



Parent Guide to Dance Competitions

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In this guide is designed to give basic knowledge of how dance competitions are organized, their scoring systems, and what most judges are looking for. It will explain basic technique, the artistic aspects of dance and how that affects competition; as well as how we decide the difficulty level and skills that go into each routine. It will discuss the ASAO Dance philosophy of competition, expectations for competition weekends and each awards ceremony, and why we feel competition is an important experience for your dancer.

Mission Statement

The mission of ASAO Dance is to provide a well-rounded dance education in a fun and nurturing environment, with inclusion and safety at the forefront of all lessons. When I decided to form the competition team, the goal was to provide instruction and opportunities for students who want to train more seriously, as well as learn from instructors beyond the scope of experience in our community.

Dance as a Sport

It is important to realize there are vast differences between dance and other sports. Dance is primarily an art form that uses an athletic body as its medium. In baseball, it does not matter how you look or the faces you make while you score your run- if you get to home base before the ball, you score a run. A grey area exists with fouls or the human aspect of seeing if the ball or runner reaches home base first, but otherwise scoring is pretty black and white. Dance is exactly the opposite. It does not necessarily matter the steps they take, but HOW they do them with good technique? With strong movements? With a smile on their face? With pizzazz? There is an element of subjectivity in dance unlike other competitive events.

Figure skating or diving could be compared to dance in this way because they are sports where beauty and form matter greatly in the scores. In these sports, as in dance, you start with a perfect score, and once you start moving points may be deducted for mistakes or lack of technique. In figure skating, there is a governing body that decides on certain steps that must be performed by competitors at each level and decides standards deductions for specific mistakes. Nothing like this exists in dance, although our dancers are evaluated on skill in addition to their artistry. Every judge that we perform in front of is using their own judgment to decide how many points to take for that sloppy arm or those bent knees or the lack of unison on that one part. What we can do as dancers, teacher and competitors, is rehearse our best and perform our best, take their critiques and get better for the next time. As a teacher, I feel this prepares dancers for real world experiences.

How Competitions are Organized

Dance competitions (at least the ones we attend) are run on an adjudicated system, which essentially means that each routine is scored individually, then compared and ranked against others in the same category for overall placements. Every dance routine gets an adjudication award - gold, high gold, platinum, etc.- no matter how they stacked up against the competition. If all 18 dances in a category deserve platinum, then they get it, but only the top 3 dances will get the distinction of an overall title: 1st, 2nd and 3rd. The reason for this system is to award the hard work of every dancer; as a studio, we also use this information to compare our accomplishments year to year at each competition.

All competitions we attend are categorized by levels. This way new dance students are not competing against pre-professional dancers. Some competitions list specific stipulations and others ask that the studio owners use discretion based on number of hours of training, or proficiency in advancing skills. There are generally 3 levels of competition and common distinction is 3 hours or less training per week is "beginner", 3-6 hours per week are "intermediate" and 6+ hours per week are "advanced". When I level our students, I consider all technique classes and rehearsal hours, but not private lessons (not regular enough instruction). If your dancer is in another group (Community Performance Troupe or Staff) I do not include those hours. The level our dance competes in is averaged over the group, so even if one of our team members takes 4 hours per week, her group probably averages out at 3 hours per week. Some of the competitions also list a number of turn rotations, degree of flexibility, or height of leaps to separate leveling. I take all of the dancers' skills into account before registering my final decision. Each of our teams' levels may vary competition to competition based on the event rules and regulations.

Judging

Judging at each competition uses a rubric. Each judge has 100 points to award, for a total per routine of up to 300. Each rubric at each event varies, but most look similar to: Technique 35 pts, Performance 35 pts, Choreography 20 pts, Appearance 10

pts. An example adjudication scale is: Platinum awarded to groups earning 285-300 points, High Gold for 270-284 points, Gold for 255-269 points and High Silver for 240-254 points. To help understand their discretionary decisions, they are each speaking into a microphone, giving corrections, suggestions, and praise about the performance. Our studio administration receives their critique videos and sends them to dancers to review before rehearsal, where we answer questions about judges' comments and practice implementing recommendations as it suits our curriculum.

Judges are respected, credentialed professionals in the dance community, but they are human beings with differing opinions which will shape the way they see each dance that comes before them. Most competitions do their best to put a variety of backgrounds on their judging panel- a ballet judge, a tap judge and a jazz judge is common stereotype. All of these judges will have experience and knowledge outside of their expertise, however what the expectations a ballet judge places on a contemporary routine are vastly different than what the jazz judge will be looking for.

The basic things that all judges are looking for when they judge any age, level or genre of competition are technique, precision, and personality. Technique refers to how well they perform the skills and steps in their dance, based on what is popularly accepted as correct right now. (Over the years, as dance physiotherapy is an emerging career field, we are seeing more and more attention to safer practices, which is altering the dance technique world.) Precision is how sharp and strong they are in their movements, on the beat of the music, and matching their group in timing and exactness of movement. And personality is how they sell the dance- musical theatre routines should have bright smiles and fun faces, whereas contemporary dances may tell a more emotional story, be stoic or have some other personality to portray. No matter the personality, the dancer's commitment to it is the most important thing.

It is also important to note that the same judges will sit at the table for up to 16 hours a day, for three days, watching a new dance every 3-4 minutes. They get tired and they get grumpy, and these things also shape their opinion of the dances in front of them. As frustrating as this human aspect of dance competitions is- it is indicative of real life. If your dancer goes on to professional auditions- they will run into the same frustrations in the audition process. And who among us has not had a bad day at work just because our boss was grumpy?

"All the dances that win do X step, so we need to do that."

Our job as choreographers is to put the best movement possible on your dancers to present them in their best light. We look for creative ways to bring out their strengths. Music choice and costuming are usually carefully selected to help make our routines even more memorable to the judges. We try to create movements that are interesting and fun to watch, captivating you with storytelling and passion. We put appropriate technique in their dances, given their experience, so that they will be successful on stage.

It is also important to note that dancers do not always understand the progression of steps that must be mastered before attempting the skill that they have their eyes set on. Teaching a dancer a skill sooner than he/she is ready for is risky – it could create bad habits, or push muscles beyond what they are capable of safely and result in injury. If they do not have the proper strength, flexibility, technique or skill set that build into a complex move (such as a bridge, backbend, recover, limber, shoulder flexibility, depth of jump, strong handstand needed to create a back handspring), they will end up making modifications to the step that will be difficult to train out later. If your dancer is frustrated because he or she feels like they are being held back, please encourage them to talk to their choreographer or teacher about what they need to work on to move on to the next step. In class, we refer to these as "sub skills." Remind your dancer that beautiful routines and advanced skill sets are not built in a day. All great dancers have to put in hours and years of work in the studio to do what they do and if he or she keeps working hard, taking corrections, and practicing, they'll get there.

What does good technique look like?

My first instinct when I think about answering this question is to tell you to leave that up to the teachers. We have trained and studied for years to know the ins and outs of techniques in dance and will go over these with her in class and rehearsal. Your dancer needs a cheerleader that does not care that her foot was sickled, or her leg was turned in or her head was at the wrong angle. However, in the spirit of education- here are the 5 most important points in technique...

1. Posture- Most dances will require an upright posture of the dancer. Chin high, shoulders back and down, ribs closed, back straight, spine neutral through the bottom (not thrusting forward or lifting up behind). Every dance form, except ballet, will vary from this posture through the movement, but the dancer always returns to proper "aligned" posture.
2. Core- Dancers must maintain a strong core while they are dancing for balance and control. A dancer without a strong core will fall out of turns, be uncontrolled during leaps and flail the arms and legs instead of having proper control of them.

3. Hip alignment- It is almost never correct if you see a dancer's booty sticking out while she's dancing- during a kick, leap, turn, etc. If the body is upright, the hips should be square under the ribs or in more advanced techniques they may be used to counterbalance the body.
4. Knees- When we refer to "straight knees" in dance, we do not just mean straight, it means all muscles engaged (squeezing through the back of the knee). Which direction the knee faces is also important, generally to the ceiling is the right direction in a leap, kick or extension.
5. Feet- Feet should be extended through the ankle and the toes and stretched away from the center body line to create a pointed foot. The goal is for the line of the leg to extend into the foot. Improvement is needed for those who do not fully extend through their ankle, or need to work on flexibility through their ankle; kids who use Barbie foot, where their ankle is extended but their toes are spread out or relaxed; sickled feet where the big toe curves inward.

Keep in mind that your child's coach will critique them, as will the judges in their notes. As a parent, we ask you support the team's success with compliments. Compliments that are very specific are helpful! Here are some ideas of things you can positively share with our team after a performance:

- Were they energetic?
- In unison?
- Sharp in their movement?
- Did they make great facial expressions?
- Did it leave you wanting more?

And consider that as you watch her competitors dance as well. We make it a very loud point in competition rehearsal to find the best we can in all we see – it is not our dancer's role to negatively critique other studios. If one hear cheers from the crowd that didn't come from their studio while dancing- that's a clear sign that the environment and camaraderie are valued!

What are our expectations?

Going into awards, let your hopes be high! Your dancers have worked so hard and poured everything into their performance! Dance teachers want our kids to hope for everything, but never expect anything. There are tons of things that will alter the outcome of the day and your dancer only had control of one small part of it. It is natural to want to win- but expectation set us up for disappointment. **Keep in mind that a strong adjudication, a judges' award, and a compliment in our critique video – are all ways to win. The ability to congratulate those that did place, or received high adjudication, is also winning (as sportsmanship is a critical lesson for our team!).**

Please understand that the lack of emphasis we place on winning is not a defeatist attitude. We know our kids have what it takes to win. We push them every day; we see them accomplish amazing things; we know they are capable of even more great things; we usually know what they are capable of long before they do. My approach to competition is one of self-improvement. I want the girls to set their own goals, that they are 100% in charge of, (hitting the timing on x part of the dance, remembering to spot on this turn, not dropping face during a difficult step) and base their accomplishments off of what they know the improved on.

A great conversation starter on the way to competition- What is your goal for today? If the answer is "a clean performance" or "to remember to smile during this step" or "to spot this turn I've been having trouble with" we're on the right path. After your dancer wins, a great question to ask is- what other routines did you see that you really respected or liked? If your dancer comes home disappointed- what is something you did really well today that you are proud of? And what do you want to work on for the next time?

Why do we compete?

Competitions provide an organized performance opportunity, with feedback from professional judges from around the US. It is an opportunity for our dancers to see what other dancers around the area are learning and with a healthy sense of competition, motivate our dancers to be better, work harder and learn more. If we go into it with the right attitude- an attitude of bettering ourselves with each performance and growing as artists, it can be a great, beneficial, and learning experience for your dancer each time.

Everyone's Role During Competition Weekends

Dancers should be focused on their performance. They should be respectful to their teammates, teachers, parents,

everyone from the competition and other studios. They are in charge of their own bag, putting on the right costumes in the right order, correct shoes on, jewelry on. It is expected that they will arrive on time and use the maximum free time to practice or stretch/warm up. Dancers should know their routine numbers for the day; it helps to print our schedule and have it in their dance bag.

Coaches will be as available as possible to help dancers with their dance, with their nerves and with anything else going on. We have many dancers to support throughout the day and many responsibilities to contend with. Coaches will also have the groups' music available to lead the team in running the dance in the hallway, dancing, marking or just thinking through it. Our coaches will also make sure each team member has all parts of their costume (including accessories) on before they take the stage.

Dance Parents should assist their dancer as is appropriate for your situation. Some parents oversee their dancer (or a fellow dancer) hair and makeup – we will assign those roles at our costume rehearsal before the first event. IT IS NOT A DANCE PARENT'S ROLE to critique your child's dancing. If you feel she needs some reminders, ask the lead coach ONLY. This will ease your relationship and your stress level for the day. Although we do want to hold our dancers to the expectation that they will act in a respectful manner, please remember that when they act uncharacteristically, this is most likely nerves and stress talking. Responding in love in the moment will lead to a more peaceful day for all. Reminding him/her later how she could have done better will lead to a more peaceful day the next time.

Other family members are an essential part of the competition weekend. A supportive audience is a great asset to a dancer! Remember to wish them luck, congratulate all team members after the performance and tell your dancer how proud you are.

Everyone- Please be respectful to all dancers, all family members, coaches and everyone from the competition and other studios. Remember our rule- don't talk about the other teams/routines while you're still in the venue. No matter if we all disagreed with the costumes/ song choice/ movement style of the routine on stage, those dancers' parents and teachers are very proud of them. They have put in just as much effort as we all have.

Cheering – It's wonderful that all of our dancers have so many friends and family that are there to cheer them on and are waiting with big hugs when they get off stage. However, when they are performing onstage, please keep in mind the tone of the dance and only cheer out loud with sassy, high-energy dances. When we know a dancer or group has been working so hard on a certain part of the dance, we all want to stand up and cheer when they execute it perfectly onstage! In some cases, this is great and can be beneficial to the dancer. However, when the tone is lower and more serious, a scream or cheer can be distracting to both the dancers and the judges. You can certainly cheer all you want when the dance is over! The more, the better! *Please do not run backstage to meet your dancer/teammates. We will take them quickly to the photo booth first, then you are welcome to connect!

In Closing

Thank you for reading to the end of this guide. We hope you have found it educational and helpful. We're looking forward to a great season ahead of us!