

The music pulses. You can feel the eyes lock onto your back.

Your right arm fires out in sync with the beat. Your right hip cocks and your right knee bends. Your head turns to look at the crowd. A big smile envelops your face to signal you got this as your head tilts slightly to begin the routine.

Laila Macon, Amari Webber and the rest of the New Hope High School DanceXpress team are familiar with the feelings of anxiety prior to a performance. They also know how quickly a toe-tapping beat can chase the nerves, flood their bodies with adrenaline and allow the music's rhythm to guide them through their choreography.

"All eyes are on you constantly and you have to meet expectations," said Macon, a sophomore who has been a member of the team for three years. "You have to really go above and beyond every day."

Macon and her teammates did just that July 28-29 at the American All-Star Choreography Camp at New Hope High. Macon, Webber, Madisyn Henry, Kearstyn Stafford, Camorah Tiggs, Emma Thompson and Presley Upton were named All-Stars at the camp and earned the opportunity to attend the American All-Star Dance Weekend on Aug. 19-20 in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Macon and Tiggs also received the Outstanding Dancer Award at the camp.

DanceXpress coach Courtney Hall said Macon, Webber and Henry will attend the camp, which will feature some of the top athletes in the region.

"I really love they're going to be able to receive instruction from college dancers," Hall said. "All three have dreams of being on a college team,

so they're going to get that experience. They're going to get the experience of learning choreography on the spot and performing. That's part of trying out for a dance team in college in that you learn the choreography that day and you try out that day. It's not a week-long process like it is in high school. The more you learn it, the better you get at it."

Repetition also helps dancers feel more comfortable even when thousands of people are watching their every move. Macon admits it is "very nerve-wracking" knowing the spotlight is on when the team steps on the field or court, but she said she and her teammates say a prayer that is very special to her and that calms her down.

"Even if you mess up, you have to keep going," Macon said. "You have to perform like nothing happened."

Webber, a senior, is in her fourth year on the team. She said being a member of DanceXpress has helped her "come out of my shell." She said her love for dance and the bond between team members motivates her to settle her anxiety and to focus on the routine.

"I know whatever I am going through I am pretty sure they're going through it, too," Webber said. "We're all nervous, but whenever we're nervous and we have one common goal and it helps us meet it because we're going through it together."

Webber said the camp at New Hope High was challenging mentally and physically and will be a great primer for the event in Louisiana. She and Macon said they are eager to learn new styles of dance and to meet new people.

“I am excited we’re going to get to learn things from members of the LSU dance team,” Webber said. “That was always my dream since I was little to be on the LSU dance team.”

Hall hopes the camp experiences – the team also attended a camp in May at Mississippi State University – provide lessons to help all of her dancers grow. She said team members have put in a lot of hard work and that the team’s growth following COVID-19 has been “amazing.”

“Several of them who were recognized in the past years haven’t really had the confidence,” Hall said. “They came out to this camp confidently and showed what they could do, and the instructors saw it.”

Maya Jacobsen, Ada Grace Glover, Chloe Kidd, Cider Griffin, Emily Robinson and Jacey Haynes round out DanceXpress. Chloe Jenkins is the team manager.