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# Crisscross

By Jae Gruenke

When you hear the word "fitness," what probably comes to mind is a gym. Does the very idea of treadmills, nautilus equipment, free weights, and step classes fill you with dread? Or do you like your health club workout, but wish for a little more variety? Either way, there is a feast for your body out there in the streets, the parks, and the unexpected corners of this city, and for very little money you can have your fill. The purpose of this new column is to introduce you to the many activities available to you that can become a rewarding part of your inner life and your social life as well as your physical life. I'd also like to tell you a little about the benefits of these activities – what they mean for your body and the way you move, and why you might want to try them.

This issue's theme is cross-body movement, or bringing one leg across the other. Doing this action strengthens your inner thigh muscles, and developing this strength in the context of a whole-body activity makes it more available to you in daily life than if you developed it in isolation on an inner thigh machine. Leg-crossing activities also help counteract overuse of your abductors and external rotator muscles, helping you feel more agile. All these activities encourage free movement of the pelvis, which is essential to walking fluidly and gracefully, and can be helpful with some kinds of lower back pain.

To feel what this means for you, try this experiment: take a few steps forward very slowly, with your hands on the widest part of your hips. Probably you can feel your hips move slightly from one side to the other with each step, allowing your body weight to shift back and forth. If it didn't, you'd fall over like a table with half of its legs gone. Now try another experiment: stand still for a moment, then slowly shift your weight from two feet onto your right foot. Your pelvis should move sideways, along with your upper body and head, so that you've quite literally moved your whole body to be centered over your right foot. At this point you should be able to lift your left foot off the ground without a problem. Now bring your left foot across in front of your right leg and set it down on the far side of your right foot. Feel how your pelvis shifts a little past your right leg, and also a little forward and down on the left side, to allow your left foot to touch down. Shift your weight onto your left foot and feel how your pelvis moves even farther past your right leg, until you are standing comfortably on your left leg and you can pick your right foot up and set it back down again to the right of your left foot. If you found yourself tipping over at any point during this exercise, you probably shifted just your upper body over, instead of moving your pelvis and letting the rest of your body come right along with it. Try it again in front of a mirror – shifting your pelvis can feel very strange and exaggerated, not to mention unstable, when you're not used to it. But in a mirror you'll be able to see how far to move your pelvis to the right to get it centered over your right foot so you can pick up your left foot with perfect composure. Close your eyes and do it a couple more times to the right and also to the left, until you get the feel of it. Then read on.

I came across a particularly fine, free, beautiful example of leg crossing and pelvis shifting one Sunday in Central Park. Members of the International Folk Dance Circle had gathered on an open terrace, and, hand in hand, were dancing a small pattern of steps over and over to the folk tune pouring from nearby loudspeakers. I thought I would give it a try myself, but as I copied the movements off to one side I realized it was harder than it looked; the intricate pattern repeatedly confounded my ex-

pectations. I finally got it as, to my distress, the song ended. Already I was hooked - by the gorgeous music (a strong draw for most folk dancers), the lacework pattern of steps, and the obvious pleasure of holding hands with a group of people all stepping sideways, across, forward, and - surprise! - suspending their weight together as though it were inevitable.

The movement vocabulary in Balkan dancing (or Greek or Israeli or other line dances) is full of sideways, grapevine-style steps. This allows the dance to spiral or circle in the middle of the dance floor while you face into the center and share your dancing with the whole group. In this way, dancing with a roomful of people is more than just an environment for your personal expression, like dancing in a club - it's a concrete, testable fact of interrelation. You can see everybody who's dancing, and if you stumble or get confused or are just absolutely carried away with the thrill of it all, the people around you will feel it through their hands. Bob Radcliffe, one of the organizers of the group, assured me that "after you do it for a while, it becomes intuitive. The asymmetrical rhythms are more like you really move your body than the typical Western European dance music..." I continued dancing for hours that day, across the circle from a man whose T-shirt said, "2 dance is 2 live 4 ever."

You can join the International Folk Dance Circle for free on Sunday afternoons from 1 to 4 pm whenever the weather is over 60 degrees. They meet at the foot of the statue of King Wadyslaw Jagiello, just north of the East 79th Street entrance, across Turtle Pond from the Delacorte Theater. During the first hour there is instruction, and the dances are easy. In the winter, the group meets indoors monthly at the Workman's Circle from 2 to 5 pm; current dates are 10/22, 11/19, and 12/17, but if turnout is good more will be added. Admission is \$8. If you want to take classes, pick up flyers at the Folk Dance Circle or contact these schools for inexpensive instruction:

**Workman's Circle**, 45 E. 33rd St. Call (212) 889-6800 x220 for general information, or call Sasha at (212) 929-5698 if you have specific questions.

**The Bridge for Dance**, 2726 Broadway at 104th Street, offers classes in Israeli folk dance. (212) 620-0535.

For information about Folk Dance Fridays at Hungarian House, Wednesday Night Balkan classes, and folk dance events (many with live music), go to <http://ginbirch.home.mindspring.com/fdf/> or call Michael Ginsburg and Belle Birchfield at (212) 544-8260.

Where the crossover steps in traditional line dancing allow you to move gracefully sideways while staying connected to the group, doing a very similar movement on skates can send you speeding around the curve in a road or rink. If you're rollerblading and you really bank a turn, crossing your legs feels more natural than not crossing them because it allows you to use both legs fully. In a strong left-hand turn, your body weight shifts way over to the left side of the left leg, so the only place you can put your right leg to get your weight on it and use it to push is on the left side of the left leg, in a crossed position (remember the exercise you did a few minutes ago?). By bringing your outside leg over the inside one as you maintain your rhythmic stroking, you can thrust, right left right left, into the ground as you lean towards the center of your turn, playing these two forces against each other to carve any arc you choose.

You can learn how to do crossovers on your rollerblades in classes offered by:

**Central Park Skate Patrol** - alternate weekends through October. (212) 439-1234 or [www.skatepatrol.org](http://www.skatepatrol.org) Classes are \$20, with package deals if you take several.

**New York Skateout** - group and private instruction, guided group skate tours through Central Park, a skate workout, and a children's program. (212) 486-1919 or [www.nyskate.com](http://www.nyskate.com).

For group skating events at every level of proficiency in Manhattan, surrounding areas, and even skate tours to other cities, contact the **Empire Skating Club** at (212) 774-1774 or [www.empireskate.org](http://www.empireskate.org).

A good general source for rollerblading information is [www.skatecity.com](http://www.skatecity.com).

All of the principles from rollerblading hold true, of course, in ice skating as well, and you get to use them more often because ice rinks are curved. The double-edged blades of ice skates turn the prose of shifting your hips into a lyrical poem. When I was a child, I used to get lost for hours in the marvellous leaning, swinging feel of it.

Most ice rinks in the New York area open at the beginning of November, except for the Sky Rink at Chelsea Piers, which is open year-round. Contact the following rinks for class and open skate information.

**Wollman Rink**, in Central Park, offers lessons for beginners through ice dancing and figure skating. (212) 396-1010 or [www.wollmanrink.com](http://www.wollmanrink.com)

**Skyrink** at Chelsea Piers has an extensive skating school. (212) 336-6152 or [www.chelseapiers.com](http://www.chelseapiers.com)

**Lasker Rink**, on E. 110th Street, charges only \$3 adult admission, or \$1.50 for kids. (212) 534-7639 or [www.laskerrink.com](http://www.laskerrink.com)

**Ice Rink** at South Street Seaport is perfectly situated for a lunchtime or early evening skate if you work downtown. (212) 809-6080

**Kate Wollman Rink** in Brooklyn's Prospect Park offers classes. (718) 282-1226

**The World's Fair Ice Skating Rink** in Flushing Meadows Park, Queens offers classes. (718) 271-1996

**Staten Island War Memorial Rink** in Clove Lake Park also offers classes. (718) 720-1010.

For a comprehensive listing of rinks (there are many more!), go to [www.skateny.com](http://www.skateny.com).

While crossing one leg over the other is the body's natural response to leaning into a turn on skates, when you dance the Argentinean tango it is a calculated surprise. For instance, if you're dancing the woman's part in this murmured conversation of intention and timing, you step evenly backwards right, left, right... But only four steps into the dance, you suddenly bring your left foot forwards across your right, and it is like a gasp, arresting your progress through space and throwing the future into question: what will come next? But even as the dance seems entirely suspended, it actually continues as you calmly, subtly shift your weight from the right foot to the left: your right foot is free, and the next step is already a certainty. Drama and tranquility are perfectly simultaneous as you make this apparently unnatural movement perfectly naturally. Dancing this way, you can feel absolutely alive, realized in the tension of opposites.

You learn this movement almost immediately when you begin to study Argentinean tango; the crossing step described above is the beginning of a basic eight-count step, or *salida*. There are a number of

studios in town that offer classes, and almost every night of the week you can go to a tango salon at a studio or restaurant and dance to live music for around \$10. Some of these offer lessons beforehand at no extra charge.

On Thursday nights, you might try **La Nacional**, 239 W. 14th S. 2nd Floor, which offers lessons beginning at 7pm. For more information, call Coco at 917-385-9698 or Juan Pablo at 917-691-6399).

On Friday nights, you can go to **La Belle Epoque**, 827 Broadway at 12th Street, (212) 254-6436, where the lesson begins at 8pm.

On Saturdays there's **Lafayette Grill**, at 54 Franklin Street, with lessons beginning at 7:30. (212) 732-5600.

Another option is a weekly free tango dance with live music at **Chelsea Market**, 16th Street and Ninth Avenue, on Saturday afternoons from 3-6pm, hosted by Carina Moeller of Triangulo Studio. Novices may want to take a few classes before going; Moeller's studio offers beginner classes nearby. Call (212) 633-6445 or visit her website [www.tangonyc.com](http://www.tangonyc.com), for information.

You can find a comprehensive listing of studios and events at [www.dancetango.com](http://www.dancetango.com).

As a final thought, you yogis out there may want to explore this hip shift sideways in garudasana, or eagle pose. In addition to stretching your external rotators at the hip and at the shoulder, this pose allows you to explore a point of dynamic stillness. The asana takes place literally between one step and the next, suspending the moment when you shift your weight fully onto one leg and cross the other over... and then back around. The micromovements you make constantly at every joint maintain your balance and educate your body. When you feel comfortable with this, try closing your eyes (but make sure you're in a position to fall without hurting yourself or others). Afterwards, observe how the feelings of garudasana compare to moving by crossing your legs, so you can integrate your physical practice of yoga into your everyday movements. Namaste.

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