

High School Students with a Passion for Dance

The dance team in practice wearing self-made costumes



“Street” dancing has grown to become one of the most popular extracurricular activities at schools across Japan. We meet the team from Takehaya Senior High, whose members work to improve their individual dance levels while competing against one another and sweating it out to improve their performance as a team.

AKIRA UMEZAWA

IT'S a late August morning at Takehaya Senior High School in Bunkyo, Tokyo, and forty members of the school's dance club have assembled, even though they are still on their summer holidays. A mid-tempo beat echoes around the wood-walled training hall, which is also used as a practice room for the martial art of kendo. Checking their movements in the mirror that runs the length of one wall, the students silently stretch and perform warm-up exercises. The windows have been left open, but sweat soon flows from the students' foreheads. When the 30-minute warm-up period ends, the group begins practicing the dance they will perform at their school festival in early September, one in which every member will take part. The dancers move energetically up, down, left and right in time with the electronic dance music, using their entire bodies for expression. They repeat the same movements over and over until everyone is in sync. Counting in short breaks, rehearsals stretch to three hours.

After-school club activities are an important

part of Japanese school life, and Takehaya Senior High School is no exception. With a student body of around 750, the school has around thirty different clubs, including basketball and soccer teams and clubs devoted to theater, art and wind instruments. The dance club has regularly taken part in Dance Stadium, the national high school dance competition, and other events around the country.

According to the Street Dance Association which organizes Dance Stadium, more than six million people in Japan enjoy street dancing, in styles such as hip-hop and house. Since 2012, “Dance” has been a required subject at junior high schools in Japan, where students learn creative dance, folk dance as well as contemporary rhythmical dance. Partly as a result, dance has grown to rival other club activities such as baseball and soccer for popularity.

While Takehaya Senior High School's dance club performs in school-organized and regional events, their biggest goal is taking part in Dance Stadium. First held in 2008, the competitions take place in the



Video by Satoshi Tanaka

Chinatsu Fujisaki (left) with her dance team's advisor, Emi Nakagawa

spring, summer and winter. At the national competition this summer, the biggest, 100 teams will take part after advancing from regional qualifiers in which 495 schools competed.

The competition is divided into two categories: "Small Class" for performances by 2-12 team members and "Big Class" for 13-40 team members. Takehaya Senior High school usually competes in the Big Class.

Each team creates and performs an original routine of between two and two-and-a-half minutes in length, with judges rating them on factors including costume, expression, choreography, dance technique, as well as the choice and composition of backing music. Takehaya Senior High School had taken part in the national competition in the summer for eight years running up to 2018, but this year they were eliminated in the regional qualifiers. While it was a disappointing result for the club, the students have quickly bounced back and have been committing themselves to rehearsals so that they can give their best performance at the school festival.


Chinatsu Fujisaki, a second-year high school student who serves as club captain, has been dancing since she was around four years old and has learned various styles including tap dancing, cheerleading, ballet and jazz dancing. When Fujisaki was deciding which high school she wanted to attend, she says she searched for a school with a dance club.

"I chose Takehaya Senior High School because I saw videos of their performances on YouTube and thought it looked cool. It's fun to hone your individual dance



skills, but at high school I wanted to try out dancing in a team that was working towards a competition. It's also appealing because we can compete with one another to improve our own levels."

With dance, no matter how much skill you have, if you don't pay attention to details such as the alignment of your feet or the tilt of your neck, for example, things will never look good, explains Fujisaki. Practicing every day in front of the mirror, she says, she feels joy as she gets close to nailing the perfect form.

"What makes us the happiest is when we have edited our own backing music and choreographed a dance, and the people who watch it react by saying something like "that's great!" or "it looks so cool!" I want to keep improving my skills and expression so that I can get closer to giving my own perfect performance." 



Dance team members work on moving in sync