



PICTURE OF CONTROL On a pile of mats at the National Training Centre for gymnasts, the Yap sisters Amanda (left) and Emma flank dancer Glenda Yoon.

Beauty from symmetry in motion

FROM B13

Both groups often have condensed careers, are constantly critiqued and produce well-rehearsed works of finesse, strength and flight before audiences. If Michael Jordan once challenged gravity by hanging in the air, so did Natalia Osipova, a principal dancer at the Royal Ballet, whose leaps were described by *The New York Times* as “improbable floating jumps”.

Dancers respond to choreography but so do athletes when figure skating on ice. What are tactics in football anyway but carefully designed sequences of movement? In the 1980s Johan Cruyff, that Dutch footballing artist, agreed to take part in a documentary titled *Feints*, where he and Dutch ballet choreographer Rudi van Dantzig attended each other's training sessions. It is said that Rudolf Nureyev, the legendary Soviet ballet performer, noted that Cruyff should have been a dancer.

History is littered with these little linkages and cross-pollination. Athletes especially learn balance

and body awareness from dance. Valarie Allman, the reigning two-time Olympic champion in the swivelling art of the discus throw, learnt hip-hop and jazz dance as a child. She told *World Athletics* that dance helped “me gain confidence in how my body moved with practice”.

Kobe Bryant, the late basketballer, did tap dance to strengthen his ankles. Harold Connolly, the 1956 Olympic champion in the hammer (a 7.26kg metal ball attached to a wire) throw, took help from his mother and aunts, who loved dance, to fashion ballet-like slippers to ensure proper grip as he spun in the 2.135m throwing circle.

It conjures up the most terrific image. A hulking, 183cm, 100kg, metal-hurling champion in a dancer's footwear. The balletic brute.

A PORTRAIT OF GRACE

In a house pool in Bukit Timah, Soh, 27, and Chong, 17, take a deep breath and disappear under water.

Then they turn upside down. In December 2025, they'll win

SEA Games gold together in the artistic swimming duet, now in early August they give us a peek at their craft. They scull their hands (pushing water down with their palms) to stay upright, bend one leg and extend the other one out of the water like an elegant periscope. On the pool deck, Yoon, in a ballerina's tutu, poses on one leg like a stylish flamingo.

In the water, using a special waterproof box for his camera, Cheong, assisted by Gin Tay, an executive photojournalist with *ST*, works diligently.

Click, click, click.

A portrait of grace emerges.

At every photoshoot, quiet conversations take place. Soh, the artistic swimmer, reveals she practised ballet from age three till 17. Yoon, the dancer, admired artistic swimmers as a kid and wanted to explore the sport yet never got the chance. Boxer Danisha, who looks at feet when she watches boxing, learnt *bharatanatyam*, the Indian dance, for a while.

Intrigued by the relationship between both tribes, the athletes ex-

plain the ties that bind them. Gymnast Emma Yap talks about leaps and turns and her sister Amanda about artistry and expression. Soh sees a parallel in how athletes and dancers “hold different positions for a long time” while Hee finds a dance connection in the way badminton players “stretch out our arms as we lunge or jump”.

In between poses, insight is offered and a sense of kinship grows. Yoon says she didn't consider the similarities between dance and boxing/fencing till she saw those athletes in their element. Perhaps she eventually saw what Danisha does, a sense of flow in both crafts.

So much is being revealed. Like the ridiculously casual command they all have over their bodies. Emma, 20, bends into a stag handstand and holds her position effortlessly. Amanda, 16, does a back handspring with the ease of a blindfolded juggler. “This is easy”, the sisters laugh, for their competition routines are much more complex and demanding. Yet they are fine representations of what Yoon says about ballet: “We train hard to make it look easy.”

And always, shadowing everything, is a familiarity with pain.

In a February 2025 story in the

dance magazine *Pointe*, there is an evocative picture of the Royal Ballet dancer Steven McRae with each leg in a bucket of ice. It could have been a scene from any athletic locker room. In the gym, Amanda talks about injuries to her heel, back, hip. Her sister points to her shoulder, ankle, knee. All these bodies, pushed and pounded, till something gives.

During breaks, athletes and dancer gather around Cheong's viewfinder, looking at themselves and his work. Soon they will return to their arenas – their respective stages are their safe places – where they will free disciplined bodies and find their uninhibited and authentic selves.

As power has become predominant in sport, its grace has gently ebbed. Yet there will always be athletes, found in old footage and on modern fields, who merge both forms. Like the most celebrated athlete of all time, a boxer of bouncing, slick feet, who right till the end, even when he was a declining fighter, was still making the same beautiful promise.

“I'm going to dance all night,” said Muhammad Ali.

rohitb@sph.com.sg
mcheong@sph.com.sg

The similarities in leaps and turns between dancers and gymnasts would be in the flexibility and precision each move requires, as well as the dynamic strength it takes to do all that without pulling a muscle.



GYMNAST EMMA YAP, and her younger sister Amanda both won silver medals at the 2025 SEA Games.

SCAN TO WATCH
Exploring the relationship between sport and dance.
str.sg/viz-dance-sport



GRACEFUL DUEL
Lunging fencer Amita Berthier and floating dancer Glenda Yoon cross paths in a studio in SPH Media's News Centre. ST PHOTOS: MARK CHEONG



COMPOSITION OF CONTRASTS On an overcast day in a pool in Bukit Timah, dancer Glenda Yoon and upside down artistic swimmers Debbie Soh and Yvette Chong strike an arresting pose.

EVOCATIVE DANCE OF SPORT

Executive photojournalist **Mark Cheong** and assistant sports editor **Rohit Brijnath** explore the harmonious relationship between sport and dance.

In a studio high up in SPH Media's News Centre, a strobe fires and Mark Cheong's camera silently clicks. In front of a black backdrop, two women dressed in white explode on cue into motion. One soars elegantly from the left, the other lunges artfully from the right. As they cross paths, their bodies extended, for a brilliant, graceful, athletic second it seems they are duelling.

Both women are athletes, who operate on separate stages, know the pull of perfection and are familiar with the penance of practice. But there is a difference. One, Glenda Yoon, 20, is a law student

who is an amateur dancer; the other, Amita Berthier, 25, is an Olympic fencer. They've never met before but it's quickly evident that they're distantly related. Movement connects them. Berthier has more muscle, Yoon more grace, yet both bodies are supple, eloquent, trained instruments which not only move instinctively but are also obedient to technique and instructions.

Their actions are precise, their bodies controlled, their feet balanced. Yoon's are trained in ballet, contemporary dance and street jazz; Berthier's in scuttling up and

write grand feats. And so Cheong and I wonder, what if we find a dancer and a set of diverse national athletes and photograph them together to explore the symmetry and harmony between these whirling cousins?

I feel that dance should be considered a sport.

DEBBIE SOH, who, alongside her partner Yvette Chong, won gold in the artistic swimming combined duet at the 2025 SEA Games.

Movements of athletes in badminton have often been compared to ballet, especially in the way we stretch out our arms as we lunge or jump.

BADMINTON PLAYER TERRY HEE, who won mixed doubles gold with his wife Jessica Tan at the 2022 Commonwealth Games.

I correlate boxing and dancing with flow. I strongly believe they go well together.

BOXER DANISHA MATHIALAGAN, who won a silver medal at the World Boxing Cup in 2024.

Football and dance are both forms of entertainment. Coordination and balance comes naturally to us.

FOOTBALLER LIONEL TAN, who plays in defence for the Singapore national team.

When I fence I am responding to my rival's feet.

FENCER AMITA BERTHIER, who has five golds in the individual and team foil at the SEA Games.

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STYLISH SPARRING Boxer Danisha Mathialagan throws a punch and dancer Glenda Yoon reacts in a ring at Bedok Sport Hall.



SMASH HIT On an HDB court in Marine Parade, a net separates badminton star Terry Hee from dancer Glenda Yoon.

SHADOW PLAY
Footballer Lionel Tan and dancer Glenda Yoon produce a graceful collaboration at the Kallang Football Hub.

