connection Model is a special mental technique that helps a dancer’s psychological preparation and makes the most use of the seconds in between dances. Practicing this model may take several months, but in that time the time necessary for preparation is progressively decreasing, allowing the dancer to reach his optimal performance levels.

**References**

