

Coaching vocal athletes

Taking care of young voices





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IMAGINE THIS SCENARIO for a minute: tech week for the spring musical is in full swing and your leading lady has come down with a bad cold and laryngitis. There is no understudy, and the show is sold out for two consecutive weekends. Maybe you've never faced this kind of crisis, but you probably do have student performers who seem to be regularly hoarse, tired, sick, or without any voice at all. You can keep this from happening by teaching your students vocal moderation and self-management skills.

Many student performers are overcommitted vocally and do not know how to manage and maintain their bodies and instrument. By the time they get into tech week they are so exhausted from staying up late, going out with friends on the weekends, eating poorly, and fretting about their upcoming performance, their bodies crash. This results in illness and, frequently, loss of voice just before a performance.

To help your theatre students avoid this pattern, take a lesson from the school athletic department. Think of yourself as a coach for your "vocal athletes." Your students must regularly exercise their muscles over an extended period of time to achieve optimal stamina, flexibility, and power. As vocal athletes, they are training the muscles of respiration (breathing), phonation (voice), and resonance (articulation) for a given role. Students need to understand that elite vocal athletes—that is, professional performers—train for years, practice daily, and are extremely judicious about their voice use. They rest when it is appropriate and, despite the image that they "party until dawn," most performers minimize vocal abuses.

Over our years of experience working with injured voices and helping singers bridge the

Using a Phontory Function Analyzer, Dr. Wendy DeLeo LeBorgne measures the lung capacity of Cameron Davis, a student at the University of Cincinnati's College Conservatory of Music.

gap from acute injury back into performance, we've found ten voice factors common to student performers. Here's the list, with tips to help your kids be at their vocal best when they need to be.

1 Overuse syndrome. Very few performers are quiet people by nature. Generally, singers are vocally enthusiastic and full of self-confidence. Often, strong voices become overcommitted in a variety of ways: accompanying every radio song that comes on, singing in chorus, the show and chamber choir, state choral competitions, community musical theatre, and every other imaginable vocal opportunity. Even the most determined athlete doesn't spend all day exercising. To do so would significantly increase his risk of injury. The voice is no different.

Tip: Guide your students to assess what is vocally *most* important on a given day and minimize all other vocal activities. For example, if they have a rehearsal for the musical, all-state practice, and a voice lesson scheduled for the same day, tell them to pick thirty-five to forty-five minutes that are most important and sing *only* for that time period, whether it's specifically dedicated to one, two, or three commitments. It probably will make more sense for them to simply cut one or two activities out for a day or two. Teach them to pace themselves. Remember that the goal is to get to the finish line, whether that is a lifetime of performances or closing night of their high school musical.

2 The "show must go on" mentality. Many students feel they have paid their dues to finally get the leading role and are determined to prove that they are the best leading performer the school has ever seen. So no matter what, they sing through illness (while giving it to everyone else in the cast) and practice 24/7. And sometimes, parents insist "my child will perform," even when she shouldn't.

Tip: There is no show worth risking the rest of a student's career. She doesn't need to stop singing if she has

a hangnail or a stubbed toe, but if you have a student with a sore throat, fever, chills, aches, painful swallowing, or who just feels bad—tell her *don't sing*. Plus, you don't want the rest of the cast to get sick.

3 Unrealistic expectations of young voices. There are many wonderful shows for young voices to sing. But realistically, shows are chosen for their popularity, not their easy scores. Unfortunately many voices become injured because they are trying to sing or speak beyond their physiological and emotional range. Sometimes directors pick shows that are quite frankly outside of realistic expectations for the majority of young voices to handle without detriment to the instrument. Jean Val Jean (*Les Misérables*), Mark (*Rent*), and Millie (*Thoroughly Modern Millie*) are examples of vocally demanding "killer" roles.

Tip: Choose material that is appropriate in age, vocal range, and emotional scale for your student population. Although we have seen high schools produce excellent shows with one or two good voices carrying the leading roles, it often damages their voices after the fact. If you're doing a musical that features challenging parts, choose "junior" versions, if they exist. They often have scores that have been adjusted to suit the ranges of young voices. If they're not, be prepared to transpose the music to make it more appropriate to your leads. Also, instead of encouraging them to copy someone else's vocal style, teach your students to find what is unique about their own voice and enhance it. Stars aren't made by copying someone else. It is often something distinctive about an individual performer that makes her a star.

4 Poor technique/inexperience. In order to sing some roles in the musical theatre repertoire, students must often sing pieces that are beyond their current level of training. Many are wonderful imitators and therefore able to produce a sound similar to what they hear on a recording. However, this may not be beneficial in the long term. It's the same sort of phenome-

non that occurs with young gymnasts: They might indeed be able to execute that spectacular back flip they saw Olympian Shawn Johnson do, but it may lead to an injury. Similarly, many new musicals require vocal strength and skills that are achieved over many years of training. Young singers performing these roles may be able to do them in the short term, but performing these parts again and again can lead to vocal repetitive strain injury, which can take a short or long time to recover from.

Tip: If a student can afford it, encourage private training with a respected voice professional. You wouldn't think about having an athlete try to play football without some competent coaching, so if your students are serious about their vocal training, help them find someone to study with. This will ensure individual daily practice and improvement.

5 Non-performance related issues. Inevitably, the biggest social event of the year is scheduled for the week before the show, and you know it will consist of hours of potential vocal abuses: singing over a deejay, screaming with friends, staying out late, possibly alcohol, drugs, or smoking.

Tip: Teach your students vocal self-discipline. The bottom line is how important their voices are to them. Some students can scream at a basketball game all night and sound no different the next day, while others are hoarse for a week. Teach them to err on the side of caution.

6 Microphone techniques. Most high schools are now equipped with personal amplification audio equipment. However, performers' and teachers' understanding of how to use microphones properly has not always kept up with the technology. The optimal placement for microphones is directly in front of the mouth; the second best acoustical placement is in the center of the forehead or over the ear. The lapel microphone is the least effective audio device. Above all, a microphone is not a substitute for good vocal technique.

Tip: A good microphone amplifies the voice so the singer doesn't have to push. Teach your students how to use the technology. Talk about how amplification and acoustics work. Discuss the difference in the sound they will hear and feel when they are on the stage as opposed to a rehearsal space. Finally, begin using the microphones as soon as you commence working in a large performance space to avoid oversinging and overspeaking.

7 Daily practice for the big event.

It's true that most students could probably run five miles without training for it. Youth is on their side. But their bodies would be much happier and perform better if they gradually ramped up their exercise routine. However, many young performers feel that they can sing for hours on end without proper conditioning, warm-ups, and cool-downs. Or that they will save their voices for the show by not singing at all until they have to.

Tip: Teach your students to think of preparing for a show as they would an athletic event, practicing short amounts of time daily and gradually increasing the intensity and difficulty of their singing. You want your performers to peak during the performance, not during tech week. Drill them in how to pace themselves, especially if the show is going to run for two or three weekends. Make it clear to them how to *not* oversing when they finally do perform on the stage. When they begin to increase the duration and intensity of their singing in rehearsals, ask them to decrease other vocal activities (talking on cell phones, singing in the car, shower, etc.) to conserve and maximize their voices.

8 Their bodies are their instrument.

Although you probably already preach to your students about eating well and getting enough sleep, you can never overemphasize the importance of these factors. As we all remember, pulling an all-nighter was easy in our teens and twenties, but it becomes more difficult as we age. And we could eat pretty much anything without major repercus-

sions when we were young. So, for your students, the concept of appropriate sleeping and eating habits may be skewed. Their scenario goes something like this: they get done with school, rush home to do a bit of homework, grab a bite at a fast-food restaurant, go back to rehearsal, and get out of rehearsal at eleven p.m. They are starving and have more homework to do, so they order pizza, eat it, and go to bed. This sets them up for a carbohydrates overload and reflux during sleep—not a good combination. If they are not getting enough rest, they may still be able to push through a performance, but they're going to work significantly harder to do it and fatigue will set in much quicker. After a period of time they will eventually crash, get sick, and need time off school and the show in order for their bodies to recover.

Tip: Ask your students to think about fourteen-year-old Olympic gymnasts: they train a certain number of hours per day, they are required to eat under the guidance of a nutritionist, and they have "lights out" at a specified time. Although this regimen may seem extreme, a student considering a professional performing career needs to start preparing *now*. If you can, seek out a local voice specialist who would be willing to come in and give a thirty-minute talk on vocal health. Sometimes, students are a bit more willing to listen when an outside source supports and reiterates the same information you have provided.

9 Hydration. Our bodies produce about two quarts of mucus per day, whether or not we drink any fluids. Many young people use caffeine (a diuretic) daily, and often a substantial amount of it. If your students do not drink enough non-caffeinated fluids during the day, the mucus their bodies produces becomes thick and sticky. Also, certain medications (especially antidepressants, ADHD medications, and some oral acne medications such as Accutane) may cause increased dryness of the mucus membranes.

The inside story



At top: a view inside the larynx, as seen through Dr. Wendy DeLeo LeBorgne's strobe camera. The silvery white bands are the vocal folds and should have smooth, straight edges. When we breathe in or out, the vocal folds should be open in this inverted "V" position so that air can get in and out of our lungs.

Above: an acute hemorrhage of the focal fold—an extremely rare event, but similar to the bleeding or bruising you might have elsewhere on the body when trauma occurs. A vocal fold hemorrhage requires vocal rest for a period of time, occasionally followed by surgery.

For more images, videos, and explanations of vocal anatomy and pathology, visit the website of the Blaine Block Institute for Voice Analysis and Rehabilitation: http://www.bbivar.com/vocal_pathologies.php.

Tip: If your students don't drink enough water, encourage them to increase their clear, non-caffeinated fluid intake gradually, perhaps by four ounces every day. That way, their bodies will get used to the increased fluid, and your vocal athletes won't feel like they are living in the bathroom. Also, theatres are notoriously dry and full of dust. You might want to have your stage manager use a mister with water and, just prior to each rehearsal and performance, walk the stage and spritz the air. This will pull some of the dust particles to the floor.

10 The inevitable illness. Germs lurk everywhere, and schools are notorious for infestations. Encourage your students to take all precautions to minimize the spread of germs: that means *lots* of hand

washing (hot water and soap, scrubbing for as long as it takes to sing "Happy Birthday"), hand sanitizer, throwing dirty tissues out, not eating or drinking after someone, not kissing one's sick significant other, adequate nutrition and sleep, and a daily multivitamin. If you notice a cold or illness coming on in a student, encourage her to see the family primary care physician or an ear, nose, and throat doctor as soon as possible. And, back to our beginning worst-case scenario, if your lead has complete laryngitis on opening night, *don't let her sing*. There will always be another show.

Tip: Double cast your leading and supporting roles. Although you hope you never have to use the understudies, it will often take the pressure off the leads so they are much more

likely to be able to make it through all the performances.

Remember, vocal athletes need as much careful guidance as those playing sports. Among the many hats you already wear, add one that says "coach," and someday your students will thank you for it.

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