

SHAPE

Meet the Alvin Ailey Dancer Who Conquered CrossFit to Return to the Stage

By: Mara Santilli

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We rarely associate the effortless grace and majestic beauty of ballerinas with the ass-kicking power of squat presses, burpees, and pull-ups. But Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater company member Constance Stamatiou (you may recognize her as a featured Ailey performer on an [episode of *So You Think You Can Dance*](#) back in 2009) is shattering all preconceived notions. After leaving the company, giving birth to two children, and enduring many health complications, Constance had to overcome a lot before returning to her passion of

dancing in Ailey's concerts and world tours. What got her there? Hitting the CrossFit gym—hard. Constance shares that she and her husband, a personal trainer, worked out together for an average of two hours per day, six days a week (and then went home to chase two toddlers) until she was back in shape to dance.

From her start with the Ailey company in 2007, Constance stayed fit outside of dance, supplementing with Pilates, Gyrokinesis, Gyrotonics, and even ballroom dance—but she hadn't yet discovered her love of strength training.

Then, she made the decision to walk away from the company in 2011 to pursue other things: acting, some commercial dance opportunities, and having a family. She had her daughter Savannah in 2012 without any major health issues. But, she says now, "I would always complain that I felt like my daughter was going to 'fall out.'" And her inkling was correct: By the time she became pregnant with her son Thanos in 2014, her cervix had thinned out rapidly, leaving her on bed rest for more than half of her pregnancy, unable to do anything active at all, and gaining more than 50 pounds.

"Going from being depressed and seeing yourself overweight, it was like, 'well what am I going to do with myself now?'" Constance says now. She needed to "fulfill her soul again," by dancing with Ailey, she says, and she was prepared to do whatever was necessary to get back to it.

So just six weeks after having her second baby, Constance was back in the gym, and starting to lift light weights a bit. But she wasn't seeing results as fast as she wanted to. And on top of that, any ab work was nearly impossible from an ab muscle separation, diastasis recti, she suffered as a side effect of pregnancy. Still, she found a Groupon package for CrossFit and decided to give the classes a try.

The weight training in CrossFit was the perfect push for her competitive spirit. "That's when I started to see my body transform, to what any dancer wants to look like. I was determined to do pull-ups again like I had when I was a kid in gymnastics," Constance says.

But the CrossFit culture was a shock, to say the least. Constance describes walking into the gym and having a trainer yelling at her to do as many push-ups as she could in a minute, and she wasn't ready for it at first. "I hadn't done a burpee since I was 5 years old, doing a tap dance—a cute burpee," she admits with a laugh. But in the end, it was the drill sergeant vibes from her CrossFit trainers (and additional training and support from her husband) that got her to her goal.

"That militant feel did something for me, drove me, and there was a little bit of martial arts, too, along with working on the punching bags, and TRX bands," Constance says. In addition to lifting heavier weights than she ever had before, she began running—but it was the strength training gave her a high like no other. "I love the feeling of the 'pump.' Whenever I'm working out, I'm tired on the first set, but then I feel strong by the second set," she says.

The idea of returning to Ailey was in the back of Constance's mind throughout this entire process, encouraging her to stick with CrossFit. By the time she began wearing her pre-maternity clothes, the dream of performing again became real, and her confidence was back. She returned to taking class with the other company members in December 2015, almost as an experiment, she says. A week later, the company director invited her to rejoin by May 2016. This gave her four months to hone her technique and increase her endurance with ballet and Horton classes, activating a whole other group of muscles than CrossFit.

She had one last obstacle to overcome, right before returning to Ailey: Her IUD had perforated the uterine walls into her stomach, and she faced a potential surgery and another few weeks of bed rest from dancing. Thankfully, her doctor was able to perform the procedure laparoscopically, and she got back to class soon after. This final setback made the victory of returning to dance that much sweeter, she says. "Especially for me, or maybe for all mothers, you take a few weeks off and it feels like all the progress you made goes away. But then I was able to keep up with all the 20-year-olds when I came back," Constance says.

Constance looks and feels stronger and more powerful than ever, and her dancing shows it. "In a sense, I wish I would have started this even before I had my kids. Now I have more strength, more control," she says. And she's helping redefine what a traditional "ballerina" body looks like, too: "We have this myth ingrained in our dancers' brains that we're going to bulk up, and it's not going to look good on a dancer's body. I have gotten so many compliments about looking long and leaner. I still have a little mama pooch, but see more cuts in my abs." She's been back in action with Ailey for over a year now and is thrilled to be returning for a second season. She'll perform this June at Ailey's [Lincoln Center season](#) and embark on an Ailey world tour this summer as well. Her rebooted confidence and pride in her strength is ultimate #bodygoals.

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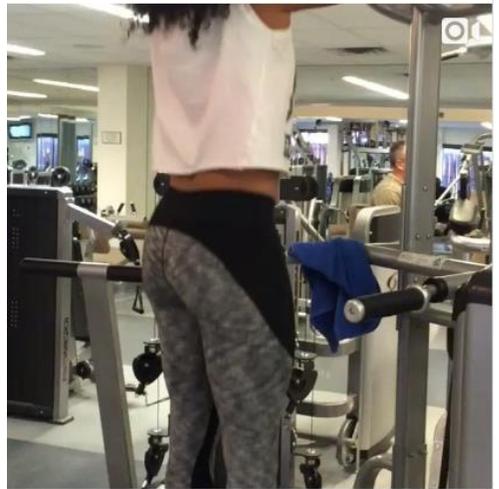
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