The High Kick - A Vanishing Act?

By Cathy Wheat

Having been a director for 25 years, I have seen trends come and go, one disturbing trend is the widespread demise of the technically correct high kick. Some possible reasons for this are improper instruction, inability to analyze movement, a lack of conditioning and a decrease in the time spent working on kicks by both the team and the individual.

The explanation of the mechanics of a high kick doubles as a checklist for analyzing the skill. The checklist should include:

1. head remains in line with spine
2. shoulders pressed down and back
3. ribcage lifted
4. pelvis parallel to floor
5. movement initiates from hip joint
6. kicking leg fully extended
7. ankle extended
8. supporting leg with only a slight bend and kneecap forward
9. supporting foot parallel
10. feet prep together
11. small prep
12. leg lifted, not thrown
13. leg lowered, not dropped
14. kick at 12:00
15. kicking leg flat against body
16. stamina to maintain technique

Numbers 1-4 on the checklist require complete control and stabilization of the head and torso. This is not possible without good upper body strength. Numbers 5-7 and

12-14 require muscular strength and endurance in the lower body. Numbers 6, 8, 9, and 15 require flexibility. Numbers 10 and 11 involve both strength and flexibility. Number 16 is cardiovascular endurance. As directors we do our students a disservice if we require them to kick but don't provide them with the tools that allow them to perform correctly and safely. You must decide if you are willing to commit to the time that is necessary to develop strength, flexibility and endurance. This will be a team time commitment; we can no longer assume that the dancers will spend the necessary time on their own. Unfortunately, the majority of dancers today do not possess that type of work ethic.

The following is a time-table that I have found to be effective:

Off Season

• Stretching–30 to 45 minutes daily (does not include warm up)
• Strength–15 minutes daily (squats, walking lunges, standing leg extensions, pushups, sit ups)
• 45 minutes twice a week lifting weights
Endurance–45 minutes twice a week (power walking, aerobics)
• 45 minutes three times a week (kicking down floor, stamina kicks, full out kicks)

During Season

• Stretching–30 minutes daily (does not include warm up)
• Strength–15 minutes daily (same as off season)
• Endurance–45 minutes daily (stamina kicks and full out kicks)

Summer (two weeks)

• 2 hour session daily for stretching, exercises for strength and conditioning by kicking

To get your dancers to value technique and height equally you must model this for them. Rewarding proper technique is your most powerful tool. I have found that the following suggestions work for my team. Do not allow dancers to kick above their waist until they can demonstrate the proper technique at that level. Then let them progress to chest high, face high and full out. You must check them at each level before allowing them to attempt a higher one. Reward their efforts by assigning them to kick lines. Allow only those dancers who have proper technique and height to perform a high kick routine. If you don't have enough qualified dancers to make a kickline then continue to work and make the performance of a high kick a team goal. If you allow dancers to kick without proper technique or height then why would they want to work to improve? Make it a privilege for your girls to be able to try out for Miss High Kick. Don't reward (or force) those who have not mastered the techniques. Last but not least (especially in their eyes) allow those dancers who have mastered the skills to kick and stretch less in class. My team lives to "kick out". They try out for me and if they are good enough, they can either sleep later or get dressed earlier depending on when our kick session occurs within the workout. Once the strength and flexibility have been developed less time is

required to maintain them; have them do just enough to maintain their stamina and that in turn will maintain the other two components. Their incentive to stay in shape over the summer is to be able to "kick out" and therefore not attend our two hour kick session.

This is just a thumbnail sketch of what is involved in striving for properly performed and safe high kicks. This may not be for your team and that does not make them any less of a team. If you feel that your team needs to spend their time in other areas then your best decision would be to eliminate high kicks. Injuries are more prevalent when the body is forced to do something for which it has not been conditioned. Strength, flexibility, and endurance require adequate time and consistency.