



AU Health athletic trainers support dancers at Colton Ballet's 'The Nutcracker'

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AUGUSTA, Ga. (Nov. 21, 2022) – If you’re watching the sugar plum fairies dance across the Imperial Theater stage this weekend, you probably won’t notice some special audience members close to the stage enjoying the show with you.

But if a dancer gets hurt, these audience members – AU Health sports medicine specialists – will quickly and quietly duck backstage to take care of them.

“(Athletic trainers) are definitely a very unique profession in the sense that we’re very versatile and you’ll see us in a lot of different settings,” said Lisa Branon, supervisor of [Orthopaedic Ancillary Services](#) at AU Health.

Traditionally, athletic trainers are seen on the field during high school or college sports, running onto the field to tend to an injured player. But they also help any profession that is physically demanding, including industrial settings like Coca-Cola or Amazon, in which workers are performing the same repetitive movements and are prone to overuse injuries, or the performing arts like Cirque de Soleil, ice skating, or the ballet.

“The biggest things we do is to assist in prevention of injuries, to keep our athletes healthy. But when injuries do occur, we’re there to immediately assess the injury, to determine if they need further imaging or workup, surgery, those sorts of things,” Branon said.

The partnership between AU Health and [Colton Ballet](#) is a small but very important one. Every winter, a few sports medicine professionals will sit in attendance with their families, watching Clara dance with the Nutcracker Prince as the Colton Ballet performs the timeless Christmas tale. It’s a partnership between the ballet and AU Health that has endured for more than the 21 years Branon has been at AU Health.

“What we do with the Nutcracker here, with the Colton Ballet, is usually fairly minimal,” she said. “We’re there during the performance, but we get there before the performances. We check on the dancers before the show starts. A lot of times, they

know what their injuries are – they’ve been dealing with them for a long time. But they may ask us to help stretch them, or tape them, just provide a little guidance on how to get through their performance with less pain.”

Performers begin practicing The Nutcracker in early October to be performed publicly around Thanksgiving. During the show’s run, dancers are typically performing twice a day.

“By the time they get to the end of November, they’re probably a little beat up,” Branon said.

Like athletes, dancers can be very stubborn, often not wanting to admit they’re injured so they won’t have to miss a performance. Branon, who has a background as a dancer herself, said many times they will perform through excruciating pain, but the average audience member will never see it. Occasionally, athletic trainers occasionally will have to encourage dancers to take time off to allow their bodies time to recover.

If a dancer does become injured during the performance, they can text an athletic trainer from backstage for help. More commonly though, athletic trainers help the dancers prepare their bodies before the show, check on them during intermission and again after the show.

“We’re behind the scenes, just making sure they’re able to perform, whether it’s providing a specific taping technique to their injury, helping them stretch, or maybe doing a dynamic warmup for their muscles to help keep them from making an injury worse,” Branon said.

Athletic trainers and sports medicine professionals have a deep understanding of body composition and can use that knowledge to help a performer or an athlete meet their performance goals while minimizing the potential for injury. Prevention of injury starts with really understanding the sport or physical performance, the body movements that are required to perform those movements, and then making sure they’re being done the right way.

Most of the orthopedic specialists at AU Health work with local sports programs and everyday movement injuries. But Branon said there are athletic trainers who work in performing arts full time, especially in the circus and Las Vegas. She said performers are amazing athletes, even if they’re not often considered such.

“I think it would be just one of the most amazing jobs to have, working with those performers because they are phenomenal athletes. What they put their bodies through and what they’re able to do, and their training regimens are so outrageous,” she said. “I think the athletic trainers that work in that field are definitely underappreciated. I don’t think people really think about them being in that field, because it’s non-traditional.”

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AU Health is Georgia's only public academic health center, where world-class clinicians are bringing the medicine of tomorrow to patient care today. As the primary teaching affiliate of the Medical College of Georgia, AU Health provides the most comprehensive routine-to-complex care at AU Medical Center, which houses the region's only Level 1 trauma center, as well as Children's Hospital of Georgia, historic Roosevelt Warm Springs Rehabilitation and Specialty Hospitals, Georgia War Veterans Nursing Home, and more than 100 primary and specialty care clinics across the state.