

156 – Huffines Sports Medicine Podcast

Ms. Elizabeth Ahearn

- S1 00:00 Hi, this is Tim Lightfoot, the Director of The Huffines Institute. I want to take a little bit of your time to tell you about this great event that we have coming up, The Huffines Discussion Four. We do this every year, and this year it's November the 21st from 1 to 4 PM Central Time in the Annenberg Presidential Conference Center here on the Campus of Texas A&M. If you're in the area, you're certainly welcome to attend. It's free of charge. You'll hear nine speakers that are leaders in Exercise Science and Human Performance. They have all been picked, because they have a great message to say and they are great speakers. If you're not in that area, don't despair, because there are other ways that you can get to the Huffines Discussion. If you look on our website, you'll find that there are 23 satellite sites around the country that will be simulcasting the event at the same time. If you're near in one of those sites, click on it, and contact, and find out where that's at, and you can go see it there. We will be putting these videos up online, probably right after the first day of the New Year. And so, you'll be able to see them there. So, we hope to see you there on November 21st. And now, on to the podcast.
- [music]
- S2 01:08 Welcome to the Sports Medicine podcast brought to you by The Sydney & J.L. Huffines Institute for Sports Medicine and Human Performance in The Department of Health & Kinesiology at Texas A&M University. At The Huffines Institute, we're always working to facilitate, apply, and bring you the most up-to-date coverage of the wide world that is Sports Medicine and Human Performance all in a language you can understand and share with your friends. And now, here's our host, the director of The Huffines Institute, Dr. Tim Lightfoot.
- S1 01:37 Well, hello and welcome to the weekly edition of The Huffines Institute for Sports Medicine and Human Performance weekly podcast. I'm your host, Tim Lightfoot, and I'm so glad that you took the time to download us. And you're listening to another interesting person in the World's Sport Medicine and Human Performance. Once again we have got someone that fits that build perfectly. We have Miss Elizabeth Lowe Ahearn. Welcome to the podcast, Elizabeth.
- S3 01:58 Thank you for having me.
- S1 01:58 Well, you're more than welcome. We're glad you took time out your schedule to be with us. I'm going to tell the audience a little bit about you, so they'll know a little bit why you're here, and then we'll just jump into the conversation. Elizabeth has a BFA and an MFA from New York University School of the Arts. She's vice president of regional planning for the American College Dance Association, and she's on the executive board of that. She's the founding director of the Pilates Center at Goucher College in Maryland, and she's actually the former chair of the Dance Department at Goucher College. I'm glad to see that you survived your chairmanship.
- S3 02:32 I did [chuckles].
- S1 02:32 Yeah, that is always interesting. And so, Elizabeth's here doing some workshops here at Texas A&M. We have a big dance science program. So, welcome to the campus.

S3 02:42 Thank you.

S1 02:42 And thank you again for taking time out your busy schedule to be with us today. So, we're just going to start off. What got you into dance?

S3 02:50 That's fairly easy. I went to a performance - a retirement performance by a dancer who danced for the Ballet Russes; her name was Yvonne Chouteau - in Oklahoma City. My mother took me. I was about four years old. It was her final performance, and she was dancing with her husband Miguel Terekhov at Oklahoma University. I left the performance saying, "That's what I want to do."

S1 03:14 At four?

S3 03:15 At four. I wanted to dance and I wanted to take class with Miss Chouteau. I call her still Miss Chouteau. I wanted to take class with her. That was going to be my career aspiration. My mother said I was too young, and she said "You need to wait a year, and if you still want to take a class a year from now, then we'll talk about it." My mother tells me - I don't remember, but she tells me - on my birthday the next year, I said, "Well, when do the classes start?"

S1 03:46 It's time to go.

S3 03:46 [chuckles] It's time to go, and she took me down the street to a small little studio down the street. I walked in and I didn't see Miss Chouteau. I asked her where Miss Chouteau was. My mom said, "This is the closest studio for us. This is where we're going to take you, and I refused. I said the only place I was going to take was from Ms. Chouteau. So, she drove me 45 minutes to the Fairgrounds to take classes where Ms. Chouteau had her classes. So, I started classes with her at that point and stayed with her until I left for New York from Oklahoma; trained with other dancers with Ballet Oklahoma after that, but that was really where my passion, I guess, stemmed from - was seeing that final performance. It moved me enough that it made me want to go into dance myself.

S1 04:37 Well, it's amazing how we talk to people in this podcast, and how many-- so many people have-- they know when they became very interested. And oftentimes, it was young and they've been very focused and pointed on that for the rest of their life. But, at four years old, that's pretty cool.

S3 04:50 Well, I think the other thing that's interesting is, for me, I am Choctaw Indian and Miss Chouteau is Indian. She's one of the five Indian ballerinas. It was impacted me that she was Indian, and she was female, and what she was able to accomplish as well, and that's still profoundly impacts me, because what she was able to do with her life beyond the performance inspired me as well. So, she inspired me as a young dancer, but she also inspired me as a more mature dancer with the pursuits that she took upon retirement from the stage.

S1 05:32 So, did you focused on ballet primarily?

S3 05:35 I did, yes. Yes, I studied ballet with her and then she sent me off to ballet Oklahoma where there were teachers there that I trained with, but all of my initial dance training was really all in ballet.

S1 05:49 And the good news was you were old enough not to refuse to go to ballet Oklahoma to train after that, right?

S3 05:53 Yes, yes. Exactly, exactly. No, if she told me to go, I was going to go. Don't listen to

your mother, but [laughter] you listen to your ballet teacher. So, she told me to go, I was going to go. I continued to study with her, but she knew that getting multiple perspectives and points of view were crucial in my development as a dancer.

- S1 06:15 What I appreciate is that, especially from a professional dance standpoint, it's a very difficult world to break into, I guess.
- S3 06:20 Yes.
- S1 06:21 You mentioned - and we really need to talk about that - we talked about that you're now at Goucher College, but there's a big gap between Ballet Oklahoma, and New York, and Goucher College. So, what happened there?
- S3 06:32 Upon graduation from high school, I decided I wanted to go to college. Most of my friends were. I was at a college preparatory school at that point. I auditioned for NYU, and SUNY Purchase, and Oklahoma University, Southern Methodist University, Texas Christian University. There was a large range of schools I looked at. Was fortunate to be accepted into all of those schools. I had thought I was going to attend SMU. I had a scholarship there. And about a month before, auditioned for Ballet Oklahoma when the new director, Eddie Villella, took over the company. And decided at that point I wasn't going to go to SMU, I was going to continue to dance with ballet Oklahoma for one more year, and would attend Oklahoma University with as many classes as I could with my schedule with ballet Oklahoma. And then after that, decided I needed to go to New York. And I was actually encouraged by Miss Chouteau and some of my other teachers to do that to spread my wings, to take a risk, to try something different and new, and to go to New York. So, I went to SUNY Purchase first, and then transferred to NYU for their undergraduate and graduate programs. So, I continued my degree there through my masters. And both of those places were really where I began studying other dance forms, modern dance. That was my first exposure to Pilates. It was at SUNY Purchase with the apparatus work with Romana Kryzanowska there. So, it did open a lot of doors which is exactly the reason why I chose to that. So, it's hard to leave your home state, but that move, I think, was a good one for me, personally.
- S1 08:25 Yeah, and just a little side light, when we talk to people who are in performing arts and the physiological side of performing arts, what many people don't understand is that when you apply to go to college, it's just not the college application with SATs and ACTs that most people think about, there's also auditions involved.
- S3 08:39 There are. There are.
- S1 08:39 So, there's another level of selection that you go through, and you mentioned that a few minutes ago.
- S3 08:43 Yes, most definitely. You have to do a solo. You present the solo to a group of faculty, and you take classes. There's usually a personal interview. So, I went through that at most of those schools.
- S1 08:55 There's no anxiety at all, is there?
- S3 08:57 No, no anxiety at all [chuckles]. No, no, no. Not at all. Something you remember now being on the other side as a teacher with students going through that same process. You certainly remember how you felt going through that audition process. It is very stressful, but it is part of the world that we live in as dancers.
- S1 09:14 You brought up the Pilates thing, and that's certainly-- I say Pilates thing, the study of Pilates. That's one of the things that you specialize in. So, tell the audience a little bit

about Pilates, because so many people almost consider that like part of yoga, but, traditionally, that's not.

- S3 09:30 No it's not. Joe Pilates actually developed the system. Joseph Pilates, he was from Germany. He developed an exercise system that he brought to the United States in the 1920s, and opened a studio with his wife in the 1920s. Happened to be in the same building with Martha Graham and George Balanchine - two of the greatest artists, I think. Most people would not debate that - the greatest artists of the century. And many of the dancers that trained with both Graham and Balanchine began to study with Joe. They called him Joe. And that's really where we get the connection to dance. Joe was not a dancer. He did the design--
- S1 10:16 Well, right from the beginning, though, when he--
- S3 10:17 Right, right.
- S1 10:18 Right from the beginning, yeah.
- S3 10:19 He wasn't a dancer, but he was very intrigued with dancers. And certainly the method that he developed compliments what dancers do on a daily basis, and helps to bring the body into balance in a way that is not easily accomplished with the rigorous routine and regiment that dancers have to go through on a daily basis beyond their class work, and the rehearsal process, and their performing et cetera. That's really where Pilates came from. It's named after a man. It's not generic like yoga.
- S1 10:54 It's not European.
- S3 10:54 Yeah, it's not like yoga - not named after someone. And so, it was actually a man who actually developed the system, initially, for himself, and then found it was so useful to others that he began to share it with the world. And aren't we are glad that he did?
- S1 11:10 There you go. And I guess the appropriate form of Pilates involves apparatus?
- S3 11:16 It does.
- S1 11:16 He built a lot of different apparati that you--
- S3 11:18 He designed them. He designed them, and we actually have-- there's an archival book that shows some of the original blueprint designs of his Reformer, and his Cadillac, and the Wunda Chair, and many of the other pieces of equipment that he designed. So, the people that manufacture them have used those designs as their templates for the design of their equipment.
- S1 11:42 So, if you're doing Pilates and you are not using apparati, it's really not Pilates, isn't it?
- S3 11:46 It's a system. It's a system of exercise. So, you can do mat work, but really it's designed to be an entire system where you work the equipment in the ideal world. In the ideal world-- It's expensive, so not everyone can afford to have all of that equipment. Now, here, you're quite fortunate, because Texas A&M does have all of that equipment which is wonderful - that the students get to partake in all of that equipment on a regular basis should they choose to do so.
- S1 12:19 So, let's talk a little bit about the training that dancers go through. You mentioned that a few minutes ago. Just for the audience's sake, give us an average training schedule for a dancer, a professional dancer.
- S3 12:29 Professional dancer.

S1 12:29 Yeah.

S3 12:30 A professional dancer is likely going to be taking a warm-up class in the morning, and then going into rehearsals daily with a lunch break. It depends if they're union or not - whether they have hourly breaks or not. Regional companies are--

S1 12:46 It makes a difference.

S3 12:46 It does make a difference, because the union is going to require breaks during the day. And then, potentially, performances in the evening, performances on the weekends. Smaller companies are going to have you performing in every performance. Larger companies, like ABT or New York City Ballet, their schedules are going to not necessarily require, especially the principles in the higher level dancers, to not perform at every single show to give their bodies a rest. A college dancer has a different schedule than a professional dancer. Sometimes it almost seems like it could be more rigorous than a professional dancer in the sense that you have your classes. So, you could have a ballet class, and a modern class, maybe a composition class. You have your academic classes. You have rehearsals also and the potential of performances. Now, your performances are not going to be as regular as a professional dancer's performance schedule. You might have one or two shows a semester. But that, on top of your studying, and maybe another job, if you're a student with an outside job. That's a pretty tough schedule also.

S1 13:55 It would seem like there's a lot of chance of break down, and injury, and not a lot of recovery in that kind of schedule.

S3 14:04 Most definitely, most definitely, most definitely. And that is where Pilates is such a wonderful tool for our students - is that it allows them to keep their body balanced to maintain strength, flexibility, posture, to address some of the imbalances in their body that are going to lead to injuries.

S1 14:26 What do you mean by imbalances?

S3 14:28 Imbalances, for example, and this could be-- I'll bring up a sport. So, say, for example, you have a lacrosse player or a football player. The quarter back is probably throwing with their one arm more exclusively. They're not throwing with their left arm, if they're right handed. So, that right arm is getting different work than the left arm, and they're practicing daily all day long, then they have their performance, their game, et cetera. So, they could be going in to work with Pilates, or doing whatever other workout they choose to engage with, allows us to bring the body back into balance, because their normal physical activity that they are engaging with on the field - practicing or during performance - is not balanced.

S1 15:15 So, it works the other side basically in this situation here?

S3 15:17 Well, and the whole body. Pilates focuses on the whole body, but address those imbalances in the body. It addresses deficits - strength deficits, flexibility for dancers. Many dancers are more concerned about their flexibility. When they come in younger thinking I need to be more flexible, but we know they need to have strength as well. There need to be a balance between the strength and flexibility in order to prevent injury. So, the whole point for me with Pilates is being able to have a regiment that you're engaged with that prevents injury. It's wonderful for rehabilitation from injury as well, but that's not where we want to be. We don't want to ever go to that place, ideally. We want to be able to prevent that injury, and reality is, when you're in rehearsals, your choreographers are not going to have you doing everything to the

right and everything to the left. That would be boring choreography. It's not what we teach our students to do in a composition class, so they might fall to the right, and then again fall to the right, and fall to the right, turn to the right. They might not be turning to the left in this particular work, so they end up with imbalances in their body, even though their daily class that they take in the morning might be very balanced, but that's an hour and a half and the rehearsals are four hours.

S1 16:32

Four hours, right. Do dancers have a dominant side?

S3 16:35

Yeah, I think so. I think so. I think if you're right-handed, there's no getting around the fact that you're right-handed. Do we want to have a dominant side? No. Ideally, we want to be able to do everything to the right and everything to the left, but, I think, reality is that some people are better turners. They're better balancing on one leg than another leg, but we do train daily to try to acquire that sense of symmetry in the body and the ability to do everything on both sides. So, if a choreographer asks you to do something in the direction that you're maybe less accomplished at that you're able to do so.

S1 17:14

So, we're talking about a professional dancer, what kind of procedures do these dance companies have in place to help their folks recover or help them overcome injuries? I've heard of some of the dance companies have physical therapist on staff that are at most at the Broadway shows. That's just an example I've heard of.

S3 17:34

Right. I think larger companies do have physical therapist, and trainers, physicians even that give of their time or hired by the company to work with the dancers. Those are really going to be the big dogs [chuckles], the big companies. The smaller companies, to be honest, don't have that.

S1 17:57

So, are the artist on their own?

S3 17:59

They are, they are. So, often, you might have doctors on your board of directors or people that are willing to volunteer their time. I know at Goucher we have an association with Union Memorial Hospital where many of the physicians have come in and done our physical screenings for our dancers so that they can address those deficits - be aware of those deficits, because sometimes you are not you're not even aware of the deficit until someone actually does a screening of you. And then, usually, those physicians are very good about seeing our students fairly quickly knowing the need to continue to work through the injury, if at all possible. So, I think many companies do the same thing as we do at Goucher. We have people that donate their time, who are very gracious to help our students out knowing that there is a great need for their expertise.

S1 18:53

One of the thoughts that run through my head here as we talk about is so many situations - performing arts - are being devalued in our society. They've been taken out of schools, but you still have people that are passionate about this. How, as a society, do we reverse that? How can we do that? You're in an academic situation. These are things that we all have to think about.

S3 19:17

Right, I think it's education. I think it boils down to education. I think back to my own childhood. My parents were not artists, but I was at the symphony, and I was going to dance performances, and I was going to art galleries, and I learned to appreciate those art forms. Obviously, one of them had a profound impact on me, but I'm not a painter. I'm not a sculptor, but I have a true appreciation for what those artists accomplish and what they're able to do. I think that's really key. It's key from the young ones - from the pre-school-aged child - making sure that they're exposed to the arts. And whether

they decide to engage with them physically - to take the trombone, or to take a dance class, or to engage in a theater production at their high school or middle school - doesn't really matter. The point is will they be an audience member? Will they be a board member? Will they donate money? Will they support it in some way? Maybe they'll engage with it, but if they choose not to, will they be a supporter of? And I think that's really what it boils down to - it's education of the youngest children to make sure that they have an appreciation and a respect.

- S1 20:42 I know one of the things that we've tried to do is we've tried to focus on the physiological side - for the lack of a better term - the athletic side. We don't like to say dancers or athletes. They certainly don't like for us to say that. But some of the physiological things that happen are amazing - the things they do. And as a matter of fact, there is a commercial running nationally where they feature a ballet performer and they talk. You can hear in the background, they are talking about all the reasons that she was told she couldn't dance, and we see her go up en pointe, and the physique is amazing. And the things that she's doing - Misty Campbell?
- S3 21:14 Yeah, Misty Copeland, Under Armour.
- S1 21:15 Misty Copeland, yes. And so, it's amazing how there are some people that are trying to change the message a little bit in society that way.
- S3 21:23 They are, yeah. And to see a strong, powerful woman, and, conversely, you have an African-American woman. Ballet, historically, has been-- if you look at most companies, the majority of the dancers are Caucasian. So, you have this strong, gorgeous, flexible artist that is also an athlete promoting Under Armour, which is fabulous.
- S1 21:53 Why don't dancers like to be considered athletes?
- S3 21:56 I think they don't want to be considered exclusively athletes, if that makes sense. I think artists and artist athletes maybe would be - if we were to be referred to as an athlete - but certainly what is required of dancers is athletic and requires great athletic prowess. But it goes beyond that, because there's an artistry that goes on top of that athletic prowess that isn't necessarily required of another athlete - of the lacrosse player or the soccer player. They don't need to work on that aspect of their endeavors.
- S1 22:31 Yeah, basketball players are not told to jump and then land quietly.
- S3 22:34 Land quietly or what their expression is, or what they're trying to communicate [laughter]. That's a different story.
- S1 22:41 That would be an interesting basketball game, wouldn't it [chuckles]?
- S3 22:42 Exactly, exactly, exactly [chuckles].
- S1 22:44 I can just see the coach, "Yes, we want you to jump as high as you can, but you can't make any noise when you land, and you have to have this look on your face."
- S3 22:51 And it has to look gorgeous, and we have to see a line [chuckles].
- S1 22:53 That's right. Now, there's some dunk contest. I'm sure that we've seen some of that. One of the questions that we have here on our background sheet, It kind of picked my interest a little bit, because we think primarily of dance as a female activity, but there are certainly men involved. There had been great men ballet stars - dance stars. Is it difficult to get guys interested in dance sciences? How do you do that?

- S3 23:19 In dance, specifically, I think, yes, it has been difficult in the United States. You don't see the same thing in Europe. They are rock stars in Europe, almost - the male dancers. Well, all the dancers are rock stars. They are recognized on the streets, et cetera.
- S1 23:36 That's why you had the paparazzi following you. We figured that we had to--
- S3 23:38 [chuckles] Yeah, right. So, I think part of it is the culture, but I do think with so much attention to so many of these dance shows that are out there to both the male and female dancers that are there, that it is becoming a little more accepted to see a male dance - that it can be a profession; that it's a worthy profession; It's an admirable profession. Certainly, I know, at Goucher, one of the things that has helped us is that the males as well as the females are able to double major. So, they're able to study in dance and also study something else. Is it Biology? Is it Psychology? Is it English? Is it Communications? et cetera. And I think that's been helpful specifically for the parents of those students that are a little hesitant sometimes to have their child - and it doesn't matter whether they're female or male - to have their child pursue something that they wonder, "Are they going to be able to make a living? Can they pay the rent doing this?" So, still being able to pursue something they're very passionate about, which is very important, but to combine that with maybe another passion that they have. Is it English? Is it a foreign language? Is it Communications? Is it Biology? et cetera. So, I don't know if that answers your question, but [chuckles]--
- S1 24:58 No, no. Very nice approach. I think there's also some cultural mores as well. My wife and I went to a wedding several years ago, and it was part predominately African-American wedding. And what's amazing was all the little boys that were on the dance floor dancing. It was kind of a sign of manlihood, I guess. I've been to other weddings from European-American descent, and the last things the boys would do would be on the dance floor. So, there's certainly some cultural mores as well.
- S3 25:23 Most definitely, most definitely. I was in Spain two summers ago, and the male dancers there are very well respected by the entire culture. I do think that's something-- that takes time - the cultural shift. It will change. I do see it changing, but it's going to take time.
- S1 25:45 So, not only are we bringing back an appreciation of the performing arts, but we're also making it okay for guys to dance in the United States?
- S3 25:50 Most definitely. Okay for everyone too.
- S1 25:52 Okay for everyone to dance. There we go.
- S3 25:53 Yes, most definitely.
- S1 25:54 That seems to be a good place for us to start to wrap up since we're running out of time. As regular listeners of the podcast know, this is the time that we are going to you a chance to give us your take home message. What is the one thing you want everybody to remember?
- S3 26:06 I would say to follow your passions, to follow your dreams, to not be afraid to make new discoveries whether that is as a student engaging and trying to take new classes or something you haven't tried before. As a teacher, to try a new pedagogy. As a creative artist, to take a risk with the work that you are creating. But to make new discoveries and not to pass up one opportunity that comes your way, because often those opportunities are going to open doors and open your mind to other possibilities

that are quite possibly going to get you closer to your passion or your dream.

S1 26:48

Super take home message. Thank you.

S3 26:50

Thank you. I appreciate it.

S1 26:51

Most of you know that, at this point in the broadcast, we also have our podcast question of the week. And here with our podcast question of the week is one of our producers, Kelli.

S4 27:00

What system of exercise is a tool dancers use to for injury prevention?

S1 27:05

So, that's our podcast question of the week. Be the first one to send us an e-mail at huffinespodcast@hlkn.tamu.edu with the correct answer, and you'll win one of those nifty podcast t-shirts. We're starting on our fourth edition of those shirts, so send in your answers. We hope that all of you take the time next week to download us and listen. We thank you for doing it this week, because next week we will also have another interesting person in world of Sports Medicine and Human Performance. And until that time, we hope that you stay active and healthy.

S2 27:35

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