



Misty Copeland

Misty Copeland (born September 10, 1982) is an author, entertainer, and American ballet dancer for American Ballet Theatre (ABT), one of the three leading classical ballet companies in the United States (along with New York City Ballet and San Francisco Ballet).^[1] She is the third African-American soloist and first in two decades with ABT, where she has endured the cultural pressure associated with this role.^[2]

Copeland is considered a prodigy who rose to stardom despite not starting ballet until the age of 13. By age 15, Copeland's mother and ballet teachers, who were serving as her custodial guardians, fought a custody battle over her. Meanwhile, Copeland, who was already an award-winning dancer, was fielding professional offers.^[3] The 1998 legal proceedings involved filings for emancipation by Copeland and restraining orders by her mother.^[4] Both sides dropped legal proceedings, and Copeland moved home to begin studying under a new teacher who was a former ABT member.^[2]

In 1997, Copeland won the Los Angeles Music Center Spotlight Award as the best dancer in Southern California. After two summer workshops with the ABT, she became a member of the Studio Company in 2000, a member of the corps de ballet in 2001, and a soloist in 2007.^[5] Stylistically, she is considered a classical ballet dancer.^[6] As a soloist since the autumn of 2007, she has been described as having matured into a more contemporary and sophisticated dancer.^[7]

1 Early life

Copeland was born in Kansas City, Missouri, and raised in the San Pedro community of Los Angeles, California.^[5] She is of African American, German American and Italian American descent.^[8] Copeland is the youngest of Sylvia DelaCerna's four children from her second marriage. Copeland's siblings from that marriage are Erica Stephanie Copeland, Douglas Copeland Jr., and Christopher Ryan Copeland. She also has two younger half-siblings, Lindsey Monique Brown (a former track star at Chico State University) and Cameron Koa DelaCerna, one each from her mother's third and fourth marriage.^[8] Copeland did not see her father, Doug Copeland, between the ages of two and twenty-two.^[9] DelaCerna, a former Kansas City Chiefs cheerleader, had studied dance.^[8] She is a trained Medical Assistant, but worked mostly in sales.^[10] DelaCerna is biracial (Italian and African-American) and adopted by African-American parents.^[11]

Between the ages of three and seven Copeland lived in Bellflower, California, with her mother and her mother's third husband Harold Brown, a Santa Fe Railroad sales executive.^[12] The family moved to San Pedro where Sylvia eventually married her fourth husband, radiologist Robert DelaCerna, and where Misty attended Point Fermin Elementary School.^[13] When she was seven, Copeland saw *Nadia* on Lifetime and suddenly Nadia Comăneci was her new role model.^[14] At age eleven, she found her first creative outlet at a Boys & Girls Club wood shop class.^[15] Copeland never studied ballet or gymnastics formally until her teenage years. However, she did enjoy choreographing flips and dance moves to Mariah Carey songs in her youth.^[16] Following in the footsteps of her older sister Erica who had starred on the Dana Middle School drill team that won statewide competitions, Copeland became captain of the Dana drill team.^[17] Copeland's natural presence and skill came to the attention of her classically trained Dana drill team coach, Elizabeth Cantine, in San Pedro.^{[4][8]} She was first introduced to ballet in classes at her local Boys & Girls Club by Cynthia Bradley, who was a friend of Cantine's.^{[18][19][20]} DelaCerna allowed Copeland to go to the club after school until the workday ended and Bradley, a former working dancer with companies in San Diego, Virginia and Kentucky, taught a free ballet class there once a week.^[8] Bradley invited Copeland to attend class at the small local ballet school, San Pedro Dance Center. However, Copeland initially declined the offer because her mother did not have a car, was working 12–14 hours a day, and her oldest sister Erica was working two jobs.^{[8][19]} Copeland began her ballet studies at the age of 13 at the San Pedro Dance Center when Cynthia Bradley began picking her up from school.^{[5][19]} During her first year of middle school the family left Robert.^[21] After living with various boyfriends of her mother, the family, moved to the Sunset Inn in Gardena, California.^{[19][22]} Soon, DelaCerna told Copeland that she would have to give up ballet. However, Bradley wanted Copeland to continue and offered to host her, to which DelaCerna agreed so Misty could pursue her dream.^[23] Eventually, they signed a management contract as well as a life-story contract. She spent the weekdays with the Bradleys near the coast and the weekends at home with her mother,^[4] a two-hour bus ride away.^[24] By the age of fourteen, Copeland was the winner of a national ballet contest and won her first solo role.^[24]

The Bradleys introduced Copeland to books and videos about ballet. When she got to see Paloma Herrera perform at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, Copeland began

to idolize her as much as she did *Mariah Carey*.^[8] After three months of study Copeland was *en pointe*.^[19] The media first noticed Copeland when she drew 2,000 patrons per show as she performed as Clara in the *The Nutcracker* after only eight months of study.^[8] A larger role in *Don Quixote* and a featured role in *The Chocolate Nutcracker*, an African American version of the tale that was narrated by *Debbie Allen*, soon followed.^[8]

The summer before her fifteenth birthday, Copeland and Bradley decided to pursue *homeschooling* to free up time for dance.^[25] At fifteen years old, Copeland won first place in the *Los Angeles Music Center Spotlight Awards*.^[2] The competition was held at the Chandler Pavilion on March 24, 1998,^[26] and Copeland said it was the first time she ever battled nervousness.^[2] The winners received scholarships between \$500 and \$2500.^[27] Copeland's victory in the 10th annual contest among gifted high school students in *Southern California*^[26] secured her recognition by the *Los Angeles Times* as the best young dancer in the *Greater Los Angeles Area*.^[28]

Copeland studied at the *San Francisco Ballet School* after winning the *Spotlight award*.^{[5][19]} While training with Bradley, she selected the workshop with the *San Francisco Ballet* over offers from the *Joffrey Ballet*, *American Ballet Theatre*, *Dance Theater of Harlem* and *Pacific Northwest Ballet*.^{[8][29]} Of the programs she auditioned for, only the *New York City Ballet* declined to make her an offer.^[29] During the six week workshop, Copeland was placed in the most advanced classes.^[30] She was under full tuition plus expenses scholarship at the *San Francisco Ballet summer workshop*.^[31] At the end of the workshop, she received one of the few offers to continue as a full-time student at the school, but with encouragement from her mother to return home and from Bradley to return to the personal attention the Bradley family offered, she declined with visions of a subsequent summer with *ABT*.^[32] She returned home to controversy as her family resented the Bradley's influence. They asked Copeland to resume her residence with them, resume study at *San Pedro High School* and sought *Cantine's* advice on finding a new ballet school.^[33] Soon she began her junior year at *San Pedro* and her ballet studies with former *ABT* dancer *Diane Lauridsen* of *Torrance's South Bay Ballet* at the *Lauridsen Ballet Center*.^{[5][34]} As a student, Copeland had a 3.8/4.0 *GPA* through her junior year of high school.^[34]

2 Custody case

“The dismissal of the emancipation petition accomplished Sylvia's main goal of keeping the family bonds intact and strong, without interference by third parties.... Another concern of Sylvia in filing a request for restraining orders was that she did not believe it was in Misty's best interest to have continuing contact with the Bradleys. In the sworn declarations filed by the Bradleys in response to the restraining order they said that “we have not and

will never do anything to interfere with Misty's relationship with her mother.... Since Sylvia has accomplished all of the goals that she intended to achieve when she filed her papers with the court we have chosen not to proceed to seek an injunction in this matter.”

—Gloria Allred^[19]

Copeland lived and trained with Cynthia and Patrick Bradley for nearly three years, ending in 1998.^{[3][19]} During that time she pursued *independent study* for tenth grade.^{[8][19]} After Copeland returned from her summer 1998 *San Francisco Ballet* experience, her mother informed her that she would be staying with her and not resuming her study with the Bradleys.^{[8][19]} Copeland was distraught with fear that she would not be able to dance.^[4] She had heard the term *emancipation* while in *San Francisco*;^[19] the procedure was common among young performers.^[8] The Bradleys introduced Copeland to *Steven Bartell*, a lawyer who explained the *emancipation petition process*.^{[8][19]} Copeland says she understood the process as a way to make everything better.^[19] The Bradleys encouraged her to be absent when the *emancipation petition* was delivered to her mother.^[19] Copeland ran away from home for three days and stayed with a friend.^{[4][19]}

After her mother reported Copeland missing, she was told about the *emancipation petition*.^[19] Three days after running away, Copeland was taken to the police station by *Bartell*, who filed *emancipation papers*.^[4] Copeland's mother subsequently applied for a *restraining order*, which included the Bradleys' five-year-old son who had been Copeland's roommate. The order was partly intended to preclude contact between the Bradleys and Copeland, but it did not have proper legal basis, since there had been no *stalking* and no *harassment*.^[19]

In late 1998, a *custody controversy* occurred involving Copeland. The case was highly publicized in the press (especially *Los Angeles Times* and *Extra*),^[19] starting in August and September 1998.^{[3][19]} Parts of the press coverage spilled over into *op-ed* articles.^[34] In the case, which was heard in *Torrance* in the *Superior Court of Los Angeles County*, *DelaCerna* claimed that the Bradleys had *brainwashed* Copeland into filing suit for *emancipation* from her mother,^{[3][35][36]} and *DelaCerna*, who was represented by *Gloria Allred*,^[19] filed a series of *restraining orders* against *Bartell*, the lawyer who filed the *emancipation charges* on behalf of her daughter.^[3] *Allred* claimed that the Bradleys had turned Copeland against her mother by *belittling DelaCerna's intelligence*.^[35] The Bradleys were not intimidated by the suits and said they were willing to enforce the *management contract*, which gave them authority and rights to twenty percent of Copeland's earnings until she became eighteen,^[19] via the legal system.^[3]

After *DelaCerna* stated that she would always make sure Copeland could dance, the *emancipation papers* and re-

straining orders were dropped.^[4] Even though she had dropped the temporary restraining order request, DelaCerna wanted the Bradleys out of her daughter's life.^[28] Later in 1998, Copeland, who claimed she did not even understand the term emancipation, withdrew the request after informing the judge that such charges no longer represented her wishes.^{[24][28]} Eventually, Copeland re-enrolled at San Pedro High School on pace to be a part of her original class of 2000 and began ballet study with Lauridsen Ballet Centre, although it was now restricted to afternoons in deference to her schooling.^{[8][19]} Afterward, all parties appeared on Leeza Gibbons' *Leeza* show.^[19] In 2000, DelaCerna stated that Copeland's earnings from ballet were set aside in a savings account and only used as needed.^[34]

3 American Ballet Theatre

Copeland was described by many early public accounts as the first African American female soloist for ABT.^{[2][18][37]} However, Anne Benna Sims and Nora Kimball, who were with the ABT in the early and mid-1980s respectively,^{[38][39][40]} preceded her.^[41] As of 2008, Copeland has been the only African-American woman in the dance company for her entire American Ballet Theatre career, nor is there a male African-American since the departure of Danny Tidwell in 2005.^{[2][42]} In an international ballet community with a lack of diversity,^[43] she is a rare African-American ballerina,^[44] and although she has been shielded from several issues, she endures the difficulties of cultural isolation as the second African-American ABT soloist ballet dancer. Since she is often credited as the first African-American ABT soloist ballet dancer in the press, some describe her as the Jackie Robinson of classical ballet.^[2] Copeland also feels that since the female dancer is the focus of the ballet, her role as a trail-blazing performer and role model has extra significance.^[2] She is included in the 2004 picture book by former ABT dancer Rosalie O'Connor that is entitled *Getting Closer: A Dancer's Perspective* (ISBN 0-8130-2768-3).^[45] Copeland's performances with American Ballet Theatre are sponsored by Susan Fales-Hill.^{[5][18]}

3.1 Early ABT career

Copeland auditioned for several dance programs in 1999, and each made her an offer to enroll in its summer program.^[8] Copeland performed with the ABT as part of its 1999 and 2000 Summer Intensive programs.^{[46][47]} During the summer of 1999, the topic of whether Copeland would stay if invited came up, and she responded affirmatively, although her mother insisted finishing high school was important.^[8] During that summer, she was told that she would likely be invited to stay after she graduated in 2000 and by the end of the summer

she was asked to skip her senior year and join the studio company.^[8] Copeland returned to California for her senior year, even though the ABT arranged to pay for her performances, housing accommodations and academic arrangements.^[8] She studied at the Summer Intensive Program on full scholarship for both summers and was declared ABT's National Coca-Cola Scholar in 2000.^[5] In the 2000 Summer Intensive Program, she danced the role of Kitri in *Don Quixote*.^{[5][47]} Of the 150 dancers in the 2000 Summer Intensive Program, she was one of six selected to join the junior dance troupe.^[47]

She joined the ABT Studio Company in September 2000, and became a member of its *Corps de ballet* in 2001.^{[5][48]} She spent most of her first year sidelined due to a lumbar stress fracture.^[49] As part of the Studio Company, which is the ABT's second company, she performed a duet in Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty*.^[50] During her second year in the corps, she endured medically induced physical maturation, professional pressure to conform to conventional ballet aesthetics and a resulting binge eating disorder.^[51] During her years in the corps, she felt the burden of her ethnicity in many ways and contemplated a variety of career moves.^[52] On August 20, 2004, while on break from ABT, she met her biological father for the first time.^[53]

Early career reviews mentioned her as more radiant than higher ranking dancers. She was named to the 2003 class of Dance Magazine's "25 to Watch".^[54] As a corps dancer she had the opportunity to dance alongside her longtime idol Paloma Herrera.^{[8][55]} Starting in 2003, she began to be favorably reviewed for her roles as a member of the corps in *La Bayadère* and William Forsythe's *workwithinwork*.^{[56][57]} Recognition continued in 2004 for roles in ballets such as *Raymonda* and *workwithinwork*.^{[6][58][59]} and the 2004 season is regarded as her breakthrough season.^[6] In 2005, her most notable performance was in George Balanchine's *Tarantella*.^[60] In 2006, she received a notable mention for her role in *Cinderella*.^[61] and she was acknowledged for her meticulous classical performance style in *Giselle*.^[62] That year, she also returned to Southern California to perform at Orange County Performing Arts Center.^[63] Copeland's "old-style" performance continued to earn her praise until her promotion to soloist in 2007.^[7]

3.2 Soloist

Copeland was appointed soloist in August 2007,^[19] which was announced in July 2007.^[64] Standing at 5 feet 2 inches (1.57 m),^[65] she was one of the youngest ABT dancers promoted to soloists,^[37] and she has been a stand-out among her peers.^[66] In the early fall 2007 New York City Center season, in which avant-garde ballets works were performed, she presented a Balanchine *Ballo Della Regina* role.^[67] Her solo in this work was highly regarded although, as one of Balanchine's later works, *Ballo Della Regina* is not regarded as one of his best productions.^[68]

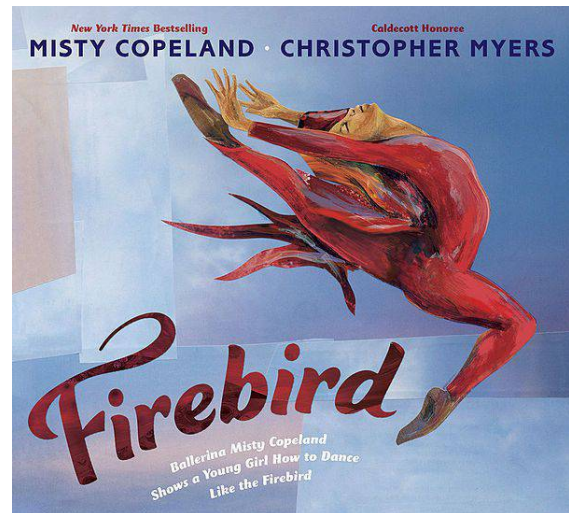
Her performances of Twyla Tharp works in the same City Center season were recognized,^{[69][70]} and she was described as more sophisticated and contemporary as a soloist than she had been as a corps dancer.^[71] As a corps member she had been recognized for prior performances of Tharp's work.^{[72][73]} Her summer 2008 Metropolitan Opera House season performances in *Don Quixote* and *Sleeping Beauty* were well received.^{[74][75]}

In 2008, Copeland won the Leonore Annenberg Fellowship in the Arts, which funds study with master teachers and trainers outside of the American Ballet Theatre.^[76] The two-year fellowships are in recognition of "young artists of extraordinary talent with the goal of providing them with additional resources in order to fully realise their potential".^[77] During the 2008–09 season, she received publicity for roles in Twyla Tharp's *Baker's Dozen* and Paul Taylor's *Company B*.^{[78][79]}

In March 2009, Copeland spent two days in Los Angeles filming a music video with Prince, for the first single from his 2009 studio album *Lotusflower*, which was a cover of the "Crimson and Clover".^{[80][81]} Prince caught her by surprise with a next-day invitation to participate in unchoreographed movements. She described his instructions as "Be you, feel the music, just move" and upon request for instruction "Keep doing what you're doing".^[82] During the summer, her Annenberg Fellowship resulted in training for her performance in Balanchine's *Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux* adaptation of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* "Pas de Deux".^{[81][83]} She also began taking acting lessons.^[81] That fall, she performed in the ABT's first trip to Beijing November 12 – 15. The six-performance engagement was the first by an American ballet company at the new National Center for the Performing Arts.^[84]

In October 2010, she performed at the Guggenheim Museum to David Lang's music.^{[85][86]} During the New York City and New Jersey portions of Prince's *Welcome 2 America* tour, Copeland took a few nights off from her 2010 role in *The Nutcracker* at Brooklyn Academy of Music and performed a pas de deux en pointe to "The Beautiful Ones" as the opening number at the Izod Center and Madison Square Garden.^[87] Prince had previously invited her onstage at a concert in Nice, France.^[88] In February 2011, in honor of Black History Month, Copeland was selected by *Essence* as one of its 37 Boundary-breaking black women in entertainment.^[89] That same month, she toured with Company B, which performed at Sadler's Wells Theatre in London.^[90] On April 13, 2011, she performed alongside Prince on the *Lopez Tonight* show, dancing to the song "The Beautiful Ones."^[91] Her Summer 2011 ABT performances were part of a new Alexei Ratmansky ballet as well as a reprisal of *Giselle* pas de deux.^[82] In the Ratmansky piece, Copeland earned praise for her May and June Metropolitan Opera House performances: "Misty Copeland was a luminous, teasingly sensual milkmaid. I'll never look at her the same way again."^[92] She per-

formed Ratmansky to a Metropolitan Opera audience that included *Black Swan* star Natalie Portman.^[93] She reprised the role in July at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in Los Angeles with a performance described as "sly".^[94] As a flower girl, she was described as glittering in *Don Quixote*.^[95] In August, she performed at the Vail International Dance Festival in the Gerald Ford Amphitheater in Vail, Colorado.^[96]

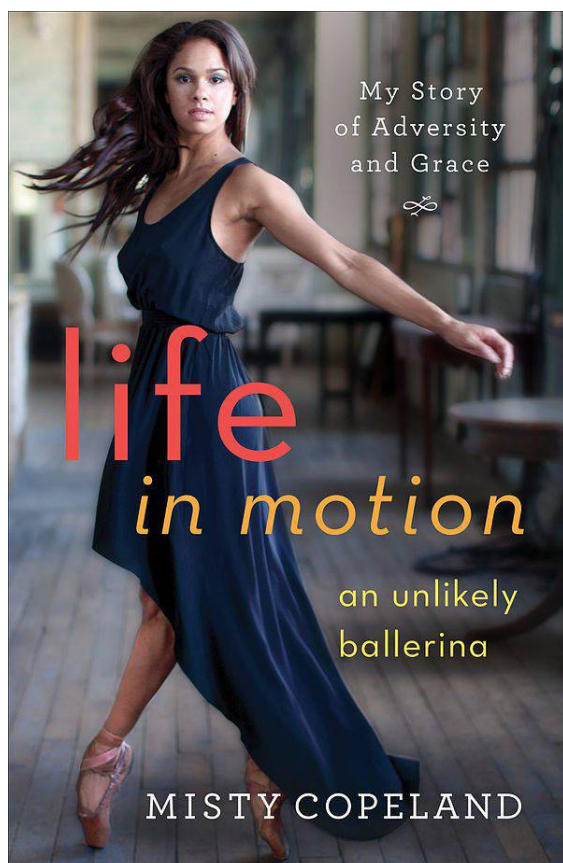


Firebird poster

While aspiring to be a principal dancer, Copeland has numerous goals as a dancer, in terms of leading roles. She aspires to perform lead roles in *Giselle*, Nikiya and Gamzatti in *La Bayadère*, Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* as well as Odette/Odile in *Swan Lake*.^[97] In September 2011, she was featured in the Season 1, episode 5 of the Hulu web series *A Day in the Life*.^{[98][99]} In December, she unveiled a line of dancewear that she designed.^[100] On April 5, 2012, Copeland was recognized by The Council of Urban Professionals as the Council's Breakthrough Leadership Award winner at its 5th Anniversary Leadership Gala.^{[101][102]}

In 2011, Copeland marketed dancewear line M by Misty.^[100] She has also produced celebrity calendars.^[103] By late 2012, she was seeking publication of two books: a memoir and an illustrated youth book.^[104] Around this time, Copeland began achieving solo roles in full-length ballets rather than works that were mostly relatively modern pieces.^[105] Copeland starred in *The Firebird*, with choreography by Alexei Ratmansky at the Segerstrom Center for the Arts in Costa Mesa, California. It premiered on March 29, 2012. The performance was hailed by the *Los Angeles Times* Laura Bleiberg as one of the years best dance performances.^[106] *The Firebird* was again performed at the Metropolitan Opera House in June 2012. Copeland and fellow ABT soloist Isabella Boylston as well as ABT guest artist and Bolshoi Ballet principal dancer Natalia Osipova shared the role as the leads in three casts that would perform.^{[107][108][109]} It was Copeland's first casting as a lead.^[108] *Backstage*

described it as her “most prestigious part” to date.^[110] Her cast performed on the second night.^[111] Within one week of her first and only performance in the role at the Metropolitan Opera, Copeland withdrew from the entire ABT season at the Met due to six stress fractures in her tibia. She was sidelined for seven months after her October 10 surgery.^[112]



Life In Motion cover

In January 2013, she announced that she was working on two books: a memoir under the Simon & Schuster Touchstone Books label and a picture book for the G. P. Putnam’s Sons for Young Readers label.^[113] In September 2013, Copeland became a spokesperson for Project Plié, a national initiative with the goal of broadening the pipeline of leadership within ballet.^[114] Copeland was interviewed in the November 2013 *Vogue Italia*.^[115]

In March 2014 Copeland’s autobiography *Life in Motion: An Unlikely Ballerina* was released.^[116] That April, Copeland was named to the President’s Council on Fitness, Sports, and Nutrition.^[117] Copeland became a guest judge for the 11th season of FOX’s *So You Think You Can Dance*.^[118] On August 14, 2014, New Line Cinema optioned *Life in Motion* for a screen adaptation.^[119]

In May 2014, she performed the lead role of Swanilda in *Coppélia* at the Metropolitan Opera House.^{[120][121]} In addition she performed the roles of a Shade and the Lead D’Jampe in *La Bayadère* alongside Herman Cornejo and Alina Cojucaru.^{[122][123]} Later in the year, she per-

formed the Odette/Odile double role in *Swan Lake* on September 3 when the company toured in Brisbane, Australia.^{[124][125]} She would later perform Odette/Odile in New York City as well as her first *Romeo and Juliet*.^[126] Her ascension to more prominent roles occurred as three ABT principal dancers (Paloma Herrera, Julie Kent and Xiomara Reyes) entered their final seasons before retirement.^[127]

On November 12, 2014, The Washington Ballet announced that Copeland would make her American debut in *Swan Lake* with Brooklyn Mack as her love interest, Prince Siegfried, on April 9, 2015 at the Eisenhower Theater in the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.^[128] The performance was announced as The Washington Ballet’s first presentation of *Swan Lake* in its 70 year history.^[129] On November 18, the Oxygen network announced that it would produce a docuseries (reality series) under the working title *The Misty Copeland Project* about Copeland as she mentors a Master Class of aspiring young dancers.^{[130][131]} Copeland was a Dance Magazine Awards 2014 honoree.^[132] Copeland was selected for the 2015 Time 100. As a result, Copeland appeared on the cover of *Time*, making her the first dancer to appear on the cover since Bill T. Jones made the cover in 1994. She was part of a five-cover installation that also included Kanye West, Bradley Cooper, Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Jorge Ramos.^{[133][134]} *A Ballerina’s Tale*, a documentary film about Copeland, debuted at the 2015 Tribeca Film Festival on April 19.^[135] On May 10, she was featured on *60 Minutes* in a segment with correspondent Bill Whitaker.^{[136][137]}

4 Endorsements

Copeland was featured in T-Mobile’s ads for the BlackBerry in 2010.^[138] In January 2013, Dr. Pepper began airing an ad campaign featuring unique individuals such as Copeland.^[139] In the first quarter of 2014, she became a sponsored athlete for Under Armour,^[140] which paid her more highly than her ballet career.^[141] The Under Armour women-focused ad campaign starring Copeland was widely publicized,^{[142][143][144]} eventually resulting in her being named ABC World News Person of the week on August 8, 2014.^{[145][146]} The ad campaign was recognized by *Adweek* as one of The 10 Best Ads of 2014 where it was recognized as “The year’s best campaign targeting women”.^[147]

5 Personal

Copeland lives with her boyfriend Olu Evans on the Upper West Side.^{[105][148]}

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8 External links

- "Cupcakes & Conversation with Misty Copeland". *Ballet News*. April 11, 2011.
- Copeland archive at *Los Angeles Times*
- Copeland at American Ballet Theatre
- Copeland on Twitter
- A Day In the Life With Misty Copeland
- Copeland's commercial for Blackberry Bold
- The Loop 21: Interview with Misty Copeland
- 1997 Copeland video

Misty Copeland: "Ballerinas are athletes too"

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