

My Week at the Prix

Pointe followed Lauren Hunter as she competed at the Prix de Lausanne.

By Amy Brandt

Lauren Hunter stands with her feet tightly crossed in fifth position, the number 102 pinned to the front of her leotard. The 15-year-old California native, who trains at Peninsula School of Performing Arts, is a long way from home, but she's one step closer to achieving her dream of dancing professionally. Around her are dancers from Asia, Australia, South America and Europe, all candidates for the Prix de Lausanne, an international scholarship competition held each January in Switzerland. For the next week, a nine-member jury will carefully evaluate them during classes, coaching sessions and performances for a chance to win scholarships to major ballet schools. "I thought it would be a good time for me to open my horizons, to meet new people and see what the professional world is really like," she says.

Hunter is one of approximately 70 young dancers selected to participate. Each candidate must choose from a selection of classical variations and more-contemporary solos by John Neumeier. For the last two months, Hunter has been training to perfect the second *Odalisque* variation from *Le Corsaire*, and Neumeier's fleet-footed *Bach Suite II*. "I don't have a lot of experience dancing contemporary," she says. "It's a challenge for me."

Her dream is to dance with The Royal Ballet, and she hopes to make a good impression on director Kevin O'Hare, who is chairing the jury. "But I'm most excited about being around so many high-level dancers, especially coming from a small school," she says. "I just want to represent my studio and myself well." In January, *Pointe* followed Hunter to capture her week at the Prix.

Gregory Batardon, Courtesy Prix de Lausanne



Clockwise from left: In Didy Veldman's contemporary class; eating lunch in the candidates' lounge with her new friend, Australian candidate Rose Dalton; Hunter and her parents heading back to their Airbnb after a long day of rehearsals



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—LAUREN HUNTER

Here: Hunter takes her first class in front of the jury. "Most of the time they have a poker face, so it's hard to know what they're thinking," she says. Below: Hunter's name is called as one of the finalists.

Sunday

12:30 pm: Registration

After having a day to adjust to the nine-hour time difference and do a little sightseeing, Hunter heads to Lausanne's Beaulieu Theatre for registration. There she receives her number and is placed in Girls Group A. "I got to meet all the people in my group," she says. "Afterwards we took our first class and got a chance to look around and see all the studios."

Monday

10:15 am: Classical variation run-through

After a warm-up class, Hunter has a chance to practice her *Le Corsaire* variation onstage. "I'm second in my group, and the girl before me is doing the same variation, so it's kind of nerve-racking." She also has to get used to the stage's raked, or sloped, floor. "You kind of fall forward, so it's a little scary, but once I'm dancing I don't think about it."

12 pm: Classical ballet class, with the jury observing

William Forsythe the stager and master teacher Stefanie Arndt teaches Hunter's first class in front of the jury, who sit behind a long table at the front of the studio. Dancers rotate spots after every combination so that everyone can be seen. Judges grade dancers on their artistry, musicality, courage, versatility

and overall potential. "I was super-nervous," says Hunter. "I didn't know we would have to wear pointe shoes for all of center."

4 pm: Contemporary class

"I don't take contemporary very often, so it's very new for me," says Hunter, who nevertheless stands right in front in international choreographer Didy Veldman's class. "I like the teacher. She makes it fun."

Tuesday

11 am: Contemporary class

Today Hunter is starting to move more freely in her upper body. "She's building off the combinations we learned the first day," Hunter says. "Thursday we have our judging with the contemporary class, so that should be interesting."

2 pm: Classical ballet class, with jury marking

"Everyone's amazing here," says Hunter. She pays attention to which dancers the jury watches and tries to learn from them. "The ones who smiled or had a nice upper body seemed to catch their eye."

Towards the end, Arndt gives a lengthy enchaînement, and Hunter has to go in the first group. "I knew all the steps, but I was hesitant about them," she says. "If I had been in the second group, maybe it would've been better. But other than that, class felt good."

5:20 pm: Onstage contemporary coaching session

The dancers in Group A have group coaching sessions with their Neumeier variation with Laura Cazzaniga, a ballet mistress with Hamburg Ballet. As she rehearses the speedy *Bach Suite II*, Hunter feels the effects of the rake. "There are a lot of direction changes, and whenever you do turns onstage, it's like you're climbing a mountain," she says. "Ms. Cazzaniga worked with us on the style so that we interpret it the way Neumeier wanted."

Wednesday

12:15–4 pm: Classical coaching

After morning class, Hunter has a six-minute private coaching session for her classical variation with former Paris Opéra Ballet étoile Monique Loudières. "Her demeanor was very kind, which helped me be more open to express myself and do well," says Hunter. "She gave me a few arm corrections, and there was also a jumping section where she wanted my footwork to be quicker."

Thursday

9:15 am: Contemporary class, with jury marking

"I was super-worried about this," says Hunter. "I thought this would be the hardest part of the competition." However, she's no longer

dancing tentatively and wears a confident smile. "Everything just worked!" One of the first things Veldman has the dancers do is run around the studio, freestyle. "I think that helped us loosen up and not get too worked up about the judges being there."

11:30 am: Classical coaching

Loudières gives Hunter some last-minute corrections about her *développé* ("don't throw your leg") and then speaks quietly with her. "She said I had the confidence to be able to perform strongly," says Hunter. "If she thinks I'm ready, I think everybody else will think so too."

2:15–3:40 pm: Contemporary coaching

After a group coaching session with Cazzaniga in front of the jury, Hunter has a one-on-one session with Yohan Stegeli, deputy of the artistic director of the National Youth Ballet of Germany. Both work with her on her *sissonne* to arabesque. "I have a chronic problem with my ribs splaying out."

Friday

9:30 am: Selections, or semifinals

Hunter performs her classical variation first, and despite a minor bobble with her final piqué turn, everything goes well. "I felt on my legs—I was grounded and

remembering corrections as I was going along."

During her contemporary solo, she catches her pointe shoe on the floor and slips. "That freaked me out a little, but I got back into focus." After she comes offstage, she feels grateful and relieved. "I've been preparing for this moment for how many months now, and I finally did it!"

6:45 pm: Finalists announced

The candidates gather to hear who will advance to the final round. "I thought, It's okay if I don't get in—there are so many good dancers here," says Hunter. To her surprise, her name is called. "It was the craziest feeling! I couldn't sleep that night because I was so excited."

Saturday

2:30 pm: Final round

"I was so happy to be in the finals that I wasn't thinking about winning a prize," says Hunter. Technically assured and confident, she gives her best performances of the week. "I felt something click during the contemporary."

6 pm: Awards ceremony

Hunter wins fifth place, and a scholarship to a Prix de Lausanne partner school of her choice. "I didn't expect anything!" she says. Her next step is to visit The Royal Ballet School to make sure it's the right fit. "The fact that I now get to go to a big school just hit me—this is actually happening!" P



Receiving last-minute coaching from Monique Loudières



Hunter takes one last bow after winning a scholarship.

Clockwise from top right: Mailyys Fortune; Gregory Batardon, Courtesy Prix de Lausanne (2)

Clockwise from top: Gregory Batardon, Courtesy Prix de Lausanne (3); Mailyys Fortune