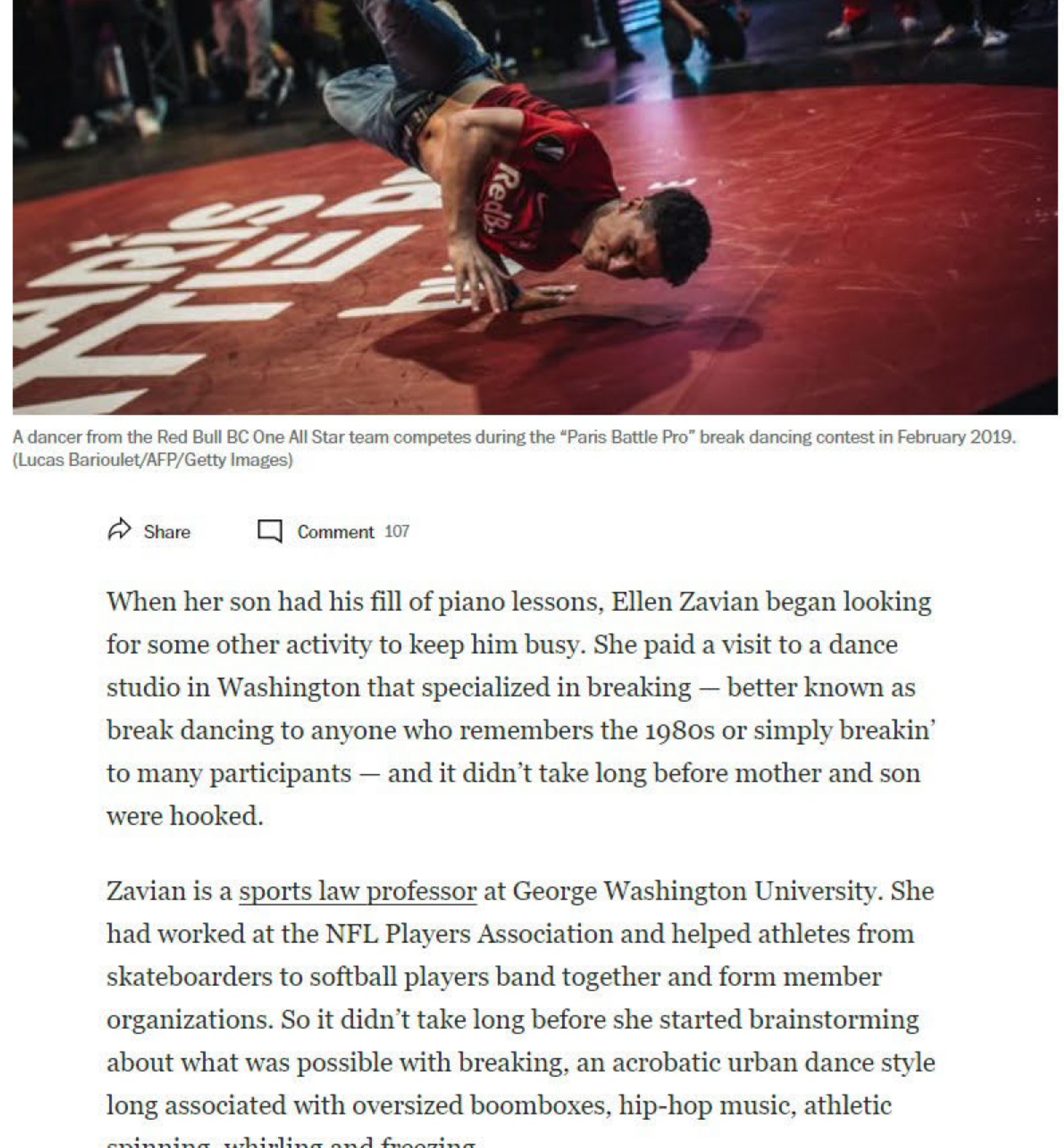


# How break dancing made the leap from '80s pop culture to the Olympic stage

By Rick Maese  
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A dancer from the Red Bull BC One All Star team competes during the "Paris Battle Pro" break dancing contest in February 2019. (Lucas Baralud/AFP/Getty Images)

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When her son had his fill of piano lessons, Ellen Zavian began looking for some other activity to keep him busy. She paid a visit to a dance studio in Washington that specialized in breaking — better known as break dancing to anyone who remembers the 1980s or simply breakin’ to many participants — and it didn’t take long before mother and son were hooked.

Zavian is a [sports law professor](#) at George Washington University. She had worked at the NFL Players Association and helped athletes from skateboarders to softball players band together and form member organizations. So it didn’t take long before she started brainstorming about what was possible with breaking, an acrobatic urban dance style long associated with oversized boomboxes, hip-hop music, athletic spinning, whirling and freezing.

"I just thought: 'My kid loves it. I work in sports. I've created associations. Why not? This is what I do,'" Zavian said.

That was a full decade ago. The result was the United Breakin' Association (UBA), an early step in organizing a sprawling, disorganized collection of young dancers, known as b-boys and b-girls, many of whom had no interest in formalizing and codifying their preferred form of self-expression. They were part of an anti-establishment counterculture that feared being co-opted by people who didn't understand the dance or its dizzying band of denizens.

The story of breaking's meteoric rise to the Olympic stage — it's set to make its debut at the Paris Summer Games in 2024 — involved an unlikely and reluctant partnership between street-savvy breakers and traditional ballroom dancers, an evolution of an urban art form into a competitive endeavor and a lightning-fast education campaign to sell Olympic officials and a curious sporting public that breakers are very much athletes.

"Most of us knew that this could be big one day. We just didn't really know how it would happen," said veteran b-boy Moises Rivas, who dances under the name "Moy." "But it has always had a path. We just had to deal with the misconceptions, negative connotations and people who didn't always want to give it the credibility it deserves."

Born in the South Bronx nearly 50 years ago, breaking long ago had spread across the world and become far more nuanced than what was commercialized by 1980s pop culture and mass media. By 2010, there were independent competitions around the world and veteran instructors operating in most major cities. Breaking was still an activity that could be done by tossing a piece of cardboard on a sidewalk and letting the music take hold, but for many, it had graduated from the sidewalks to dance studios.

In other large cities, from Los Angeles to Miami, there were parallel efforts to grow the sport but little coordination. Steve Graham had dabbled in breaking in college in the early 1980s. He worked on Wall Street and then established a successful private equity firm in Philadelphia. He [gravitated back to breaking](#) in his 50s, dancing alongside his children. He saw the potential for growth. The dance wasn't just a form of expression; competition was baked into it with fierce dance battles between b-boys and b-girls.

He ran a popular competition in Philadelphia and established a [Pro Breaking Tour](#) and a nonprofit membership organization called Urban Dance & Educational Foundation with a vision of drawing together the fragmented breaking world. Many of the competitions were spectacles, drawing large crowds with elaborate lights and window-rattling beats, but the sport was driven by independent event promoters without any movement trained on the Olympics.

Far removed from booming bass notes and twirling young b-boys, however, serious efforts were afoot to get other forms of dancing on sport's biggest stage. The global governing body was called International DanceSport, an umbrella organization for all dance disciplines, from Boogie Woogie to salsa. It was formally recognized by the International Olympic Committee in 1997, but officials there failed in their efforts to get ballroom dancing accepted into a Summer Games. Rather than pack up their tap shoes, they [rebranded as the World DanceSport Federation](#) (WDSF) and decided to double-down, buoyed by the popularity of television shows such as "Dancing With the Stars" and the public's growing interest in dance competitions.

Breaking was far from the organization's core when WDSF enlisted the help of Jean-Laurent Bourquin, an IOC veteran, in 2015, asking him for his help in wooing Olympic officials. The WDSF leaders were hopeful they could push specific styles of dance — either Latin or rock-and-roll — but after consulting with his colleagues in the Olympic world, Bourquin surprised them.

"I had to be frank," Bourquin said in a recent interview. Dancing would be a viable candidate for the Olympics, he told them, but not the style they were used to.

Japan b-boy Shigehiko, right, competes against Russia's Bumblebee during the 2018 Youth Olympic Games in Buenos Aires. (Eitan Abramovich/AFP/Getty Images)

## Resistance on two fronts

The WDSF's top governing board included no breakers, so the proposition was something of a quandary: The organization could realize its Olympic dream, but only with a rogue, largely unfamiliar discipline.

"It was a bitter pill that was hard for everyone to swallow," recalled Ken Richards, who was on the board at the time and is now president of USA Dance. "Everyone had that feeling that the dances all worked together. So we had to come to this understanding and agreement that if dance can get a foot in the door with a style the IOC wants, then maybe the other dances aren't as far behind as we feared."

Bourquin planted a seed with the IOC in 2016 and traveled to the Rio Olympics to chat up IOC members. He was named interim president of the WDSF and convinced leadership to relocate its headquarters from Barcelona to Lausanne, Switzerland, where the IOC is based. Rather than target the 2020 Tokyo Olympics or even Paris in 2024, he strategically set sights lower. Bourquin wanted to see breaking at the 2018 Summer Youth Olympics in Buenos Aires, a more apt platform and a friendly way to introduce the sport to Olympic officials, who skew older.

For many in the Olympic world, it was the first time they considered dancing a true sport. And for many in the breaking world, it was the first time they considered the Olympics a realistic goal.

Within the breaking community, there have always been factions focused on the art and the performance, and others who thrive on battles and competition. Other lifestyle sports, such as skateboarding or surfing, had struggled with an [existential dissonance](#) with members rebuffing mainstream acceptance or organized events.

"They didn't view their talent as a sport," Zavian recalled, "so I had one of the skateboarders come to our meeting and talk about the difference between a sport and art. It was a very heated topic: 'You're going to take our culture away. You're going to take our art away.'"

More than 2,000 people signed a [2017 online petition](#) that was sent to the IOC titled, "Get the WDSF's Hands Off Hip-Hop." Organized by Seronj Aprahamian, a Lebanese-Armenian breaker, the petition accused the WDSF of trying "to exploit breaking as a Trojan horse to get its foot in the door of the Olympics."

"Would the IOC allow the Badminton World Federation to oversee baseball? Would it allow the Federation for Equestrian Sports to oversee auto racing? Why would the Olympics accept such a polar opposite and illegitimate entity as the WDSF to have anything to do with breaking?" the petition asked.

But the ball was moving. While Graham provided much of the funding, the critical push for the Summer Youth Olympics was spearheaded by the larger dancing community, not the breakers. Bourquin knew there was a long list of criteria that needed to be satisfied to gain admittance to the Olympics. Breaking, for so long, had operated differently from event to event, city to city. It needed to be codified with universal rules, judging and protocols.

WDSF assembled committees and panels to prepare for the Summer Youth Olympics, enlisting the help of breakers such as Rivas. Outsiders were skeptical, unsure how the dance would translate to a competitive format and how it would engage spectators.

Rivas recalls walking into the [venue in Buenos Aires](#) and being greeted by a massive — and curious — crowd of several thousand.

"You could see it on their faces," he said. "At first, it was almost like disgust: 'How is this real?' But no one moved. The crowd kept getting bigger. And you could just see their faces change. It was amazing. I knew then that there was no way this wouldn't make the Olympic stage."

## Youth prevails

Bourquin had been checking off boxes that he knew would impress Olympic officials. He still can rattle off the key items from the [IOC's Olympic Agenda 2020](#), its forward-looking, 40-point reform document produced in 2014.

"Number six was to trigger youth involvement and benefit the host community. Nine limited the number of athletes to 10,500; I'm only asking for a quota of 32: 16 b-boys and 16 b-girls. Number 11, foster gender equality," he said. "Twelve, reduce costs. Twenty-three, engage with communities. Twenty-six, blend sport and culture."

Baseball and softball were eager to get back to the Summer Games, but they required expensive stadiums and large rosters of athletes. Bourquin explained to everyone in Buenos Aires that breaking was inexpensive to produce and targeted a young demographic that otherwise might not tune in.

IOC President Thomas Bach was particularly impressed, Bourquin said, and everyone noticed that breaking turned in bigger social media numbers than any other sport in Buenos Aires.

The Paris 2024 organizers [were on board](#), and barely five months later the IOC's executive board [recommend provisionally](#) adding the dance discipline to the Summer Games. Breaking was formally approved for Paris last month, the same time skateboarding, sports climbing and surfing, all youth-oriented sports, were retained from the Tokyo Olympics slate.

Breaking's quick ascent as an Olympic-level competition has complicated its governance issues and stirred mixed feelings across the sprawling dance community.

It's an awkward marriage to be sure, non-breakers suddenly charged with championing an unfamiliar discipline, still holding out hope their preferred style of dance will someday impress Olympic organizers. Graham remembers a quarter-century ago when snowboarders made a splash on the Olympic stage but found themselves under the organizational control of ski-centric bodies.

"We're talking about a completely different demographic," Graham said. "The breakers aren't ones who you can just regulate. That doesn't mean they won't collaborate, but it's going to be a challenge for the ballroom dancers."

Break dancing competitors perform during the 2019 French final of the Red Bull BC One Cypher in Lyon. (Jeff Pachoud/Agence France-Presse/Getty Images)

## What's the score?

Outsiders have a more basic, intrinsic question: Is breaking even a sport?

Like most from his generation, 36-year-old Antonio Castillo didn't grow up thinking in those terms. Looking for a place to train, he [opened a studio](#) in Northwest Washington in 2011, eventually growing it into a [fully fledged breaking school](#) and taking on students.

"The kids and parents were always interested in the battles; they were attracted to that idea of winning," he said. "So it wasn't hard to see where this was heading, because I was seeing it every day at the school."

A breaking competition generally involves a series of dance battles. The dancers don't know the music ahead of time and have to improvise on the spot. Judges score them based on personality, technique, variety, creativity, performance and musicality.

In that sense, breaking isn't that different from other judged events at the Olympics, such as figure skating and gymnastics. Many incorporate music, costumes, acrobatics, strength and athleticism.

"Breaking is such a physically demanding dance," Rivas said. "It's so different than all the other dances and requires so much strength, energy, creativity, artistry."

The corporate world — think Red Bull and Monster Energy — have embraced breaking, and many think the Olympic stage is going to open many more doors for everyone involved. Castillo said he already has seen a bump in inquiries from young people for his studio.

"I'm always telling these kids, 'You could be Michael Phelps or Simone Biles of the sport,'" he said. "The Olympics are bringing a new energy, and you can see the path. The art and the sport are going to have to coexist. We need to have both worlds."

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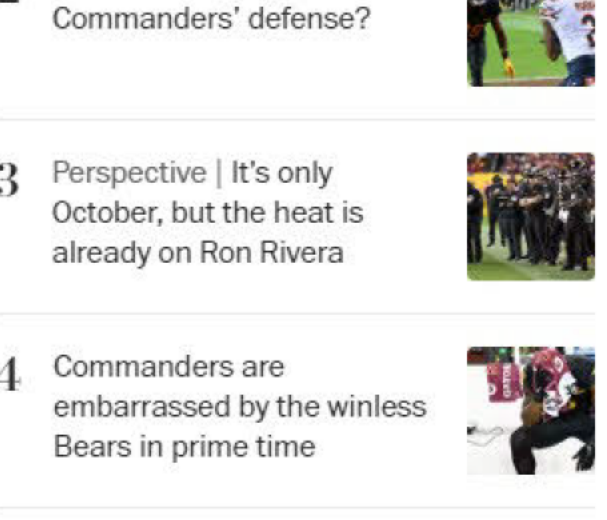


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