

# Wirewalking

## A Balancing Activity

*In 1791, in Paris, inside le Théâtre des Grands Danseurs du Roi, five-year-old Marguerite-Antoinette Lalanne was making her debut.*

*She flipped.  
She tumbled.  
She cartwheeled.*

*High above, her mother and father danced across a tightrope. The crowd cheered.*

*Marguerite waved and bowed and vowed that one day she would dance on a tightrope, too.*

—Madame Saqui: Revolutionary Rope Dancer

### Find Your Balance

Most of us take balance for granted. Our sense of balance, though, is something that we can develop and exercise throughout our lives. Dance, aerobics, tai chi, and yoga are all ways we can continue to train our sense of balance. A daily way to work out your sense of balance is to put on your socks while standing—one sock at a time while standing on only one foot!

### Simulate Wirewalking

Readers may be inspired by young Marguerite-Antoinette Lalanne, who became the famous Madame Saqui, revolutionary rope dancer and wirewalker. Here is how readers can pretend that they, too, are walking across a high-wire (while standing firmly on the ground).

#### Preparation

1) Use masking tape to make a 6-7 foot line on the floor. Children can take turns walking across it, one foot in front of the other, without falling off. Alternatively, you can place a piece of string on the floor. If you have access to a rope or a cable, set it on the floor, as it gives more of the sensation of what it's like to walk across a wire.

2) Use two pieces of paper, either squares or cut into circles, at either end of wire to create the platforms between which the wirewalker walks. Tape them down at either end of your "wire." Or you can use a frisbee at either end. For extra fun, have each child imagine where they are wirewalking, like over the Seine, or between the towers of Notre Dame, or over a local river.

## Wirewalking Simulation (cont.)

### Wirewalking Tips

- 1) When walking on the wire, don't stare at your feet. Instead, stare at the platform toward which you are walking. Try to look at that spot the whole time without looking down at your feet.
- 2) Stretch your arms wide for balance.
- 3) Walk the wire heel to toe, one foot after another.
- 4) Try a sliding walk; the front foot slides along the wire, then the lagging foot slides up to meet the first foot. Repeat.
- 5) Slide into a lunge on the wire (front leg bent, rear leg straight)
- 6) Walk two steps, then squat down, then stand again. Repeat.
- 7) Enjoy!



Image © Rebecca Green

### About Madame Saqui

Madame Saqui pursued her passion for rope dancing at a time when society imposed many constraints on women. Although women have practiced this perilous art for hundreds of years, most famous wire walkers are men, such as Charles Blondin, who crossed Niagara Falls on a wire, and Philippe Petit, who walked between New York's Twin Towers. Madame Saqui achieved international fame before these men were born. Her story adds a woman to the cast of characters on the stage of circus history.

When Marguerite-Antoinette Lalanne was born in 1786, French Revolution was in the air. Although Marguerite was not a revolutionary, her conduct was. Her scandalous costumes outraged and delighted audiences. Parisian women imitated her style, wearing ostrich-feathered hats à la Saqui. At Vauxhall Gardens, her flesh-colored leggings created such a stir that she had to change into pantaloons to perform. Women were not supposed to own property in the 1800s, but in 1816, Marguerite bought a theater and named it Le Spectacle Acrobat de Madame Saqui. She faced many setbacks: a cholera epidemic that drove Parisians away from theaters; the exile of her patron, Napoleon; and the deaths of two sons. Nevertheless, she persisted, rope dancing through two more waves of revolution in 1830 and 1848. Learn more in the picture book **Madame Saqui: Revolutionary Rope Dancer** by Lisa Robinson and illustrated by Rebecca Green (Schwartz & Wade Books).

### A Note from the Author

Madame Saqui's story inspired me to try wire walking. I practiced on a low tightrope in my home. But you don't have to own a tightrope in order to learn. Most large cities have gyms that teach circus arts. Beginners start on low wires with a mat underneath. Why not give it a try?