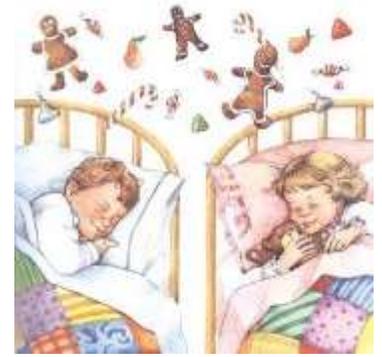


Dancing In Your Head

by Harold & Meredith Sears

Between your club lessons, do you have a chance to practice the new figures, the new ideas that you have learned? Can you dance a circuit around the kitchen? Can you shift furniture a little and make space in the living room? I'm afraid the driveway is just too rough to allow any kind of pivot, spin, or turn. But, a good alternative to real practice at home is practice in your head.



This works because the mind and the body are intimately connected to each other. During real practice, we dance a sequence, and that series of muscular activity is stored in the mind — not very firmly the first time. But we repeat the steps, and the mental record becomes more firm. We dance it again. Sometimes, we talk about this kind of learning as “muscle memory.” We get a dance into our muscle memory, and we can do it more and more smoothly. But there really is no such thing as muscle memory. Muscles can't remember anything. It is a record of their activity that is remembered in the mind, and we can put that record into the mind in other ways than by physical practice.

Again, physical practice establishes neural pathways in the brain, but mental visualization, with no muscular movements at all, can do the same thing. Mental rehearsal sends the brain through a neural workout that is very close to what would happen during actual physical practice. In a way, mental practice is even better than physical practice, because we can visualize an ideal that we maybe can't actually perform at that time. In our minds, we can run through a routine with no bobbles, no mistakes, and so nail down that neural pathway. Of course, we do have to get out on the floor, but we'll be so much better prepared with a little mental practice beforehand.

Let's look at some some mental strategies, some "mind tricks":

In school, you used to take notes in class. (Maybe you still do.) Would it be worthwhile to carry a little notebook during a dance class or clinic? The teacher tells you to lower a little before you move forward into an



Open Telemark. You try it. That is, you physically practice the action once, but you also find a moment to jot the idea down. Now your potential for practice, for learning, for creating that “muscle” memory is magnified three-fold.

- Through the simple act of carrying that little notebook, you have increased your listening powers. You have created a clear intention to take one or two notes, so you listen for something to write down. Without the notebook, you might have been thinking about something else and missed that lowering idea, but with the notebook, you are a little more alert, and you don't miss it. Already, your learning is fixed a little more firmly than it might have been.
- Then you write it down. The act of writing cements the lesson a bit more. You heard the lesson through your ears. Now the lesson enters your mind through your writing fingers and up the nerves in your arm. Even if you never look at the notes you take, the taking of them has doubled the power of the lesson.
- But of course, you do look at your notes. On the drive home, you thumb through the pages while your partner drives, or visa versa — Open Telemark, lower on trail foot and then step forward on the lead (lady steps back). You talk about how that felt. Without it, sometimes it felt like you bumped into each other; with the lowering, it was smoother — a third reinforcement of whatever those neural circuits are that encode the idea of lowering before the step. Without the notebook, we might not have heard that point at all. With it, we have heard it and practiced it in our heads three times. We're dancing in our heads.



In school, you might also have tape-recorded lectures or discussions. Some of those talks might have been pretty hard to listen to a second time, but listening to a recorded round-dance class or to a party dance is a pleasure, if only because the music is so nice. This can save you from having to be scribbling away when you should be holding your partner, walking through the figures, and dancing. Do you have a substantial commute to work in the morning? Instead of listening to the news and arriving on the job blue and



depressed, listen to last night's dance class, and think about some of the new ideas that were presented. As you listen, connect the figures to the music passage, see one figure flow into the next, picture the steps you need to take and the body stretch and shape that goes along with them. Dance the dance in your head.



When you watch a movie and the hero or heroine is really straining to overcome some obstacle, do you sometimes find yourself straining along in sympathy? It is especially easy to identify with and to put yourself into a video, and there are many web sites offering dance videos. Record a video of your latest dance or find it on the Web, watch now and then, and, as you watch, put yourself into the action. Don't just admire the smooth performance and enjoy the show, but mentally make some of those moves yourself.

Some dancers look at a cue sheet as they would a deed or a stock prospectus, with suspicion and even a little disgust. A cue sheet is 2, 3,



4, even 5 pages of closely typed fine print, loaded with jargon (contra-body), acronyms (DLW, XLIB), and abbreviations (fwd, bk, sd, Imp to Semi). So dry. But cue sheets are a wonderful resource, and if you don't read them, you should try. You've just had the teach and you've gone through all those figures. The head cues on the cue sheet *will* look mostly familiar, and with experience, totally familiar. Read the head cues through. It's a very short story. As you read, picture yourself dancing — feel the moves.

“A study was done with basketball players. Players were divided into three groups. One group practiced free throws for twenty minutes a day. One group did not practice at all. One group was asked to lie on the bleachers in a relaxed state for twenty minutes while imagining making free throws. At the conclusion of the study, the group that practiced improved 22%. The group that did nothing did not improve at all. The group that relaxed on the bleachers visualizing making free throws improved 23%. . . . In 5 to 15 minutes, while sitting in your office chair or recliner, you can achieve the benefits of an hour of physical practice.” – Ann Taylor, in “Dream Your



Dance, Dance Your Dream,” *American Dancer*, July-August 2007.

Again, what are the steps in our learning sequence?

- Teacher shows it and we see — visual.
- Teacher explains and we hear — auditory.
- We try it and we feel — kinesthetic.
- Any note taking heightens the attention during the seeing and hearing, and it adds another kind of kinesthetic input.
- And our subsequent listening and visualization, the dancing in your head, puts the icing on this particular cake, and, next week, you dance like angels.

