

Ballroom Dancing Wants Olympics To Give It a Whirl

Reality Television Put Tango on World Stage, But Is It Really a Sport?

By BARRY NEWMAN

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Tug of war, which was yanked out of the Olympics in 1920, would like to get back in. The Tug of War International Federation acknowledges, however, that the sport falls on its face in the vital Olympic arena of mass exposure. "The biggest thing with tug of war is we don't get any television," says Glen Johnson, a construction worker in Orfordville, Wis., and the federation's secretary general.

You can't say that about ballroom dancing. Like tug of war, it's on the International Olympic Committee's 31-sport waiting list for a spot in the Summer Games. On the IOC's latest seven-sport short list, at least two -- golf and rugby -- get good play on TV. But for the world-wide mega-audiences that Olympic impresarios place high on their checklists, ballroom has outdone them both.

It's got a reality show.

"Dancing With the Stars," a pastiche of samba, celebrity and melodrama, went world-wide in 2005, a year after the Olympics in Athens. Local versions now air in 25 countries -- from Estonia to India to Israel to South Africa. In the U.S., where the show's newest boldface champ is ex-Olympic figure skater Kristi Yamaguchi, 20 million people watch. In China, the first week's audience was 40 million.

To ballroom's promoters and to the show's producers, those numbers ought to convince the IOC that tango has as good a claim to Olympic status as beach volleyball, a recent addition with a similar emphasis on deep tans.

"We run a serious competition that has massively raised the profile of ballroom dancing and would make it a successful Olympic sport," says Paul Telegdy, the executive at BBC Worldwide America who introduced "Dancing with the Stars" to ABC.

"Ten years ago, the only people who would watch ballroom dancing were ladies over the age of 50," says Peter Pover, who heads the U.S. arm of ballroom's main amateur body, which now calls itself the International DanceSport Federation. "It's all been transformed by 'Dancing With the Stars.' "

So has ballroom's customary decorum. TV fame -- plus the idea of Olympic glory -- has ignited a feud between the amateur federation and ballroom's international organization of professional dancers. The professionals, who mount big for-profit competitions like England's famous Blackpool Dance Festival, worry that the Olympics will relegate their own events to ballroom's bush league.

The spat has led to angry public exchanges and the rise of rival world championships. But aside from the chances of making or not making a lot of money, the quarrel comes down to differences over ballroom's true nature.

Is it an art, like ballet? A sport, like fencing? Or a contest, like hot-dog eating?



Barry Newman for the Wall Street Journal

Eugene Katsevman practicing part of his dance routine in a studio in Times Square, in New York City.

won the U.S. National Latin Championships 11 years in a row before turning pro this year. They were heading home, to Brooklyn, after an hour with an instructor in a Times Square studio, working through a dramatically physical *pasodoble* they planned to unreel in Blackpool.

Reality TV piles on publicity, they agreed, and the Olympics confers legitimacy. But neither quite addresses ballroom's essence, which seems to lie somewhere between bumper cars and choreography.

"That show isn't about dancing," said Mr. Katsevman, hunting for a parking place in Bensonhurst. Said Ms. Manusova, who weighs 100 pounds, "It's about diets. Always, 'Look how much weight I lost.'"

"The whole sports thing came from the DanceSport federation and the IOC," Mr. Katsevman said. He found a spot to park in front of a Turkish snack bar. "The word wasn't in our vocabulary before all that."

All that began in 1990, after the IOC rejected an application from what was then the International Council of Amateur Dancers. Mr. Pover, now 76, was a council officer. "What did we have to do to convince these Olympic people that we were a sport?" he says. "Well, the first thing was to call ourselves a sport."

So ballroom dancing was rechristened as "DanceSport." A video was made in Germany of splendidly fit dancers swimming laps. A split screen showed an 800-meter runner alongside a couple doing the quickstep. Then, a German researcher from the University of Freiberg

"It's competitive," Eugene Katsevman was saying not long ago, as he drove his SUV in New York City traffic. "But it's artistic."

From the back seat, Maria Manusova said, "And creative. But accidents happen. You crash into other couples."

"I guess we're dancers," said Mr. Katsevman.

"Or athletes," said Ms. Manusova.

Either way, they are good at it. Mr. Katsevman, 29 years old, and Ms. Manusova, 28 -- both born in Ukraine --

performed tests demonstrating stress levels in the two events to be equal. "And our women do it backwards in high heels," says Mr. Pover.

DanceSport was a game without rules. It doesn't even have a set of tricks like figure skating. Couples moved with the music and tried catching the spirit of a dance. Judges watched and picked winners. Still, the federation got something down on paper -- including a code of ethics -- and in 1997, DanceSport achieved Olympic "recognition."

That put it in a class with bridge and bowling. DanceSport hired IMG, the sports marketer, to impress the IOC with TV deals in more countries. No luck. At the 2000 Sydney Olympics, hundreds of dancers did a samba with big kewpie dolls in the closing ceremony. Their reward was a joke about pulled hamstrings by a sportscaster on NBC.

Then reality TV struck. Revitalized, DanceSport now has branches in 90 countries and IOC affiliates in 65. In May, Mr. Pover got an invitation, his first, to visit the U.S. Olympic Committee in Colorado Springs. "I met all these people from hockey, swimming, curling," he says. "We instantly bonded. It was totally great."

The IOC itself, though, is sitting this one out. Its officials have nothing public to say about ballroom's aspirations. But 2012's Olympic calendar is already full, and the IOC drew up its short list of candidates for 2016 before "Dancing With the Stars" blasted off. So if DanceSport ever does ride the reality comet into the Games, it won't be for 12 years -- too late for Bensonhurst's Eugene and Maria.

After a Turkish meal in a neighborhood where Italians once discoed, they were in their own mirror-walled row-house studio, laying down the laws of cha-cha for two potential 2020 Olympians.

Armen Petrosyan, 17, from Armenia, and Nicole Pyatetskaya, 14, from Ukraine -- the 2008 U.S. National Youth Latin Champions -- took a break to think about it: Will they go to the Olympics?

"As soon as possible," young Armen said.

"Probably not," said Nicole. "All sports in the Olympics are different from this. This is not a sport. This is art."

"How do you like that?" Ms. Manusova interrupted. "Everybody has an opinion. Now, get back to work. Two, three, *cha-cha-cha*..."

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