

The next generation

As Blackpool Junior Dance Festival starts this month, **Marianka Swain** investigates how our young dance champions cope with the pressure of competing and what support is available for rising British talent

“It’s hard work, but how many people my age get to do something they’re really passionate about? I’m incredibly lucky,” observes 13-year-old Hanna Cresswell-Melstrom. Junior partners Hanna and Luke Miller, 14, devote their lives to ballroom, “which does involve sacrifices,” notes Luke’s mother, dance teacher Lynn. “Luke loves football and golf, and Hanna’s really into ballet, but they have to turn lots of things down. If you want to be a champion, you have to focus.”

As ex-competitors, Lynn and husband Richard have extensive experience, but the amount of commitment required came as a shock to Andrew Duffin, whose sons Will, 14, and Matt, 11, are top Junior and Juvenile competitors respectively with partners Aimee Falvey and Ellie Beacock: “It’s a new world to us. My wife and I took Will to a social dance and a woman approached us, asking if he’d like to dance with her daughter. We thought she just meant round the room.

“He didn’t do many competitions at Juvenile level, but we agreed to do more when he found his Junior partner. We didn’t realise what we were getting into! Now, he’s at competitions most weekends, and we have

a long commute with Matt, as his partner’s near Birmingham and we’re in Horsham. I’ve driven about 24,000 miles since last June, sometimes 700 miles in one weekend.”

Junior couple Jordan Sahota and Megan Chattwood, 14, live in Winchester and Wolverhampton respectively, so they stay with each other’s families on alternate weekends.

“The distance does mean the weekends are precious,” notes Jordan’s mother Debbie. “So it’s hard if one of them isn’t feeling well on a long training day.” Megan doesn’t mind forgoing the odd cinema trip with her school friends, “because dancing means the world to me. I’ve grown in confidence and had some amazing experiences. I wouldn’t trade that for anything.”

Successful young dancers are remarkably clear-headed, believes Lynn: “It’s a tough world, and you don’t always get the results you want, so you have to really love it and learn from

the experience. Luke and Hanna are very focused. If they don’t perform as well as they’d like, they work twice as hard in training. We’ve never pressured them, but they want to do as much as they can, so we back them.”



Glynn Richard Boyce and Lydia Hedges

Parental support is key, and those with dance-savvy parents have a definite advantage, notes leading coach and former world champion Shirley Ballas: "My three [her son Mark and Derek and Julianne Hough] didn't make any mistakes, because I've been in the industry since I was four years old, so I helped them avoid the pitfalls, although expectations were higher and there's a lot of jealousy in the dance world."

"Many winning youngsters have dancer parents, such as Luke Miller and Glenn Richard Boyce, but current Latin professional Rachael Heron didn't come from a dance background, and she

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was so outstandingly talented that she came through."

Debbie thinks kids without a natural advantage work harder to achieve their goals, "which is a good life lesson. Jordan and Megan are very mature – they manage their time, don't moan about early starts, present themselves well and are extremely sociable, as they've been exposed to lots of different people. They know what it takes to succeed."

Jordan is very aware of his competition: "You see other couples progressing, so you have to work harder at every level. But it's a great experience, because on the floor, you're doing your best to beat other dancers, but off the floor, you're friends and you learn from each other."

Luke and Hanna were younger than most Juniors when they moved up a level, but found that exhilarating. "It's great to discover what you're capable of when you really push yourself," says Luke. "It's like learning a difficult new step: at first, you have no idea if you'll ever manage it. But if you practise loads and trust each other,

you can master it. We've achieved goals that seemed impossible at first, and we want to keep doing that for the rest of our career."

Will and Matt both get frustrated when they struggle with a figure, "but we don't stress about it; we ask someone who knows what they're talking about," says Will. Matt adds: "Tango and paso are great, because if you get annoyed about messing up in another routine, you can channel your anger!"

Will has found it easier to deal with the pressure of competition over the years, "and it's the same with my hectic timetable. My teachers are amazed I can get my work done with all the dance practice, plus cycling two days a week. I think that's a good skill to develop."

As well as giving her new skills, dancing is a vital outlet for Megan: "It lets me express myself without using words; I can show different parts of me through all the dances. I'm inspired by the top professionals, but you can't just follow in other people's footsteps – I want to do my own thing."

Lynn wishes the government would champion dancing more, citing the many benefits, "from fitness and discipline to instilling confidence and positive interaction with the opposite sex. We don't support young talent nearly enough. The best solution would be if the government

Photograph © Andrew Duffin

Will Duffin and Aimee Falvey

granted dance organisations premises for official schools, where kids could combine academic study and dance, rather than fighting to juggle the two and sacrificing family time. Luke was unhappy at school, as he was given a hard time for having days out for competitions, so he's now home schooled."

Rachelle Stretch, EADA's press and publicity officer, thinks we should match other countries: "In Russia and Japan, children do at least 40 minutes of ballroom per week." Will agrees: "In Russia, dancing's as important to them as school. It's like football for us." EADA and the British Dance Council's Born to Dance Scheme, which ran from 1999 to 2009, taught 100,000 children and was the reason some young hopefuls, like Hanna, got into dancing. "We're hoping to relaunch it soon," says Rachelle.

"We're also aiming to introduce training camps, get ballroom into schools and subsidise travel to competitions. However, funding is limited, as in Britain we're not a recognised medal sport, so we're not supported by the Olympics, and Sport England cut off its funding for EADA in 2007."

Lynn agrees training camps would be productive, "rather than just private lessons with lots of different

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coaches. We've started doing the Pure Class training days, which are really useful. I'd love to see those on a larger scale."

Shirley thinks teachers giving private lessons need to take their responsibility seriously: "I've kept the same price for my young British students for the past eight years, and I do a lot of follow-up: I'm there when

they lose, when they win.

"If we paid young hopefuls closer attention, we'd have a lot more successes. You can't just take people's money and stand around talking. You need to focus, and balance the positives and negatives. Don't tell them they're terrible and leave them hating dancing, but, equally, if you spot a problem, show them how to fix it so they improve by the end of the lesson."

She's proud to have worked with many of Britain's rising



Jordan Sahota and Megan Chattwood
Photograph © Norman Large



Matt Duffin and Ellie Beacock
Photograph © Ron Self

stars, including Glenn Boyce, "my pick for world champion in 20 years' time. Luke and Hanna are incredibly talented dancers, and they're also extraordinary human beings who can represent our country around the world."

Debbie thinks such representation should be acknowledged: "Jordan and Megan are competing for England in Moscow, and the only thing covered is flights – unlike young Olympians, who are on TV and get Team GB tracksuits. Perhaps dancing is seen as a soft option."

Matt thinks that's true: "Some guys at school call us poofs; they don't understand how physically demanding it is. We try to ignore them and get on with it – one day, we're going to be champions

ADVICE FOR PARENTS

"It's like picking a doctor: do your research. Some teachers have the gift of the gab, but not the talent." – Shirley Ballas

"Get to know the other parents and kids on the scene – it's a great support network." – Debbie Sahota

"Stay with your base. If you've got a good teacher, stick with them and follow their advice."
– Lynn Miller

"Be prepared for the time commitment. I'm a full-time PA for my kids!"
– Andrew Duffin

"In Russia, dancing's as important to them as school. It's like football for us"

earning loads of money, and they'll be serving us in Tesco!"

Shirley thinks you can acquire many useful skills through ballroom, but advocates giving children a good grounding in performing arts: "I love ballroom, and I've never wanted to do anything else, but I'm thrilled my kids have varied careers. I sent them to Italia Conti, so they learned acting, music, jazz and so on, and now Mark's released an album and Derek and Julianne both have big film roles. Not everyone wants

to stay in ballroom forever, so it's good to have options."

Jordan's back-up plan is physiotherapy, and partner Megan is interested in dressmaking: "I love going onto the floor in all my gear, becoming a character." Luke and Hanna have the world professional title in their sights, and "can't imagine ever tiring of ballroom," says Hanna. "We've danced in beautiful venues around the world and built up a great partnership, and I've done crazy things, like jump out of a cake for a surprise jive at Shirley Ballas's birthday party in Los Angeles."

Matt says his favourite thing about dancing is "winning", particularly becoming national champion. Will was proud to do so well at the World

Championships in Moscow and be invited to the World Junior 10-Dance in Spain: "Next step, world domination!"

Megan can't wait for the next Blackpool Dance Festival, "as it's a different atmosphere to the Sunday comps: the British couples cheer each other on." Jordan adds:

"Moscow will be a challenge, but dancing for my country is the most amazing feeling. You can't top it."

Lynn knows some parents worry about their kids dancing, "but we all want our children to do something they enjoy. It's just like any hobby – it makes them happy and confident, and it keeps them out of trouble!" ●



Hanna Cresswell
-Melstrom
and Luke Miller