

Walker Balances Bulk With Ballet

By THOMAS C. HAYES, Special to the New York Times
Published: April 11, 1988

FORT WORTH, April 10— Herschel Walker raised a 115-pound ballerina high overhead, strode forcefully without the slightest quiver, then leaned forward as she uncoiled gracefully across his muscular back.

There were no soaring leaps, no lively pirouettes and at times his moves were a shade mechanical. But the Dallas Cowboys' running back dazzled an audience with his surprisingly fluid strength today in a one-time appearance with the acclaimed Fort Worth Ballet.

It was the same stage where Mikhail Baryshnikov and the thriving local ballet company once charmed a capacity throng of 3,000. Walker's presence, in a program that also included George Balanchine's "Firebird" and Peter Martins's "The Magic Flute," filled only half the theater, but his performance with two other dancers drew a rousing ovation. 'He Was Great'

"I thought he was great," said Denise Earle, a dental hygienist who once choreographed for high school and college theater. "He's not a ballet dancer. He's a football player, but he handled it real well."

Maria Terezia Balogh, the ballet's principal dancer, was quite literally in Walker's hands several times during an eight-minute dance. "He's very aware and he adjusts very well," she said after a dress rehearsal Saturday.

Their biggest challenge was a delicately balanced promenade. Walker, with arm and shoulder muscles bulging on his 223-pound frame, gently traced a circle as he held Balogh's left arm. She was balanced on the toes of her right foot as she angled her left at the waist behind her. A slight falter by Walker could have sent her tumbling to the stage.

Moments earlier, the Cowboy knelt briefly on one knee, thrusting his powerful arms and chest outward like a gymnast forming an iron cross on the rings. Then he curled his arms in front and cradled Balogh as she moved her body to the eerie, unharmonic sounds of piano, cello and violin written 75 years ago by Anton Webern. Flat-Footed and Macho

"He's basically a football player, kind of flat-footed and kind of macho," said Eddie Griffin, a quality control inspector and a Cowboy fan who was attending his first ballet, specifically to see Walker. "But he pulled it off pretty good. And that girl that danced the 'Firebird' was real wonderful."

"Just like football, you have to have a high concentration level in ballet," Walker said. "We had five rehearsals, so I knew when she was comfortable. In football, you read your teammates. Here it's reading your partner. The eyes tell it all."

Walker earns \$1 million a year playing for the Cowboys, or about \$500,000 less than the Fort Worth Ballet's annual budget. He agreed to perform without pay after ballet officials presented the idea to Cowboy executives earlier this year as a way of drawing young football fans to the ballet.

SIGN IN TO E-MAIL

PRINT



Log in to see what your friends are sharing on nytimes.com.
Privacy Policy | What's This?

Log In With Facebook

What's Popular Now

Blackwater Won Contracts via Web of Companies



How Debt Can Destroy a Budding Relationship



@Times - Inside NYTimes.com by E-Mail



Sign up for regular updates on what's new on NYTimes.com.

See Sample | Privacy Policy

Sign Up

MOST POPULAR

E-MAILED BLOGGED SEARCHED

- Op-Ed Contributor: How to End the Great Recession
- Op-Ed Columnist: The Real Story
- For the A-Cup Crowd, Minimal Assets Are a Plus
- State of the Art: Your Own Hot Spot, and Cheap
- In Medical School Shift, Meeting Patients on Day 1
- Your Money: How Debt Can Destroy a Budding Relationship
- Crossroads County: Fewer Young Voters See Themselves as Democrats
- Does Your Language Shape How You Think?
- Op-Ed Columnist: The Alternate History
- U.S. Asks Educators to Reinvent Student Tests, and How They Are Given

Go to Complete List »

"You could have heard a pin drop out there when Walker was on stage," said an elated Paul Mejia, the artistic director of the Fort Worth Ballet. "The tension was there. He was perfect for the part and a wonderful contrast to the other dancers."

Walker studied introductory ballet at the University of Georgia. "Ballet is very tough and I was thrilled to get the chance," he said. "I've got great flexibility for a guy my size and that helps. Some football players are so stiff they can't raise their arms above their head."

Walker is not the first pro football player to answer the call of ballet. Lynn Swann, then a wide receiver for the Pittsburgh Steelers, performed a decade ago. Willie Gault, a wide receiver for the Chicago Bears, danced last year with Balogh and Joseph Malbrough of the Chicago City Ballet. Working Combination

Herschel is bulkier, so the contrast with a thin-legged ballerina like Balogh is much greater, she said, adding "I think it works better."

The piece was originally choreographed by Mejia when he was artistic director of the Chicago City Ballet. He came to Fort Worth this year. A prolific choreographer and husband of Suzanne Farrell, a ballerina at the New York City Ballet, he came to Fort Worth this season.

Malbrough took center stage with Balogh during the piece's more fast-paced moments. A 6-footer who weighs 185 pounds and swims daily for strength and muscle tone, Malbrough seemed small next to Walker.

That impression was highlighted at the dance's end when Walker and Malbrough glided slowly to opposite sides of the motionless Balogh and, facing the audience, eased into a football player's head-up, three-point stance. The audience laughed, then erupted into spontaneous ovation that kept a broad smile on Walker's face throughout several bows.

"I would love to do it again," Walker said. "I didn't want to embarrass my partners or the Fort Worth Ballet but I guess the ovation, said 'Don't worry you did O.K.'"

Walker, who played three seasons in the Meadowlands with the New Jersey Generals, is a breakaway runner who exceeded 700 yards in receptions and carries in his two seasons since joining the Cowboys in 1986. He credits an unorthodox, daily workout regimen for his unusual mix of speed, power and balance on the field.

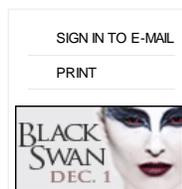
The routine includes up to 3,500 sit-ups, a thousand push-ups, several wind sprints, quarter-mile dashes and a two-mile run. He also does lots of stretching through the martial art of tae kwon do. Walker has been a black belt in tae kwon do since his college days.

Walker said the workout seemed to accommodate every twist, bend and lift required in his ballet debut. "I'm not sore anywhere," he said. For Balogh, that was the biggest surprise of all.

"Willie complained last year about his hamstrings," she said. "Herschel is much bigger, and he goes very, very deep in his knee bends, but he's not sore. Even I'm sore."

photo of Herschel Walker and Maria Balogh (NYT/Mark Perlstein)

Get the full newspaper experience, and more, delivered to your Mac or PC. Times Reader 2.0: Try it FREE for 2 full weeks.



[N.Y. / REGION »](#)



A Steel Symphony, Pounded Out in Brooklyn

[OPINION »](#)



Home Fires: War and the City — March Song

[REAL ESTATE »](#)



Town Houses With Condo Amenities

[U.S. »](#)



A Niche of the Unreal in a World of Credulity

[OPINION »](#)

Bloggingheads: What Mr. Boehner Wants

A discussion of the policy agenda of a G.O.P. Congress.

[MUSIC »](#)



Director Says He Left Met Production in Visa Spat

[Home](#) | [World](#) | [U.S.](#) | [N.Y. / Region](#) | [Business](#) | [Technology](#) | [Science](#) | [Health](#) | [Sports](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Arts](#) | [Style](#) | [Travel](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Real Estate](#) | [Autos](#) | [Back to Top](#)

[Copyright 2010 The New York Times Company](#) | [Privacy](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Site Map](#)