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## Let's Dance

by Nancy Henderson

Men and women of all ages, from teenagers to baby boomers, line up for a fox-trot lesson at Allemande Hall, a spacious dance venue in Chattanooga, Tenn. Many have never danced before; others have been dancing for years. Instructor Bud Slack jokes with the newcomers while explaining the timing: slow, slow, quick, quick. "This is the only time in your life you'll be the boss," he tells the men. "Enjoy it while you can."

For the next hour, Slack teaches sway steps and underarm turns. He shows the guys their steps, then demonstrates the women's, before inviting everyone to pick a partner. Veteran dancers help nervous novices. High school students such as Lindsey Brown, 18, practice with partners old enough to be their grandparents. "I love dancing with all the different ages," says Brown, who dances every Tuesday night. "I like dancing with the older people because of their experience. They make better leads."

### Dance craze

Ballroom dancing, which generally is defined as partner dancing with patterns of predictable steps, originated at high-society parties in England in the late 18th century, spread to the middle classes in the 1900s and became the rage in America during the Roaring '20s. Eventually, the public lost interest in the elegant waltz, dramatic tango and flirty cha-cha. But thanks to hit movies such as *Shall We Dance*, the television show *Dancing With the Stars* and a popular Gap commercial that prompted a swing craze a few years ago, ballroom dancing has made a phenomenal comeback. Elementary schools and colleges offer classes. Private studios are springing up in small towns from Maine to California. Even churches and community centers are drawing folks who've always dreamed of dancing but never dared to try it—until now.

Esther Freeman, president of USA Dance, a 22,000-member organization that promotes the pastime, estimates there are "millions" of social ballroom dancers across the nation. "It's back in a big way," she says. "Dancing With the Stars made it OK for macho men to dance. (NFL great) Jerry Rice dancing with his wife in the kitchen (in one

episode)—that was very romantic for a lot of women. And men looked at it and said, ‘Well, if Jerry Rice can do it, I can.’”

Alan Sosebee, 45, a truck driver from Dalton, Ga. (pop. 30,341), took up ballroom dancing in 2006 after a female friend showed him some East Coast swing steps at a singles church event. He was instantly drawn to the “structure.” “To be honest, I did not like getting out there and wiggling around like a worm on the dance floor,” he says of the free-style dancing he’d tried before. “That loosey-goosey stuff doesn’t work for a 6-foot-6 man.”

Sosebee liked swing dancing so much that he took a group fox-trot lesson. “Talk about frustrating,” he says. “When I first started, I almost quit three or four times. But to be honest, I figured out this was where the girls were at. So I just kept coming back.”

He also bought instructional DVDs and practiced at home. “As I got better at it, I started enjoying it more and more, and it just sort of grew on me,” he says. “It’s a pretty big part of my life now.” Sosebee usually dances three nights a week and is teaching his daughter, Erica, how to waltz for her upcoming wedding. He dreams of meeting his own special someone on the dance floor. In the meantime, he says: “This has given me a lot more confidence with women.”

### **Revvng up romance**

Some couples, like Steve and Hilda Ostby of Cedar Falls, Iowa (pop. 36,429), joined the fun long before celebrities such as racecar driver Helio Castroneves and dance partner Julianne Hough wowed millions of viewers and won last fall’s Dancing With the Stars competition. In 1994, Hilda found herself trying to cope with “empty nest syndrome” as, one by one, her six children left for college. “I felt like my family was really not my family any more, that it had been cut in half,” she says. “I was dreading having the others go.” The Ostbys signed up for a six-week group class in swing, fox-trot and waltz. Soon, Hilda says, giggling, “We were having too much fun to miss ‘em!”

These days, Hilda, 55, who runs a daycare business, and Steve, 60, a fifth-grade teacher, dance at least once a week and take private lessons. On their 34th wedding anniversary last fall, they danced at the Electric Park Ballroom in nearby Waterloo, Iowa, where Buddy Holly and Glenn Miller once played. “We feel it’s a good investment in our marriage,” Hilda says. “Oftentimes a husband will golf and a wife will do something else. We spend a lot of time dancing, and I’m just thrilled we can do it together.”

And if Hilda is happy, Steve is happy, he says. “She didn’t buy any

clothes for 10 years; I was on a schoolteacher's salary. When we started dancing she went to the sale rack and bought these beautiful, beautiful gowns at 75 percent off. She really enjoyed that."

### **Spanning the generations**

Lisa Sandoval, 41, a bubbly, outgoing speech pathologist in Palmdale, Calif., was a 17-year-old college freshman when she took her first ballroom dancing class. "It was everything that epitomized dancing for me. It was elegant and graceful," she recalls. "I got to meet a lot of wonderful people. I just loved it from the very first class." By 22, she was competing in dance contests.

Three years ago, Sandoval started teaching weekly community dance lessons for adults. And in 2006, she organized a local after-school dance program for sixth- and seventh-graders. During the first 10-week class, the children learned tango, rumba, salsa, fox-trot and East Coast swing. The second year, they studied cha-cha, intermediate tango, West Coast swing, waltz and merengue.

"These kids were practicing at recess," Sandoval says. "They were helping each other out. They went in for extra practice times in the teachers' classrooms. We had reports that behavior problems had diminished significantly. They became true gentlemen and ladies. It was truly neat to see the transformation." Impressed by what they saw, some parents and teachers signed up for lessons of their own.

Kids do tend to catch on more quickly, Sandoval says. "I think it's because they don't have as much fear as adults do. We're always afraid of looking silly or not 'getting' it, but children just jump right in there." Seeing the children perform in choreographed competitions at the end of the 10-week program was very rewarding, she says. "You could see the parents getting misty-eyed. You could see the children cheering for each other. It was a great team-building experience. This was a chance for them to be champs."

Freeman also has seen the impact that ballroom dancing has had on youngsters. At a summer jazz festival in Jacksonville, Ore. (pop. 2,238), she watched as an 11-year-old boy worked his way through the audience, asking the grandmothers to dance. "That wouldn't have happened five years ago," she says. "It's great for mothers and sons, fathers and daughters. It spans generations." As for the future of ballroom dancing, Freeman says that it's bright. "Everybody's dancing and talking about dancing," she says. "It's something people can do forever."

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