

IMPROVING ARTISTIC EXPRESSIVENESS IN STANDARD DANCES – YOUTH LEVEL

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Abstract. *In order to achieve high-performance results, a good knowledge of all aspects related to the complex training of athletes is vital. Evaluation and scoring criteria in DanceSport and especially Standard Dances highlight more and more the importance of artistic training and expression for dancers. This scientific approach aims to find an explicit formulation of some opinions about the systematisation of improvisation lessons and creativity training, raising a series of personal and professional concerns regarding artistic expressiveness and body expression from the perspective of Standard Dances. The research methods used in the present paper are: literature review, observation (systematic and participatory observation), conversation and experiment. The investigated sample consists of 10 mixed couples of D-Class Standard dancers (10 girls and 10 boys) aged 16-18, who participate in official Youth competitions and are affiliated to the Romanian DanceSport Federation (FRDS). Analysis of the obtained results has revealed that the differences between the initial and final tests can be considered statistically significant and therefore the training methodology used, including the methods, the means and especially the dosage and stages of training, lead to higher indices, the Student's t Test values supporting and validating the research hypothesis. By addressing motor skills in a structured learning process, we will be able to influence in an advantageous way the path from spontaneous body expression to educated expressive behaviours.*

Keywords: *DanceSport, Standard Dances, artistic and aesthetic training.*

Introduction

DanceSport is a mix between art and sport (Markula, 2018), as it combines the elaborate way of communicating the artistic movement in full synchronisation with the character of the melodic line and the competitive character. This special activity is continuously changing due to technical progress and the increasing complexity of dance elements or figures, with regulations that constantly adapt to the present time and society (Picart, 2012), always offering an amazing show.

According to specialists in the field (Mackrell, 2019), dance represents the rhythmic movement of the body, usually to music and within a certain given space, with the purpose of expressing an idea or emotion. Also, it can release energy or simply help to take delight in the movement itself. It is the human language before its synthesis, which fosters creativity and individuality (Gill, 2014).

DanceSport is “a modern cultural phenomenon” (Soraka & Sapezinskiene, 2015, p. 1976) that has become “a multi-sensory pursuit that connects human beings in a particular kind of relationship, which gives dance its power” (Grau, 2015, p. 233).

DanceSport influences the development of both physical and mental skills, creating an environment that leads to the development of social interactions. Fink et al. (2021) concluded

in their study that, “despite the cultural diversity in dance movements and contexts, the primary communicative functions of dance may be the same across societies” (p. 351).

According to Mayer (2012), the artistic side of dance involves the athletic side as a means of creating and improving performance in terms of both motor quality and aesthetic form. However, if dance is regarded as a performance art, “the definition of success might not be that clear, since the overall goal in art forms is not as explicit compared with those in sports or animal behavior” (Özçimder et al., 2018, p. 61867).

While Suits (1988) argues that judged sports such as figure skating and dance are aesthetic performances rather than games, Hurka (2015) states that they are “simultaneously performances and games” (p. 317). In addition to the two aspects that are thought to be connected, Maheu et al. (2019) say that their main goal is to skate or dance beautifully, but the requirement to perform elements or figures makes it more difficult to achieve this goal.

Other sports specialists (Bayraktar, 2019) propose a new approach for DanceSport coaches to improve performance, which consists in adapting relevant strategies taken from other expressive sports (such as gymnastics and figure skating) by using elements that belong to artistic expressiveness and motor expression. Thus, they fulfil both requirements for DanceSport performers: competitive athletes and dance artists.

Such opinions highlight the need to maintain the aesthetic quality of DanceSport, as technical performance is achieved in stages and should have the role to support the aesthetics of movement and artistic performance without overlooking the importance of the connection, leading and partnering skills in the dancing couples (Premelč et al., 2019)

DanceSport and especially Standard Dances are among the aesthetic or expressive sports where the artistic qualities and beauty of the dance itself are emphasised and where success is often influenced by subjective opinions.

The most important criterion that has remained unchanged so far is the ranking of competitors, which is based on the direct comparison of dancing couples (direct comparative analysis of sports and artistic performances). However, when technical performance can no longer differentiate dancing couples, the artistic factor and each dancer’s ability to perform as well as possible (in aesthetic terms) the dance routines and improve the current principles of tempo detection, including ballroom dance style recognition, become decisive factors.

Methodology

The purpose of the research is to develop body expressiveness and artistic performance using an intervention programme intended for youth ballroom dancers.

Through this approach, we aimed to achieve the following tasks:

- information and bibliographic documentation in order to establish the theoretical and methodological background related to the research topic and objectives;
- the theoretical and methodological approach to the issue of artistic training and expression based on a scientific background and the authors’ personal experience;
- presentation of the artistic training methods used in Standard Dances for Youth;
- educating the posture, artistic execution, rhythmicity, musicality and motor expressiveness specific to dancers;

- developing the content of the tests, applying the tests and checking the efficiency of the means used in the artistic training of dancers;
- processing and interpretation of the obtained data.

Hypothesis

The particular content of the intervention programme contributes to improving the dancers' posture, artistic execution and ability to perform expressive motor actions.

Participants

The investigated sample consists of 10 mixed couples of D-Class Standard dancers (10 girls and 10 boys) aged 16-18, who participate in official Youth competitions and are affiliated to the Romanian DanceSport Federation (FRDS). The dancers have been practising DanceSport for the last 5-6 years, and the couples have been formed for 2-3 years. In general, they are all well-proportioned, with minor exceptions. The conformation and overall appearance of the investigated dancers are pleasant, with correct postures and elegant attitudes. Male dancers, with few exceptions, belong to the ectomorph body type (harmoniously developed lower limbs that are longer than the trunk, narrow pelvis, predominantly tall and slim - according to Sheldon's Constitutional Theory mentioned by Mitrache and Predoiu, 2016), having good spinal mobility. Female dancers have normal height and weight indices and also fit the ectomorph body type, with beautiful and harmonious bodies, reduced adipose tissue and very good mobility in small and large joints.

Research participants are in a complicated stage of the process of growth and development of the body in all aspects, which is called puberty or adolescence (14-20 years old).

Before the start of the experiment, all dancers and their legal representatives were informed about the project stages and filled out a document through which they took note and gave their consent to participate in the study (ethical principles being respected).

Measurements

Initial and final tests:

- Test 1 - Technical aspects: timing, posture, balance, coordination, quality of movements (Slow Waltz, structure: 27-30 bpm [beats per minute])

Evaluation criteria:

1st Criterion - C1: Timing/ Observance of the musical structure - 2 points (1 point per dancer)

2nd Criterion - C2: Step/ Step orientation/ Degree of execution of the turns - 4 points (2 points per dancer)

3rd Criterion - C3: Technical structures/ Specific holds/ Static and dynamic balance elements/ Specific step connections - 4 points (2 points per dancer)

- Test 2 - Partnering elements, relationship-leadership (Quickstep, structure: 50 bpm)

Evaluation criteria:

1st Criterion - C1: - correct position of the dancers in pairs - 4 points (2 points per dancer)

2nd Criterion - C2: - style/ lead/ hold/ shaping elements - 4 points (2 points per dancer)

3rd Criterion - C3: - execution of weight transfer from one leg to another, static and dynamic balance - 2 points (1 point per dancer)

- Test 3 - Choreography and presentation (Viennese Waltz, structure: 58-60 bpm)

Evaluation criteria:

1st Criterion - C1: Alignment/ Moving on the dance floor/ Directions - 2 points (1 point per dancer)

2nd Criterion - C2: - Presentation/ Floor entry - Floor exit/ Ability to avoid other dancing couples - 4 points (2 points per dancer)

3rd Criterion - C3: Positioning in relation to the partner/ Pair positioning on the floor/ Posture between dances/ Concentration of dancers - 4 points (2 points per dancer)

- Test 4 - Ability to perform expressive motor actions in accordance with the character of the musical style (Tango, structure: 31-33 bpm)

Evaluation criteria:

1st Criterion - C1: Ability of the dancing couple to materialise the artistic character of the performance through body expressiveness - 4 points (2 points per dancer)

2nd Criterion - C2: The dancers' motor ability to adapt and transpose the interpretive character of any musical style (flowing and lyrical, jerky and lively, heroic or playful music), as well as their ability to choose the most suitable and expressive means from a wide range of possibilities - 2 points (1 point per dancer)

3rd Criterion - C3: Ability of the dancing couple to show first of all synchronisation, followed by cohesion and harmony, the level of expressiveness being equally important - 4 points (2 points per dancer)

Procedure

The research was conducted in the Feather Step Dance Studio, whose area is 110 square meters and which has all the necessary equipment to carry out competitive sports activity.

To make the evaluation as objective as possible for all of four tests, we used a judging-featured method, namely the Delphi technique, which relies on a panel of experts (Predoiu, 2020) who award points in both the initial and final evaluations. The three panel evaluators are instructors at the Feather Step Sports Dance Club in Bucharest (musical accompaniment: first audition, with dancers performing the structures for 1 min and 30 sec per dance, the break between dances is 30 sec, and the total score for a dancing couple is 10 points). All choreography pieces fulfil the technical requirements in force, according to the D-level programme for Standard Dances adopted by the Romanian DanceSport Federation.

Staging of the research:

- June 2021: Creating and establishing the lead technology and movement content; performing the initial evaluation;

- July-November 2021: Educating the artistic posture, aesthetic execution, rhythmicity and motor musicality, as well as developing body expressiveness and artistic imagination by implementing the proposed approach;

- December 2021: Final evaluation.

The 6 months of training (2.5 to 6 hours per week – allocated time varying according to the school schedule) as part of the present quasi-experimental study include:

1. Mesocycle for the resumption of sports activity (June 2021): a period of adaptation to the new training conditions and increase in the functional ability of the body.

2. Accommodation mesocycles (June-August 2021): varied games and rhythmic themes to form the basis of rhythmicity/ motor musicality; structures of classical dance and ballet exercises performed at the bar and/or in the centre of the room, with an emphasis on the education of posture and artistic execution, as well as dance step combinations.

3. Basic mesocycles (August-November 2021): structures of classical dance and ballet exercises performed at the bar and/or in the centre of the room, with an emphasis on the education of artistic execution; exercises specific to the training of expression, with the objective of developing body and facial expressions and artistic imagination; dance step combinations.

4. Training and evaluation mesocycle (November 2021): exercise structures performed at the bar and/or in the centre of the room; dance routines with step variations.

5. Recovery microcycles (November-December 2021).

The specific methodology involved addressing the training components in different weights throughout the programme (Năstase, 2011), as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *Content of the training periods: June-December 2021*

Training period	Mesocycle type	No. of training lessons	No. of training days
General	Accommodation (29.06-31.07)	13	13
	Basic (04.08-11.09)	15	15
Specific	Basic (15.09-23.10) + Recovery microcycle (27-29.10)	15+2	15
	Preparation and evaluation (02-25.11)	10	10
	Final testing	1	1
	Transition	Recovery microcycle (30.11-02.12)	2
	Period: 23 weeks - 58 training lessons (1.5-2 h)		

So, the largest share of the training performed by the dancing couples involved in this experiment is allocated to artistic training, more precisely, over 56% of the training methodology, while physical training and technical training are allocated approximately 12% each. Psychological training is found in a percentage of 9.61% (we mention that it was conducted by a sport psychologist with whom we collaborated to carry out the research and who addressed topics such as self-confidence, attention concentration, visualisation, motivation, activation control, control of negative emotions). Tactical training has a smaller percentage of 8.65%, and for the theoretical training, the percentage is close to 2%. The overall/ mixed type of training (development of the specific training state, development of motor skill combinations, improvement of the technique and dance routines, artistic training, mental preparation for the competition) have a weight of only 3.85%, being addressed only in the pre-competitive mesocycles. (Table 2)

Table 2. Training requirements – Quantitative indicators of the training components for June-December 2021

Mesocycle type	No. H. Tr.	No. H. Tec. Tr.	No. H. Art. Tr.	No. H. Phys. Tr.	No. H. Psyc. Tr.	No. H. Tact. Tr.	No. H. Theo. Tr.	No. H. Mix. Tr.
Accommodation	24	4	11	2	2	3	1	1
Basic	27	3	17	2	3	2	0	0
Basic	27	2	17	1	2	2	0	3
+	+							
Recovery	3		1	1	2			
Preparation	18	2	12	1	1	1	1	0
+								
Evaluation								
Final evaluation	2							
Recovery microcycle	3	0	1	0	1	1	0	0
Total amount of hours	104	12	59	6	10	9	2	4
%		11.54	56.73	5.77	9.61	8.65	1.92	3.85

Note: No. H. - Number of Hours; Tr. - Training; Tec. - Technical; Art. - Artistic; Phys. - Physical; Psyc. - Psychological; Tact. - Tactical; Theo. - Theoretical; Mix. = Complex.

The training programme included the preparatory stage consisting of multilateral and specific physical training for 30 min, the fundamental stage lasting 90 min (45 min dedicated to technical/ tactical/ theoretical/ psychological training and 45 min allocated for individual/ partner choreography rehearsal with varied tempo) and the recovery stage (stretching and breathing exercises) performed for 20 min (Table 3).

Table 3. Planning the content of aesthetic training and rhythmic-musical training

Training programme	Aesthetic training	Rhythmic-musical training
June 2021	20 min classical dance - specific exercise structures	15 min/ 1-2 exercise structures
July 2021	20 min DanceSport - specific step structures	15 min/ 1-2 exercise structures
August 2021	20 min DanceSport - specific step structures 20-30 min Slow Waltz - varied dance steps & dance routines	15 min/ 1-2 exercise structures
September 2021	20 min classical dance - specific exercise structures 20-30 min Viennese Waltz - specific step structures and dance routines	15 min/ 1-2 exercise structures
October 2021	20 min ballet - specific exercise structures 20-30 min Tango - specific step structures and dance routines	15 min/ 1-2 exercise structures
November 2021	20 min ballet - specific exercise structures 20-30 min Quickstep - specific step structures and dance routines	15 min/ 1-2 exercise structures

Methodological indications: The first weeks include separate learning structures in different rhythms and tempos, accompanied by explanations/ demonstration/ correction of motor actions and a large number of repetitions to ensure the correct technical execution. After mastering those mentioned above, the structures are performed as connections, and each exercise is created so as to become a unitary complex in the final stage (when the structures are performed in succession, with no breaks).

The created motor rhythmicity systems involve the ability to perform various and repeatable motor actions at certain intervals, being precisely organised in time and space; in Standard Dances, motor rhythmicity is the ability to perceive and reproduce through movements the specific musical accompaniment in terms of the sequence of highlights in a musical phrase and to perform movements whose duration must correspond to musical notes.

We mention that, although the technique of the steps used in each Standard Dance style is under no circumstance neglected, the couples of dancers must highlight the character and rhythm of each Standard Dance as well as the expressiveness inspired by the musical support.

Judging System

According to the Regulation in force issued by the WDSF (Judging Systems, 2021), the dancing couples are judged based on four criteria (two covering the technical aspects of the performance, and the other two, the artistic qualities) for each dance style, separately:

- Technical aspects: Technical qualities, Posture and balance, Balance (static/ dynamic; individual/ couple), Body line, shape, design, Positions and transitions (body), Positions of arms and grips, Movement coordination, Body actions (both general and style-specific), Movement dynamics (fluidity, weight transfer, synchronisation);

- Movement to music: Rhythm, Tempo, Rhythmic Structure, Phrasing/ Timing, Synchronisation, Musicality;

- Partnering skills: Physical connection, Communication without physical connection, Coherence; Leading elements, concordance of the leading elements with those belonging to the character of the dance style;

- Choreography and presentation: Well-balanced choreography (content, mode of travel, spacing, partnering, level of difficulty), Atmosphere, Creativity, Expressiveness and Interpretive elements.

Thus, the final (and initial) evaluation criteria were designed in relation to the judging regulation in force and the aesthetic and artistic aspects that we considered to be important for the dancers' performance.

Methods

Like other sciences, the research field of physical education and sport, in all its complexity, uses general, particular and specific methods. In this study, the following methods were used:

- Literature review - consulting Romanian and foreign bibliographic sources (articles, web pages, etc.) provided by specialists in the field of DanceSport and classical dance, physical education and sport, psychology and sociology;
- Observation - is one of the oldest and most commonly used research methods because it is the easiest to apply in technical terms and does not require sophisticated equipment; this method was necessary in the current study when talking about the activity of experts who awarded points at the initial and final evaluations of dancers;
- Conversation - facilitates the investigation of inner life/ intentions/ interests/ aspirations/ desires/ opinions/ attitudes/ beliefs/ conflicts/ biases/ feelings/ mentalities/

values/ professional status through a premeditated discussion between the researcher and participants; this method was used in the training of dancers in order to get them familiar with the present research and allowed us to observe them during the study;

- Experiment - is a fundamental scientific research method by which deliberate changes are made to phenomena in order to study them under relatively controlled conditions to see the outcomes of the intervention. An experiment is a rigorously and methodically conducted logical approach used in research to make causal inferences about the impact of an independent variable on a dependent variable (Predoiu 2021);
- Mathematical statistics - was performed using the Microsoft Office 2019 Professional Plus 2019 program and consisted in calculating several indicators such as: arithmetic mean, mean difference; median; minimum; maximum; standard deviation, coefficient of variation, effect size; confidence interval; significance threshold, mean deviation and Student's *t* Test used to validate or invalidate the null hypothesis.

Results

Table 4. *T1: Technical aspects*

Test 1: Slow Waltz	Initial	Result	Final
Mean	7.24		7.60
Median	7.30		7.60
Mean difference		0.36	
Standard deviation	0.55		0.35
Minimum	6.2		7.0
Maximum	8.2		8.2
Increase		5.0%	
Confidence interval	0.20		0.52
Coefficient of variation	7.6%		4.6%
<i>t</i> Test		5.01	
<i>d</i> (Cohen)		1.59	
<i>p</i> (significance threshold)		0.001	

For Test 1, Technical aspects (Slow Waltz), the final evaluation shows an increase of 0.36 points (meaning 5.0%), and the confidence interval for the mean difference is within 0.20-0.52. The two resulting tests are homogeneously dispersed. The effect size has a value of 1.59, which indicates a very large difference between the resulting means; the value of the significance threshold is $p = 0.001$ – the result is statistically significant. (Table 4)

Table 5. T2: Partnering elements

Test 2: Quickstep	Initial	Result	Final
Mean	7.06		7.66
Median	7.10		7.80
Mean difference		0.60	
Standard deviation	0.52		0.37
Minimum	6.0		7.0
Maximum	7.8		8.2
Increase		8.5%	
Confidence interval	0.43		0.77
Coefficient of variation	7.3%		4.8%
<i>t</i> Test		8.22	
<i>d</i> (Cohen)		2.60	
<i>p</i> (significance threshold)		<0.001	

For Test 2, Partnering elements, relationship-leadership (Quickstep), the final evaluation shows an increase of 0.60 points (meaning 8.5%), and the confidence interval for the mean difference is within 0.43-0.77. The obtained scores demonstrate that the dispersion of the results is homogeneous in both tests. The size effect index has a value of 2.60, which indicates a very large difference between the resulting means; the value of the significance threshold is $p < 0.001$ – the result is statistically significant. (Table 5)

Table 6. T3: Choreography and presentation

Test 3: Viennese Waltz	Initial	Result	Final
Mean	7.24		8.16
Median	7.20		8.20
Mean difference		0.92	
Standard deviation	0.69		0.59
Minimum	6.0		7.0
Maximum	8.0		9.0
Increase		12.7%	
Confidence interval	0.72		1.12
Coefficient of variation	9.5%		7.2%
<i>t</i> Test		10.17	
<i>d</i> (Cohen)		3.22	
<i>p</i> (significance threshold)		<0.001	

For Test 3, Choreography/dance routine and presentation (Viennese Waltz), the final evaluation shows an increase of 0.92 points (meaning 12.7%), and the confidence interval for the mean difference is within 0.72-1.12. The obtained scores demonstrate that the dispersion of the results is homogeneous in both tests. The effect size (Cohen's *d*) has a value of 3.22, which indicates a very large difference between the resulting means; the value of the significance threshold is $p < 0.001$. (Table 6)

Table 7. T4: Expressive motor actions in accordance with the musical support

Test 4: Tango	Initial	Result	Final
Mean	7.46		8.30
Median	7.70		8.40
Mean difference		0.84	
Standard deviation	0.70		0.54
Minimum	6.0		7.2
Maximum	8.2		9.0
Increase		11.3%	
Confidence interval	0.63		1.05
Coefficient of variation	9.4%		6.5%
<i>t</i> Test		9.00	
<i>d</i> (Cohen)		2.85	
<i>p</i> (significance threshold)		<0.001	

For Test 4 (ability to perform expressive motor actions in accordance with the character of the musical style: Tango), the final evaluation shows an increase of 0.84 points (meaning 11.3%), and the confidence interval for the mean difference is within 0.63-1.05. The obtained scores demonstrate that the results are homogeneously dispersed. The effect size has a value of 2.85, which indicates a very large difference between the resulting means; the value of the significance threshold is $p < 0.001$ – the result is statistically significant. (Table 7)

The research results highlight significant differences between the initial and final tests, which is emphasised by the values achieved and the important progress with a probability of 99% (or more).

Discussion and Conclusion

In the context of the continuous transformation of dance due to technical progress and the increasing complexity of elements or figures, the growing expansion of DanceSport is an area of interest for specialists (Stinson, 2014), whose concern is to discover the best methodological training directions through scientific research. Moreover, there is a constant interest of specialists in highlighting the most effective behaviours for athletes in general (Pelin et al., 2018).

Similarly to any other competitive sport, an imperative condition in DanceSport is the existence of a well-defined plan and a perfect strategy regarding the training of dancers, regardless of its type (Lakes et al., 2016). In order to achieve optimal training, it is necessary to consider the knowledge and complex analysis of all the components that make up the performance capacity. Researchers mention the importance of eye-hand coordination, visual discrimination and space-time orientation skills in DanceSport (Zahiu et al., 2019), which has become an activity that increasingly challenges athletes' limits in motor and psychological terms.

The particular content of the intervention programme contributed to improving the dancers' posture and artistic performance. By testing the ability to perform expressive motor actions according to the musical style, it was noted that the dancing couples recorded significant progress with a probability of over 99%. Thus, the null hypothesis was rejected. In addition, all dancing couples involved in the research significantly improved their ranking in

national dance competitions, with 3 couples reaching the final of the 2022 National Championship and 4 couples reaching the final of the 2022 National Cup competition.

The means specific to classical dance, such as educating body expressiveness, rhythmicity and motor musicality, must be found in the content of the training programme for DanceSport and especially Standard Dances (Thomson, 2020). The need to implement specific means of expression lies precisely in the very nature of DanceSport and first of all Standard Dances, which are characterised by plastic, fluid, elegant and expressive forms of movement (Chappell et al., 2009).

The current research raises awareness about the true meaning of the complex and varied training of dancers, in particular the artistic training aspects that are vital for achieving high sports performance, and also creates the prerequisites for further extensive research that would be able to demonstrate the degree of connection between the artistic training and other elements of the training process.

We mention that the Romanian DanceSport Federation does not have centralised data on artistic and aesthetic training for any category of dancers, which is why our approach is not able to compare the results obtained with those of a national average category. We intend to continue the research in this direction in order to expand the documentation and expertise areas. We believe that many aspects of this scientific research can represent, for both DanceSport specialists and enthusiasts, a substantial material about artistic expressiveness, motor skills and the diversity of methods and means used in the specific training programme.

Authors' Contribution

Both authors have equally contributed to this study.

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