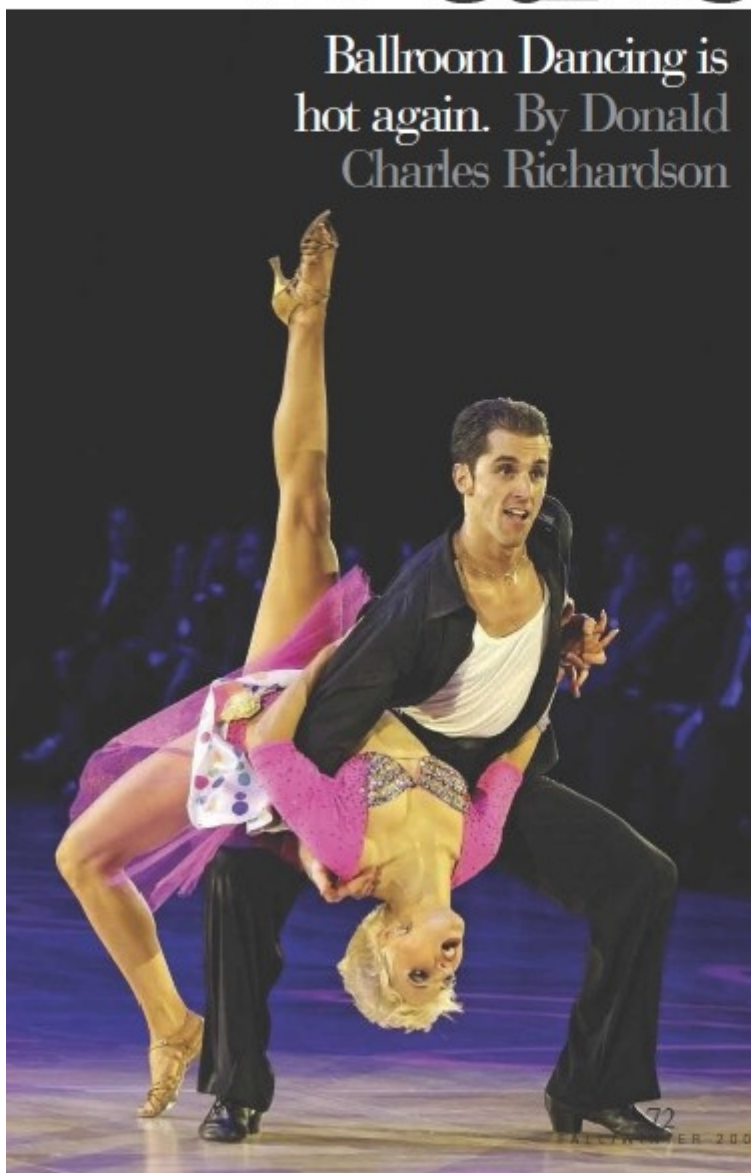


PASTIMES

# Feel like Dancing?

Ballroom Dancing is hot again. By Donald Charles Richardson



**A**T THIS MOMENT chances are that someone somewhere is ballroom dancing. "Hundreds of thousands of people are dancing," says Angela Prince, a national director of USA Dance. Dancers are young and old, and come from

just about every country in the world. Many colleges now offer dance lessons, and social dances are held in small towns and big cities all over the country. When people aren't dancing themselves, they're watching it on television. Eight to ten million people never miss *America's Ballroom Challenge* on PBS. Over 20 million tune in to *Dancing With The Stars* on ABC, and Comcast now broadcasts the USA Dance National DanceSport Championships.

Why is ballroom dancing getting so much attention? "It's popular again because people are looking for ways to connect," says Aida Moreno, who has been producing dance programs for PBS for over 20 years. "There's nothing better in the world than holding someone in your arms and dancing across the dance floor to beautiful romantic music." Academy Award winner Marlee Matlin, who appeared last season on *DWTS*, says, "As much as the show was about competition, I also got out of it a sense of fun. Dancing is truly fun!"

Melanie LaPatin, who with her partner Tony Meredith has won over 100 championship titles, owns Dance Times Square ([dancetimesquare.com](http://dancetimesquare.com)), a studio in New York City where the young and not-

**Happy Feet** (this page) Decho Kraev and Bree Watson on PBS' *America's Ballroom Challenge*. (opposite page) Marlee Matlin and her professional partner Fabian Sanchez on ABC's *Dancing With the Stars*.

PHOTO: FOR THIS ARTICLE'S BALLROOM CHALLENGE PHOTO BY JEFFREY OWEN FREDICK. OPPOSITE PAGE COURTESY USA DANCE AND THE STARS

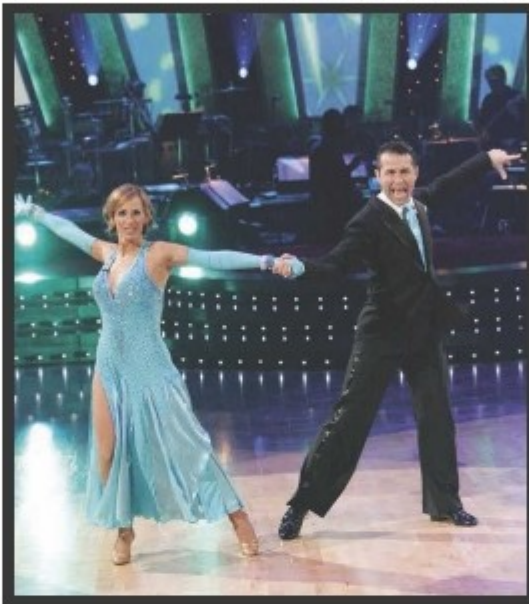
so-young come to learn ballroom dancing. As soon as you enter the studio, you're involved. The music is playing. Everyone is smiling and talking. Suddenly, a mature woman in magnificent condition (dancing is excellent exercise) slips into the arms of a young man and they sail across the dance floor. The enthusiasm is contagious. "Anyone who experiences ballroom or partner dancing for the first time at any age feels the joy, intoxicating intrigue, challenge and power within moments," says LaPatin.

"It's exciting and frightening at the same time," says Matlin. "I love any sort of challenge and it was certainly challenging for me to do something I had never even considered before. It was also exciting to work with someone who is a 'pro' at what he does. The frightening part was wondering if I could meet all of his expectations. After all, I may be the one out there dancing but everyone would be looking to him to see if he could teach me. I didn't want to let him down."

Most novice dancers don't have to perform in front of 20 million viewers, but taking the initial step can still be daunting. Even if you're convinced you've got two left feet and no rhythm at all, there's hope. Tony Dovolani, who has appeared on *DWTS* for the past six seasons (he partnered with the popular Marissa Jaret Winokur in season six), has been teaching for 19 years. "I have yet to come across someone I couldn't teach how to dance," he says. "Dancing is walking with rhythm. The first thing I do with novice dancers? I watch them, study their bodies, the way they walk and move. I don't throw difficult things at them." If you're really terrified about starting out in a dance studio, Dovolani has created [ballroomdancechannel.com](http://ballroomdancechannel.com), where you can familiarize yourself with the rumba and the waltz before you show up at the studio.

**W**hen you're ready to get your feet wet and join a class, it's very easy to find a dance studio. USA Dance (USADance.org) serves as the national governing body for DanceSport (the competitive version of ballroom dancing in the U.S.) and local chapters of the organization offer group dance lessons for beginners. Advertisements for dance studios can also be found on the web and in phone books. When you finally choose one, make sure the dance instructors have reliable credentials (the best have often won championships) and that they will actually dance with you during

class. Yang Chen, president of the Greater NY Chapter of USA Dance, cautions that it doesn't help for an instructor to just tell you how good you might become and push the sale of lessons. A good teacher really cares about what you can accomplish. Jacob Jason, a world Latin champion and popular teacher at Dance Times Square, says, "Dancing and teaching dancing are what I do. When one of my students 'gets it', I feel like I've really done my job and it's amazing."



For many people who begin casually by taking lessons, ballroom dancing turns into a lifestyle. "It's a healthy addiction," says LaPatin. "Dancing changes people's lives." Paul and Louise Giuliano from Albany, New York, have been married for 38 years, and didn't start dancing until their 25th wedding anniversary. "The kids were older then. We'd worked and taken care of them. We were finally in a comfortable spot. We clipped a coupon from the paper for a dance studio." Since then, the Giulianos have moved from social dances (which they attend just about every day of the week) into the world of competition. They danced in the USA Dance 2008 National DanceSport Championships,

represented the U.S. at the World Senior Latin Championship in Belgium in 2004 and now have seven U.S. titles.

Naturally, not everyone who learns to tango or waltz will want to make the leap to competition. Some people simply want to dance. LaPatin's studio hosts a social dance once a month. USA Dance holds frequent social dances all over the country, and everyone from high school students to senior citizens attend. And there are, of course, those truly elegant occasions when you can show off your steps wearing a designer gown and beautiful jewelry. "Part of what every woman loves when they get involved in ballroom dancing is getting dressed up," says Mrs. Giuliano. Most cruise ships have dances on formal nights, or you can take the lead at a wedding or charity ball. Under the glittering chandeliers in the dining room of the London Ritz, ballroom dances are held Friday and Saturday nights from January through November, and every night but Sundays from December 1st until Christmas.

Ballroom dancing, at its very best, when the music and the lights and the glamour and the romance all come together, is chic, beautiful, unforgettable. "I think all my fantasies came true on *Dancing With the Stars*," says Matlin. "I danced a beautiful Viennese Waltz to my favorite singer Billy Joel, right there in front of 22 million people with my husband and daughter watching in the audience. How wonderful is that?" ♦