

DANCE AUSTRALIA

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\$6.75 / NZ \$7.75 (incl. GST)



THE BENEFIT OF BALLS

TAKE A look in most of today's gyms and dance studios and you'll see that Swiss balls have become a standard part of the equipment. What is it about these balls that dancers like so much? Can they really benefit your technique?

The obvious feature of a ball is that it makes an unstable support. If you sit on one it rolls around beneath you. Therefore, when performing an exercise while using a ball for support, the user has to call on his or her own muscle strength to hold herself still. The dancer can't "cheat" and lean or rely on a barre or the floor. Even very simple exercises, when performed on the ball, may need a greater degree of control than when performed on a stable surface.

In other words, by using the ball, you call on the "stabilis-

ing" muscles — those deeper, intrinsic muscles of the torso that are often overlooked in training, which tends to focus on or isolate the large muscle groups. Thus, the ball promotes the sort of "core strength" essential to dancers — pelvic, shoulder and hip girdle stabilisation. Having control over these areas helps improve balance, control and make movement more fluid and efficient.

Dancer Cathy Goss was introduced to the benefits of the ball through Pilates. Because one of the main principles of Pilates is the strengthening of these same stabiliser muscles, many Pilates studios have adopted the ball as a useful part of their exercise program, often using it as an alternative to the usual Pilates equipment.

"The ball is very good for rudimentary exercises," Goss says, "because it helps you rediscover correct postural

alignment. I use it for keeping myself in shape when I can't get to a dance class. I like using it to work my obliques, [but] it's multifaceted — you can do a complete workout. It's great for strengthening muscles that might have weakened through injury or laziness!"

The Swiss ball can also help those in more sedentary professions. Abel Valls, the administrator of Queensland's Expressions Dance Company, swears by it. "We have purchased four balls to use as replacement for chairs in our offices. In fact the three performing arts companies at this level in the Judith Wright Centre — ourselves, the Rock and Roll Circus and Kooemba Jdarra — are all using them.

"I do find them very effective to relieve muscular back pain and our dancers certainly pinch them from the office and use them to stretch."

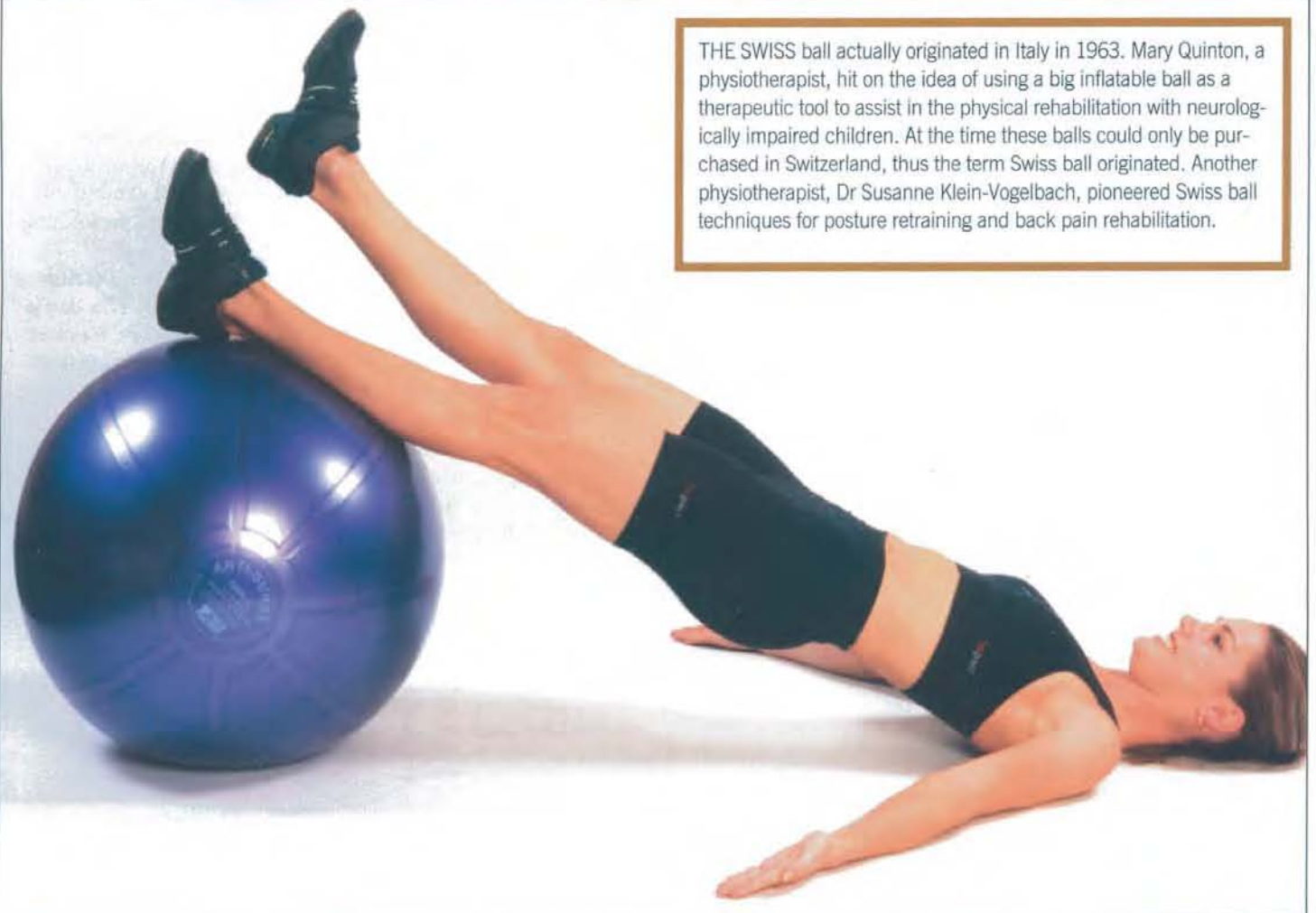
Sarah Way is the principal

of the Melbourne Dance Clinic and physiotherapist for the Australian Ballet School (ABS), where the Swiss ball is used as part of a comprehensive injury prevention and rehabilitation program.

"Because the ball provides an unstable base, it challenges the body's stabilising mechanisms," she explains.

"Therefore, with even the most basic exercises, for example sitting on the ball while performing a port de bras, many muscles, including the trunk stabilisers, are recruited."

She encourages dancers to perform the exercises with a neutral spine and designs exercises so that they are "functional" — that is, they simulate as much as possible what the dancer is trying to achieve. She stresses, however, that dancers should be supervised when working with the ball so the exercises are specific to their individual needs.



THE SWISS ball actually originated in Italy in 1963. Mary Quinton, a physiotherapist, hit on the idea of using a big inflatable ball as a therapeutic tool to assist in the physical rehabilitation with neurologically impaired children. At the time these balls could only be purchased in Switzerland, thus the term Swiss ball originated. Another physiotherapist, Dr Susanne Klein-Vogelbach, pioneered Swiss ball techniques for posture retraining and back pain rehabilitation.