



The World Professional Ballroom finalists celebrate in Blackpool's Empress Ballroom

# We are the Champions

This month, as we look back at the World Professional Ballroom Championship, **Marianka Swain** finds out what it takes to get to the top

**"S**ome people are born with competitive spirit, the way some are born with rhythm," notes coach and former *Strictly* champion Darren Bennett. "But whether it's innate or not, you need that desire to win or you don't stand a chance." Dr Richard Keegan, senior lecturer in sport and exercise psychology at the University of Lincoln, adds: "You need mental strength to overcome challenges and put in the legwork

to achieve your aim. It's basically sheer bloody-mindedness: 'I'll do whatever it takes!'"

However, ours isn't necessarily a winning culture, admits Darren: "It's a stereotype that Brits just want to play fair, but it can be a reality – we have so many options that we might not have the same focus as Russian competitors, for example, who can completely change their lives with this one opportunity."

"You need that burning ambition, but also realistic targets,"

observes teacher Richard Miller, whose son Luke is a Youth competitor. "Lots of couples set goals too high early on, get a bad result and can't deal with it. It's important to have achievable short- and long-term goals."

Darren agrees: "Sometimes, we go from practice to practice, competition to competition, not knowing what we want out of them. I create a 'season' for dancers I coach, shaped around the major competitions. ➤

In the 'off' periods, you work on choreography and technique, giving yourself time to process without the immediate pressure of a big competition. It should also be cohesive – if you train with different coaches, know what you're getting from each and make sure it fits your master plan."

**T**raining works best with positive reinforcement, believes former world champion and coach Shirley Ballas: "If you can believe it, you can achieve it! Far too many coaches give harsh, unconstructive criticism: that destroys dancers. Perhaps I'm different because my kids have gone through this, but I would never swear at students or slag people off; when I competed, everyone respected one another."

"That negativity stems from people who haven't succeeded taking out their disappointment on others. If you're not experiencing joy every time you put your dance shoes on, change coaches. You do have to suffer for your art, but it should be constructive. You'll encounter so many roadblocks, from partner issues to injuries, so a strong belief that you can learn from each obstacle, that

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– Dr Richard Keegan, senior lecturer in sport and exercise psychology



each one builds you up to a better dancer, is absolutely vital."

"You do have to find that balance between not believing in yourself and becoming a diva!" notes Richard. "Luke's worked hard on walking onto the floor at big international events, believing he deserves to be there. You don't want to annoy a judge by

being cocky, but if you don't catch their attention, someone else will.

"Off the floor, we keep him grounded, so he puts both victories and disappointments in perspective, though it is a full commitment – he gives up things he loves, like football, but he never moans. And if something isn't going to plan in training, he and [partner] Hanna don't bicker – they know they can do it, and they figure it out."

**W**hen it comes to performing, you need to switch off that analysis, says Dr Keegan: "If someone tells you not to think about the importance of that moment, it's almost impossible not to! Brains are processing tools – they want to engage with information. In order to separate preparation and performance, I get competitors to write down all those nagging thoughts and then put the book away. If a thought does pop into your head, you can ignore it, as your analysis is contained – it's literal compartmentalising.

"You should also train mentally for big events. I had an inexperienced team who'd never competed in a stadium, so we filmed the stadium and played it on a big screen – they could experience it in a safe space. Psychology doesn't make you fitter or stronger, but it allows you to access your training without anything interfering." Darren agrees: "You have to put your energy into the factors you can control. Yes, you're at the mercy of a panel, but you can never please everyone, so focus on yourself and your

partner rather than the judges, the venue or the audience."

**I**f things don't go your way, find a constructive way of dealing with it, says Dr Keegan: "Our brain wants to know why – why did I make a mistake or not get the right result? It's important to analyse it and find an answer, so you can plan for that eventuality or deal with it if it happens again, and also so you can put it to bed."

If you do succeed, that brings a different kind of pressure, notes Shirley: "You can feel others coming up behind you! Some people enjoy that sensation of

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winning so much they almost become afraid of defeat – that hampers their training." Darren adds: "On the upside, you know how great it feels to win; on the downside, you can lose your drive. 'Oh, I've got my title, I might skip practice today.'"

"The best athletes have personal pursuits – a particular time, score, level, record; it's not just about beating others," explains Dr Keegan. "You have to switch gear from that burning desire to fill a void to pursuing excellence for its own sake, and try not to focus on competitors or those expecting something from you. Go back to why you started competing in the first place.

"This is where a partnership can be really positive. Yes, there's potential for problems, but if you can align your goals, you develop a shared commitment. When cyclists are in a team, they go substantially faster, not just because of the slipstream, but because those moments of 'Should I give up?' are written off by feeling the people around you trying their hardest and spurring you on."

"Ultimately, you shouldn't just take joy in one title – that trophy is the icing on the cake!" says Shirley. "You should take joy in the journey, from the first time you enter a competition and get knocked out early to your first callback, first semi-final and so on, through to sharing your knowledge with others. Best of all, you get to experience it with your partner, and every victory is the sweeter for it." ●

