

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

## Dancing Toward Dreams

By Sara Matson  
2016

*Misty Copeland is an American ballet dancer for American Ballet Theater. In 2015, Copeland became the first African American woman to hold the highest-ranking ballet position at the dance company. In this informational text, Sara Matson discusses Copeland's journey to success. As you read, take notes on the challenges that Misty Copeland has faced as a ballet dancer.*

- [1] Misty Copeland spends most days twisting, twirling, and leaping. She practices and perfects the graceful movements of her art. When she isn't performing, she is practicing. When she isn't practicing, she is stretching. She takes classes almost every day. She takes care of her body so she doesn't injure it when she goes to work as a soloist<sup>1</sup> with American Ballet Theatre, one of the most famous ballet companies in the world.

"I treat [my body] with the respect that any musician would their instrument. I accept all that it is and do my best to make it the best it can be," says Misty. "I love my body," she adds.

Misty didn't always feel so confident in herself. The challenges she has faced over almost 20 years of dancing have made her strong.

She was a shy child and avoided the spotlight. But Misty loved music and movement. When she was 13, she joined the drill team, a dance line at her school in San Pedro, California. One day, Misty's coach suggested she attend a free ballet class at the Boys & Girls Club, where she often went after school. For two weeks, Misty sat on the gym bleachers watching the class, afraid to join in. Finally, she gave it a try.



*"Misty Copeland dances the role of Odette in Swan Lake" by American Ballet Theatre/Darren Thomas/QPAC is used with permission.*

### Beginning Ballet

- [5] At first, Misty felt out of place in the class. She didn't know anything about ballet, and she was older than most of the students. And instead of the tights, slippers, and leotards the other girls wore, Misty had on a T-shirt, baggy shorts, and sweat socks. Over time, however, she began to enjoy the lessons. She discovered that her body — especially her long legs and strong, flexible muscles — was just right for ballet.

1. someone who performs by themselves

After the class season ended, Misty received a scholarship<sup>2</sup> to a nearby dance studio. Most ballerinas start their training much younger than 13. But Misty's natural abilities and hard work helped her improve quickly. After only two months at the school, she danced *en pointe* — on her toes — for the first time. Soon after, she danced in her first show. The more she learned of ballet, the more important it became to Misty.

Over the next five years, ballet was Misty's life. She practiced, performed, competed, and attended summer ballet programs. "Performing was my favorite part because I felt really open and free onstage," she says. "For the first time in my life, I felt like I belonged."

After she graduated from high school, she joined American Ballet Theatre's Studio Company. There, her feelings of belonging began to change.

## Changes and Challenges

At the age of 19, Misty suddenly gained weight and developed curves. "My body changed completely over the course of a couple of months," she says. Misty had always been long and lean,<sup>3</sup> which was considered "perfect" for a ballet dancer's body. But now, she says, "I was being told that my proportions<sup>4</sup> just weren't right anymore." This shook her self-confidence. In addition, Misty was the only African American ballerina in a company of 80 dancers. Because of this, she sometimes felt as if she didn't fit in. Misty says this time was "one of the toughest moments of my professional career."

- [10] Even though Misty felt discouraged, she didn't quit. She talked with others who had struggled with similar problems. With the support of these friends and mentors,<sup>5</sup> things slowly improved. She learned to care for her body by eating healthier foods. She learned training techniques specific to her body type. And Misty — the girl who had always been shy — learned to stand up for herself. As she did, she began to believe again that she belonged in ballet.

Today, Misty says, "I've learned to embrace my appearance, skin color, and figure." She wants to help other dancers, especially ballerinas of color, accept themselves, too. She wrote a picture book, *Firebird*, in which her character encourages a young African American ballerina. In a note at the end of the book, Misty tells readers to follow their dreams: "No matter what that dream is," she writes, "you have the power to make it come true with hard work and dedication."

Misty continues to follow her own dreams, too. In July 2015, she was named a principal dancer — a ballerina of the highest rank — at American Ballet Theatre. She is the first African American woman to achieve this goal.

"Every morning, I wake up and think, *Today I can be better than yesterday*," she says. "And that's pretty cool."

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2. a sum of money given to a student to pursue their studies
  3. **Lean (adjective):** thin
  4. the relationship in size or shape between different parts of a whole
  5. **Mentor (noun):** someone who gives help or advice to someone with less experience

## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: What is the central idea of the text?
  - A. Misty Copeland would be a better ballerina if she had started earlier and met fewer challenges.
  - B. Misty Copeland overcame self-doubt to fulfill her dreams of being a ballerina through dedication.
  - C. If Misty Copeland hadn't had the support of her friends and family, she never would have gone on to be a ballerina.
  - D. There are some sports that require a certain strength and body type for athletes to succeed at them.
  
2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
  - A. "For two weeks, Misty sat on the gym bleachers watching the class, afraid to join in. Finally, she gave it a try." (Paragraph 4)
  - B. "At first, Misty felt out of place in the class. She didn't know anything about ballet, and she was older than most of the students." (Paragraph 5)
  - C. "Misty had always been long and lean, which was considered 'perfect' for a ballet dancer's body." (Paragraph 9)
  - D. "she began to believe again that she belonged in ballet. / Today, Misty says, 'I've learned to embrace my appearance, skin color, and figure.'" (Paragraphs 10-11)
  
3. PART A: Which of the following best describes the problem in "Changes and Challenges"?
  - A. Misty had to work harder when her body changed and people told her she no longer had a body for ballet.
  - B. Misty was angered by comments people made about her body and acted out, making it difficult to pursue her dreams.
  - C. Misty felt like she never belonged in ballet, even when she was performing, and had to overcome her shyness to succeed.
  - D. Misty made her friends and family angry by constantly complaining about the issues she was having in ballet.
  
4. PART B: Which quote from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
  - A. "At the age of 19, Misty suddenly gained weight and developed curves. 'My body changed completely over the course of a couple of months'" (Paragraph 9)
  - B. "Misty says this time was 'one of the toughest moments of my professional career.' Even though Misty felt discouraged, she didn't quit." (Paragraph 9)
  - C. "She talked with others who had struggled with similar problems." (Paragraph 10)
  - D. "She wrote a picture book, *Firebird*, in which her character encourages a young African American ballerina." (Paragraph 11)

5. How does the text help the reader understand the connection between refusing to give up and achieving your dreams?

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## Discussion Questions

**Directions:** Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. When Misty was 19, she was told she could not succeed as a dancer with her body. Describe a time when you were told you couldn't succeed at something. How did it make you feel? How did you respond?
2. Misty Copeland wants to help other African American ballerinas succeed at their dreams, like her. What is a dream that you hope to succeed in making true one day? What can you learn from Misty's experiences that can help you accomplish this?
3. Misty faced criticism about her appearance in her effort to become a professional ballerina. What do you think would have happened if Copeland had believed the negative comments people were making about her? Describe a time when someone doubted you but you believed in yourself.