Putting Your Best Foot Forward!

5 exercises that focus on your feet

"Arch foot...heels dropping... point toes...pull up on toes."

Have you read these comments on your feis results or heard your dance teacher yelling them? Are you plagued by an ankle injury and trying to regain strength and stability in that foot? It's time to focus on your feet!

BY: Target Training Founder & Coach, Ellen G. Waller

Focus on your Feet

Irish dancers are expected to perform a delicate balance of power and grace while maintaining perfect technique. A critical component to the aesthetic of an Irish dancer is the shape of their foot. While bearing weight, you're expected to be high on the ball of your foot or tips of your toes. When your foot leaves the floor, you strive for the perfect, high-arched, fully extended point. Meanwhile, while landing a jump or executing a difficult move, any faulty alignment or poor technique can contribute to an injury. The ankle and foot are the two most common sites of injuries in Irish dancers and understanding proper alignment while performing various foot and ankle exercises will increase strength and mobility. These are critical to an Irish dancer's success. Not only will you show improvement in your point and toe height, but specialized exercise therapy is effective in injury prevention.

Irish dancers commonly "force their feet", giving the perception of greater turnout, to compensate for a limited range of motion in their hips (where turnout originates). This results in faulty alignment of the foot and increases a dancer's risk of injury. The first step in preventing this is to understand proper foot alignment.

Foot Alignment: Pronation, Supination & Neutral

Pronation - rolling in on the foot, placing most of the weight on the inside of the foot, and collapsing the arch. Sometimes the term "winged" is used to describe a pronated foot. Unfortunately, this is a common position seen in Irish dancers who are trying to force their feet to turn out instead of originating the movement from their hip. Injuries may occur if the foot is pronated/winged in any weight bearing movements and should be avoided.

Supination - rolling out on the foot, placing most of the weight on the outside of the foot and raising the arch up. Another term used to describe supination is "sickled". Dancers can be prone to sickling with weak ankles, as they have a greater range of motion inward compared to outward, or due to their genetics. Injuries may occur if the foot is supinated/sickled in any weight bearing movements and should be avoided.

Neutral - foot and ankle in alignment, weight is evenly distributed along the bottom of the foot when it is flat on the ground.

The International Association for Dance Medicine and Science explains that when pronation or supination occurs "abnormal alignment ensues, causing medial stress along the leg and knee, and is quite possibly linked to increased injury potential. The injury for the foot and ankle complex is the highest of all joint systems. Thus, this strategy of allowing the foot to pronate as a compensatory mechanism for turnout is discouraged by teachers and health care practitioners alike." In order to reduce the risk of injury, it is imperative that dancers practice and perform with their foot in neutral alignment.

Ankle Strength & Mobility Exercises

The foot is a hugely complex structure with 26 bones, 34 joints, and over 100 muscles, tendons and ligaments. The muscles that move the foot are broken up into two distinct groups, intrinsic and extrinsic foot muscles. The intrinsic muscles are responsible for stabilizing the foot and its fine motor movements. Developing the intrinsic foot muscles are critical to Irish dancers in order to develop their arch, maintain proper foot alignment and protect the foot in repetitive movements like jumping and pointing. Complementing the intrinsic foot muscles are the extrinsic foot muscles which originate in the lower leg. The extrinsic muscles are responsible for flexing the foot (dorsal flexion) and pointing the foot (plantar flexion).

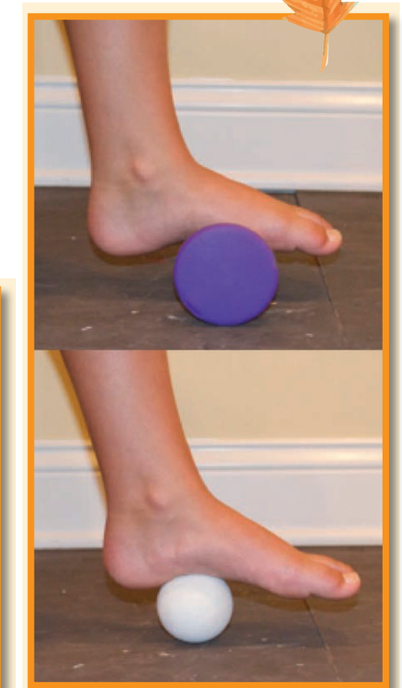
Improve your point, increase your toe height, and prevent ankle and foot injuries by incorporating these five intrinsic and extrinsic foot exercises into your weekly routine.

Doming

- **Begin sitting down with your feet flat on the ground, in neutral position**
- **While keeping your toes extended (do not crunch), contract the intrinsic foot muscles, doming your foot**
- **Hold for one count then relax**
- **Repeat 15 times per foot**

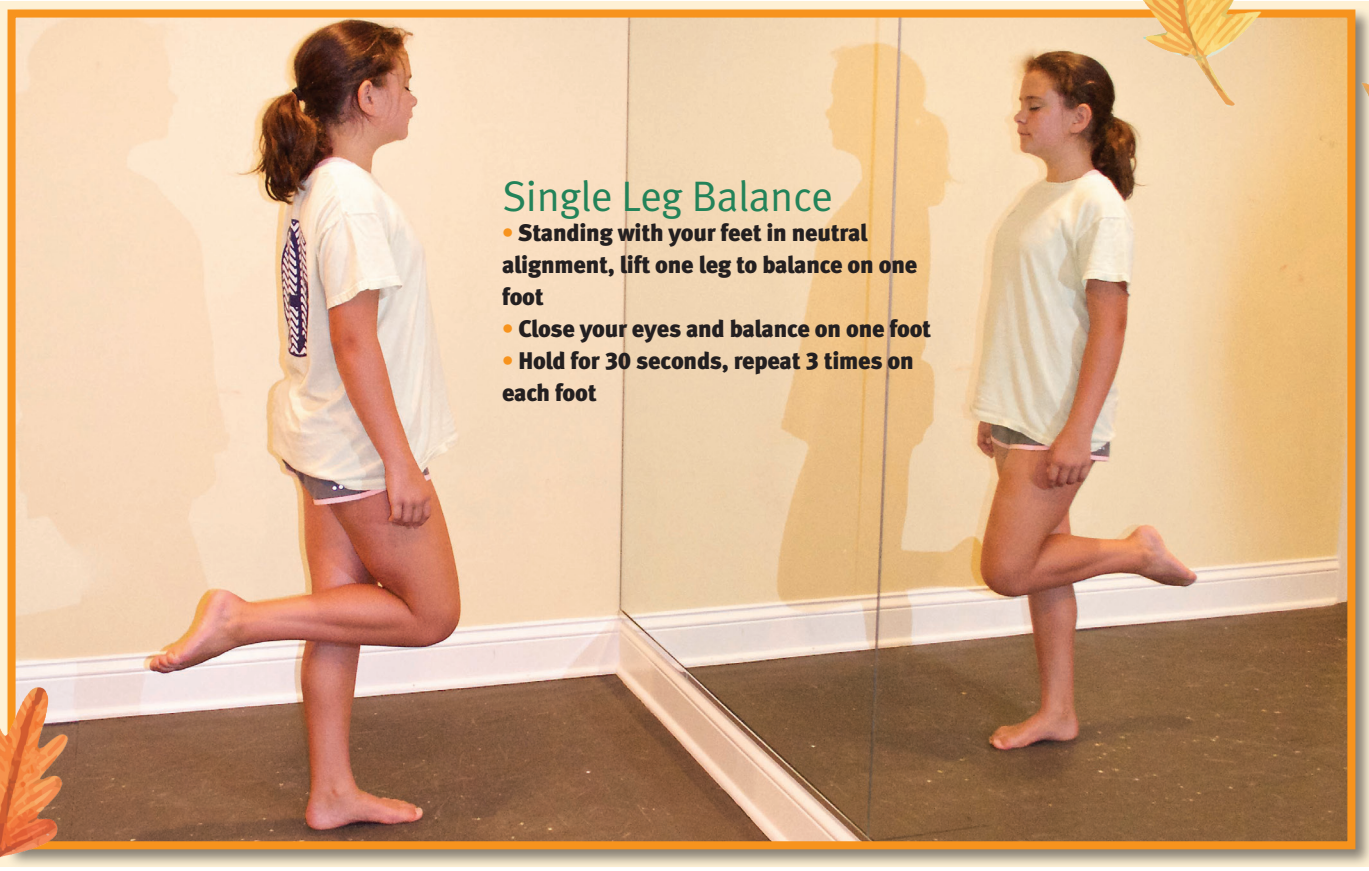
Toe Swap

- **Begin sitting down with your feet flat on the ground, in neutral position**
- **While keeping the ball of your foot on the ground, and toes lengthened, lift only your big toe**
- **Keeping the bottom of your foot evenly pressed to the ground, lower your big toe with control and lift your four toes**
- **Repeat 20 times per foot**



Foot Rolling

- **Sit in a chair**
- **Using a ball or roller, roll feet out moving forward and back, hitting every edge of the foot**
- **Perform for 1 minute on each foot**



Single Leg Balance

- Standing with your feet in neutral alignment, lift one leg to balance on one foot
- Close your eyes and balance on one foot
- Hold for 30 seconds, repeat 3 times on each foot

Relevé Series

- Stand facing a mirror to make sure your feet are in a neutral alignment
- Bend knees while keeping your feet flat on the ground
- Raise up on your toes while keeping your knees bent
- Extend knees, straightening legs
- Lower heels down with control
- Repeat 15 times in parallel and 15 times with turned out legs

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