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Rhythm And Moves

With Influx Of Young Dancers, Ballroom Clubs And Competitions Thrive



SARA NORTH, of Guilford, and Tom Schrader of East Haven, met two years ago at dance lessons arranged by their mothers. North, a junior at Guilford High School, and Schrader, a senior at Notre Dame High School in West Haven, have competed successfully in college-level dance competitions. (BOB MACDONNELL / March 13, 2008)

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It was all nerves and clumsy feet when Sara North and Tom Schrader first clasped hands at the Branford dance studio two years ago.

Forget that the teens had never ballroom danced before. They hadn't even met. But there they found themselves, after North had begged her mother for lessons, and after her mother, Wendy, found a willing partner in a co-worker's son. ("He seemed like such a nice boy," she remembers.)

But what did North and Schrader know from ballroom dancing, anyway? Not very much. All they knew was that for weeks, the glitter and grace of the performances on "Dancing With the Stars" had them both transfixed.

"For me, it was seeing how these celebrities couldn't even dance at all in the beginning," says Schrader. He figured if they could do it, why couldn't he?

Inspired newbies like North and Schrader, both 17, have been giving dance halls and ballroom clubs around the country a major enrollment boost in recent years, thanks in large part to the smash success of the television series, which begins its sixth season tonight on ABC. Based on a hit British program, the show pairs professional ballroom dancers with B-list celebrities who perform each week at the mercy of expert judges and the television voting public.

"The show makes it really exciting — all the glitz and flash," instructor Piers Stonehart says, perched inside the audio booth at Let's

Dance In Rhythm, where North and Schrader practice with him weekly.

"It's amazing how it's exploded," he says, eyes on the pair — she in a red dress with polka dots; he in black shirt and tie. He estimates 35 percent to 40 percent of the studio's new clients reference the show as a reason for taking lessons.

"It's been a long time coming for these classic partner styles to have this renaissance," he says.

Since the show's 2005 premiere, USA Dance reports its membership has jumped more than 30 percent. The national governing body for DanceSport, as competitive ballroom dance is known, counts more than 200 dues-paying clubs across the country. It also just scored a major victory in signing a deal with the [Comcast](#) Network to air the first-ever televised broadcast of its National DanceSport Championships, set for next month in Baltimore. Nearly 500 couples will compete.

"Shows like 'Dancing With the Stars' have demonstrated there is now, for the first time in a long time, a genuine public interest in ballroom dancing at the competitive level," says Peter Pover, president of USA Dance.

All the momentum has the organization more hopeful than ever that it will finally see its decades-old mission accomplished: to get DanceSport designated as an official medal sport in the Olympic Games. Already a recognized sport in the World Games, but snubbed for this summer's Olympics, organizers are now eyeing the 2012 Olympics in London.

"I always felt it would happen," says Pover, though he once thought he wouldn't see it in his lifetime.

"Of course, there are people ... who argue it's an art form [and not a sport]. Well sure it is. But so is gymnastics. ... There is a strong artistic element, but the physical requirements are such that ... we've been treating it as a sport."

Yet for all of the excitement around "Dancing With the Stars," Pover and others agree ballroom's buzz isn't solely a result of the television show. They say the build-up has been years in the making, with help from grass-roots efforts like their own. It got a final push from the series' success, as well as that of other shows such as "America's Ballroom Challenge" and movies such as "Mad Hot Ballroom," a documentary about New York City schoolchildren competing in a citywide contest.

But quite simply, says Pover, the rise of ballroom is a matter of cyclical social tastes.

The public last held a deep fascination with ballroom dance in the 1930s, when [Fred Astaire](#) and [Ginger Rogers](#) introduced highly stylized dance routines to big-screen musicals. Styles changed, and the next string of decades unhooked dancing partners with rock 'n' roll, bumping and grinding, "and standing in a dark room with flashing lights, waving your arms around," says Pover.

"Now, we're in one of those cycles where partnership dancing has become acceptable again."

Perhaps surprisingly, it's the demographic you'd expect to be waving its arms in those darkened rooms that's helping to drive that acceptance. Ballroom clubs and competitive teams are gaining steam on college campuses, with USA Dance involved with more than 200 colleges nationally. Pover says the growth can be charted in the participation of just one popular competition, the D.C. DanceSport Inferno at the [University of Maryland](#). The event drew 500 students in 2005. Last December, it attracted 900.

"When people hear 'ballroom dancing,' a lot of them automatically think of old black and white pictures, of it being something faded and in the past. But it never left — it's just more popular than ever," says Andrew Pueschel, a dance instructor in Pittsburgh and vice president of USA Dance's youth and college network.

Pueschel, who didn't glide across a ballroom floor until his freshman year in college, says students are drawn by the social aspect. Most are new to ballroom dance. They come to make friends, break out of their shells and blow off some steam. With a range of styles, from salsa to swing to mambo, they're bound to find something that moves them, he says. Literally.

And, as each of the men interviewed for this story noted in his own way, ballroom dancing gives men license to wrap their arms around a woman. But, we think Pover put it best.

"This is guy talk," Pover says in his gentlemanly English. "But that partner dancing involves meeting a member of the opposite sex, and that you get to hold one quite tightly — well, I think it's quite a unique revelation for men. It's certainly more fun than getting in a scrimmage with a football between your legs, you know what I mean?"

Yes. Yes we do.

Across the Northeast, college ballroom dance teams have a strong tradition. In Connecticut, [Yale University](#) and the University of Connecticut host both social dance clubs and competitive teams with solid national reputations.

Lauren DellaFera, vice president of the [UConn](#) ballroom dance team, says the endeavor is not without its challenges. The team boasts more than 70 students, teachers and local residents, but there's a built-in revolving door of members who graduate or move on. And while ballroom is basking in national admiration, on a campus where sports rule, competitive dancing easily gets edged to the bottom of the list of priorities when it comes to university resources and support. Costumes can run upward of \$1,000, she said, and practice space is scarce. "Sometimes, people just get together and practice in random academic buildings or in the hallways," says DellaFera.

Now a junior, she is considering applying to graduate school and hopes the one she settles on has a ballroom dance program. "It's one of those things that, once you get started with it, you don't want to stop. The feeling you get when you're dancing — you kind of forget everything else. It's become such a part of my life."

Just two years in, that's exactly how high schoolers Schrader and North feel about dancing.

"It changed my life," says North, a junior who started a ballroom dance club last year at Guilford High School.

"I second that," says Schrader, a senior at Notre Dame, an all-boys high school in West Haven. He's waiting on his college applications, crossing his fingers for Yale and hoping to join their dance team.

Through dance, the pair say they've gained a confidence and poise they never imagined they could have in their teens. A few weeks ago, they placed in their first competition, hosted at Yale. With no competitive events for the high school level, they were the youngest to enter the collegiate event. The pair placed third out of 33 couples in the newcomer category for swing dance.

But best of all, says North, through ballroom dancing, "I found my best friend in the whole world."

Schrader smiles and returns the sentiment.

"I keep promising her I'm not going to dance with anyone else in college," he says. "But I know that's not going to happen."

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