

Being Your BEST SELF: The Lost Art in Competitive Dance

By Jill Haller

They stink. We're so much better. They think they can beat us? We HAVE to win.

We've all heard these hateful comments. We might have even said some of them ourselves. We've seen some of those parents, coaches, and even students give a sideways look to their direct rivals in competition, or in convention classes. I personally have overheard coaches tell their students not to talk to other students from different teams because they are the "competition." I've watched coaches put full warm-ups or robes on over costumes in backstage line-ups so that other teams won't "steal" their ideas, or for intimidation purposes. I've heard parents argue with opposing team parents about a certain teacher, or a phrase of choreography that is deemed insufficient, or even inappropriate. I've seen parents reserve unnecessarily large dressing spaces for their dancers, limiting the space for teams twice as large as theirs. I've even witnessed dancers' family members stand up after their dancers have competed and gesture the "bring it" stance to opposing team parents. I've listened to teachers or parents in a studio rehearsal, or backstage, reminding their nervous-wreck kids that the whole purpose of competitive dance is to WIN, WIN, WIN!!!

What are we teaching our kids? Aren't competitions supposed to be encouraging, educating, and self-challenging? When did these events turn into cutthroat attitudes, mean girl tactics, and feuding adults? In a land of competition, how can we, as educators, artists and role models, teach our kids humility and grace, when these nasty behaviors are modeled for them? How do we explain to them that these attitudes and behaviors are incorrect, when mean teams go on to win and are successful, despite their appalling character? How can we disprove this approach to sportsmanship, when the dance world (or any world) isn't fair, and the good guys don't always win...or do they?

This is an ongoing conversation among my dance students within their all-girl, college preparatory high school. We offer an informative and holistic program that instructs students through dance courses for graduation credit, as well as co-curricular enrichment. We also provide two competitive dance teams, but our focus is on the education of each dancer, in preparation for college and the professional dance industry. We are different; we have been compared to all varieties of high school dancing, such as a conservatory, an arts school, a studio, and a typical high school dance team, yet we do not fully define any of these. We compete in multiple circuits of dance, including high school competitions, studio conventions, and regional to international competitions. We don't really fit in anywhere, and we're fine with that. Our focus is not the competition, as in the other teams who compete "against" us. They are just as important and beneficial to their own organizations, parents, teammates, and judges. However, we don't care who scores higher among other studios, or even among our

own dancers; they are not the competition. Our focus is the competition against *ourselves*. “Look in the mirror,” I tell them, “*that* is your competition.”

A few months ago, we were at a studio circuit competition and convention. I was running around the hotel ballrooms watching the master teachers inspire young talent, while at the same time, soaking in as much information and inspiration as possible for me to give to my dancers and my teachings. I went to check on my oldest girls, who were in the end of a session. As the class concluded, a few of them pulled me aside to show me a couple of dancers from another studio. You might expect that they were concerned about those dancers being their competition, as I half expected them to share with me. Rather, my teachings in the studio had obviously taken effect when they went on and on about how amazing the girls were. I remember watching those other dancers for a minute, but I don’t remember how they danced, or what skills or artistry they possessed that made them truly amazing. What I *do* remember though, is thinking to myself, “They get it.”

So often, in fact almost weekly, I will ask them, “Who on this team is better than you? Who has a skill, or technique, or performance aesthetic that you can learn from?” They’ve learned, through my almost obnoxious repetition, that the best way to approach feeling or having thoughts of intimidation of another dancer, a *stronger* dancer, is to be *inspired*. They’ve learned that dancing with or “against” someone who is better than them, *makes them better themselves*.

I learned this lesson myself as I grew up in the dance world. I am six feet tall. I have long limbs and the most beautiful hyper-extended legs in the ballet. But I was *never* the best dancer in the room. I had challenges because of my God-given body that didn’t make dance, amateur or professional, easy. I remember being very intimidated by the talent surrounding me in my initial dance classes in college. I remember dance professors making a decision about me the second I prepped my tall stature at the barre in ballet class. I was never the standout, the prodigy, or the one whom everyone wished they could become. However, I learned early (thanks to my parents who understood life, work ethic, and inspiration) to not give up or resent myself for the talent or ability that I felt I lacked, or someone else for being better. Instead, they taught me how to harness my fear (and sometimes jealousy) into a positive learning experience. I know now that it is *that* attitude, along with my work ethic, which earned me professional credits on my résumé. The talent and glory was trivial in comparison.

Later that day, at that same convention and competition, my students competed their dances. During my preparation and pep talks, I reminded them of what *our* idea of competition was. We were there to compete against *ourselves*—to be our best selves. We were there to dance with each other, to put each other first by being our best selves. We were there to be inspired by the great talent and artistry featured in other teams. We were there to grow and learn from

others' abilities. And we were there to WORK HARD. Regardless of the outcome at the competition's awards ceremony, if they took ownership of *who* they are as individuals and as a team—completely outside of their technical and aesthetic abilities as dancers—there is no such option as “win” or “lose.” There is only win. They win when they are kind, they are humble, they are inspired, and they accomplished the best goal in life—maturing as their *best selves* while improving in a myriad of ways.

Ironically, during awards, the girls took home their fair share of the trophies and accolades. But their most prized award of the night? They *earned* the Sportsmanship Award, for being kind and humble, for encouraging others and their teammates, for not taking a one-shot spot on the dance floor too seriously, and for not allowing it to define them as a dancer, or a human being.

So what can we do? How can we change the mentality of “competition” within our students, despite the conflicting opinions and ideas from other studios and schools, and the people who train for and within them? Let’s be honest: we are all human; we all contain an innate competitive nature; we all want everyone else to see the greatness within those we love. It’s natural. I believe it is *this* human nature, which causes such jealousy and intimidation, and which creates a nasty environment from time to time. However, *our* example of kindness and humility will go further with our students than the dance steps we teach them. These are skills that will be needed and used in life, regardless of their future inside or outside the dance world. I believe it is our number one duty as educators and parents to teach them this *first*, then teach them to grande jeté with confidence and skill.

The answer is simple. Ask them. Ask your student or your child: “Is there someone in this studio who is better than you? Of course there is. What can you learn from that dancer? How can you grow making those skills your own? What is so great about that dancer’s character or work ethic? Why do you love dance, and why do you love people?” The answer is the same: Dance makes us free to *become our best selves*.

So instead of giving an evil-eye or making a degrading comment about other dancers, parents, or coaches, remember that it is *I who compete against ME*. Everyone else is there to inspire our own personal progress. Competitions don’t exist to hate or win; they exist to express our art, share our skills, and hone our holistic *best selves*. Want proof? Ask your dancers what they remember about their last competition, or what awards a specific competition dance earned. The answers will surprise, and likely, inspire you. It’s time to stop the vicious victories and instead evoke benevolence and humility. Find what’s been lost, and change the face of competition dance. *Be your best self.*