



RAPTORS JUNIOR DANCE PAK

'L'il Ballas' a Big Hit with the Home Crowd

Calling all 8 to 13 year old dance students! Do you want to know a little known secret? Do you know you can be a dancer at the Toronto Raptors games?! Yes - it's possible. Just ask the twenty young dancers that are presently a part of the Toronto Raptors Junior Dance Pak. This dance squad performs at twelve home games each year at the Air Canada Centre in Toronto, Ontario. Alongside the greats like John Salmons and Dave Austin, these young hopefuls get to strut their stuff and be a part of the fan entertainment during breaks in the action at Raptors games. And any boy or girl between the ages of 8 and 14 who can do some hip hop is eligible to try out.

Leading the squad as the Director/Choreographer is Courtney Drake. Drake started out as a dancer in the adult version of the Jr Dance Pak. She graduated to Director/Choreographer of the Dance Pak, and then took on the added responsibility of choreographing routines when the offshoot of the Dance Pak was created. Now a busy mother and owner of Kicks Dance Studio in Markham, Ontario, she has relinquished the role of leading the senior Dance Pak, and concentrates on giving the 8 to 13 year squad the best routines possible to wow the home town crowds.

Auditions happen every September and they are competitive. Approximately 100 to 150 young hopefuls between the ages of 8 and 13 dance their hearts out in a screening process led by Drake. A minimum of 3 to 5 years of hip hop training is recommended to dance students interested in auditioning. The auditionees are put through their paces in a dance routine taught by Drake. The pack is narrowed to a group of twenty, with five kids selected from each age range to ensure a mix of young and more mature dancers in the final casting. And from there, rehearsals begin!

The kids must commit to ten, two hour rehearsals on Sundays between September and March. Drake works them hard, teaching the kids a new routine in its entirety at each rehearsal. Anyone on the squad that has gymnastics or break dancing tricks often gets a feature in these high energy, complex, and in Drake's own words 'jam packed' routines. The Jr Raptors Dance Pak, or the Lil Ballas, as they are sometimes referred to, are a big hit with the crowds,

and receive plenty of audience support when they perform.

The Jr Dance Pak perform at special games such as the Home Opener, Drake Night, sell-out games, Sunday Family games and the last game of the season to name a few. They also dance at several charity events each year, often for charities focusing on kids issues. Occasionally the kids get to mix in with the adult squad. This past Christmas they danced together in the holiday half time show at the Air Canada Centre, giving the kids on the junior squad a chance to dance alongside professional dancers.

Every year the Dance Pak squad is comprised of a mix of returning and new dancers. At 12 years of age Terrance Fante-Coleman is a veteran, with four years of experience under his belt. His break dancing and acro skills are often utilized as the squad pounds out it's exciting, dynamic numbers. Terrance's favorite part of being a part of the Jr Raptors? Getting to enjoy celebrities, the likes of Drake and Justin Bieber, watching him perform! Kya Sousa is the youngest member of the squad at 8 years old. She says it's hard at the beginning to learn the routines, but everyone gets better at doing them with practice. Even if it's not perfect, she has the best attitude; "Sometimes everyone makes mistakes." Simona Mastromartino is in her first year on the squad. As a dancer at a GTA studio, she decided that auditioning would be 'fun'. This past September she and a couple of friends plucked up their courage and auditioned to be one of the select dancers on the Junior Raptors Dance Pak. The process of auditioning was 'intimidating and different' but she credits her success at the audition due to her laid back attitude. We "just did it to have fun", she says. When she received the news that not only she, but her friends too had made the cut, she was 'bouncing off the walls excited'. All of the kids commented on the fact that one of the best parts of being on the Dance Pak was getting to meet new people and make new friends.

The Jr Dance Pak continue to be a fan-favourite year after year. The Raptors conduct fan surveys every season, and the Lil Ballas consistently score very high. The squad members do not get paid for their efforts, but the perks are pretty sweet. They



are given free clothing and are fed at every game. They get to experience professional basketball up close and in person, and catch glimpses of the players. And maybe, just maybe, they might get the chance to say hi to the players once and a while. The biggest thrill is, of course, the chance to dance in the largest indoor stadium in Canada for 19,800 cheering fans. Not a bad time for any 8 to 13 year old!

If there are any talented young hip hop dancers in your home or studio, consider giving the auditions for the Lil Ballas a try. This year the squad will be hosting a Jr Dance Pak 2-day workshop Aug 23 and 24 featuring some of Toronto's greatest hip hop choreographers. The workshop will be a great preparation for the audition in September. Further information on auditions can be found at <http://www.kicksdance.ca/raptors-jr-dance-pak-auditions/> If you decide to try out ... best of luck! And whether you make it or not, remember Simona Mastromartino's advice...just have fun!

~Kiri-Lyn Muir