



Michael Malitowski and Joanna Leunis dance before the judges at the International Championships last year

Photographs © Ron Self

# JUDGEMENT TIME

The fate of the top couples in the world lies in the hands of a few individuals. What pressures do they face and how can dancers impress them? **Marianka Swain** finds out

**“E**veryone has their own priorities,” observes David Sycamore, world champion turned top coach and adjudicator. “One judge

might prefer a certain style or look; someone else might completely disagree. That’s why it’s so important to have a broad cross-section for big

competitions. It’s an art form, so judgement is subjective, and we’re very aware that our decisions can be life-changing.”

Karen Hardy, also a world champion turned coach, adjudicator and, of course, “Strictly” star, agrees, adding: “It’s a huge responsibility. My job now, whether I’m teaching or judging, is to help ensure the future of ballroom. It can be difficult switching from one to the other, as I do end up judging my students, but I mark what’s in front of me, nothing more. It’s hard when I see students having a bad day, but I can’t help in that situation – the important thing is to be a keen observer and, next time they’re in the studio, ➤

## WHAT IS THE SKATING SYSTEM?

As the name suggests, this system of judging, which involves assessing individual couples and ranking them, was adopted from the skating world and introduced at the Blackpool Dance Festival in 1937. The skating system was deemed a fair, democratic way for a panel of judges to assess multiple couples, as it takes into account different opinions and the final result comes from the majority view. It was formally adopted by the Official Board of Ballroom Dancing on January 1, 1947.

The skating system has 11 rules. For the preliminary rounds, the chairman of adjudicators specifies the number of couples that can advance to the next round and the judges mark the couples they want to go through. The couples with the most pass marks advance (rule one).

In the final, judges rank the couples from one to six for each dance (rules two to four) and the final rankings are calculated by tallying up the placements (rules five to eight). The winner is the couple placed first by a majority of judges. Finally, the rankings for each dance are added up to determine the overall results, and the couple with the lowest score – ie most top rankings – wins (rule nine).

If there's a tie for first place, it's awarded to the couple with the most overall first place rankings (rule 10). If there's still a tie, the winner is the couple with the most firsts across all the judges' marks, and if that doesn't settle it, the couple with the lowest mark when all placings for all dances are totalled (rule 11).

explain what I saw as a judge and how they can improve.”

Nevertheless, it is an unavoidable conflict of interests, points out competitor turned teacher and adjudicator Richard Miller, “as most judges make their living through coaching. It's odd that I can judge my own pupils, whose success can affect my business, but I can't judge my son Luke, for example. In theory, we should all judge by the technique book, but there are so many stylistic variations and choreographic choices that it's never that simple.”

However, David believes it's important for judges to have experience as competitors and coaches, “so you know what it's like out there as a dancer and can appreciate the work and dedication. Your personal experiences alter the way you judge, but that's not a bad thing – it just means we make

Dancers being marked at the International Championships. Right, Simone Segatori and Annette Sudol



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more informed decisions. For example, we can see through some of the posturing!”

Keeping up with developments in the ballroom world is key, notes Karen: “If you're not coaching and attending lectures and workshops, you lose track of what dancers are attempting and what's being mastered on the floor. Judging is like buying a painting – you have to appreciate great art to know what it's worth, so you have to balance being an impartial observer with expert knowledge and being open to something new and potentially great.”

David would like to see more emphasis on steps and musicality, “rather than playing to the crowd, stamping and – my pet hate – finger snapping. That usually makes me think they're covering something up.” For Karen, the basics come first: “If there's a couple dancing brilliantly but off time, versus one in time but less talented, I'll go for the latter. Ballroom needs discipline, and I hope the great performers learn from the rankings, go away and work on their technique and come back stronger.

“We've got a problem now with dancers watching YouTube clips and copying horrendous errors, like samba on straight legs, illegal lifts and prioritising overly complicated choreography above floor craft and respect for other couples. We have to be protective of the fundamentals of our art form.”

However, discipline doesn't mean losing your individuality: “If I spot my students picking up my mannerisms, I put a stop to it – we don't want little clones! They're the future of dance and we want them to bring something new to the

floor. As a judge, you should never mark solely on whether dancers adhere to your personal style.”

Richard would love to see the technical elements given greater prominence, “perhaps a round where all the couples are limited to certain basic figures before they can progress to the showier stuff. It would be interesting to see if that affects the rankings! I know some top couples, like Michael Malitowski and Joanna Leunis, are just as stunning doing basics with exquisite technique, but that might not apply to everyone. Having a round with more transparent criteria would also reassure the public about subjective judging.”

David would love more time to assess all the couples, “but we understand the constraints of a big competition, so we just have to do the best we can on the day”. Karen worries that she misses things when she's switching from couple to another, “so then it's up to another judge to spot that illegal move, which isn't ideal.

“It would be great to have an invigilator who isn't marking, but whose sole job is to watch out for illegal elements. That would free us up to respond to the artistry, which is my favourite aspect – seeing the next generation bringing their skill, commitment and unbeatable passion to the floor”. ●