

# The pros and cons of Pro-Am

Jade Birchall (Pro) and Peter Coles (Am) dance the waltz at Karen Hardy Studios



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**Marianka Swain** investigates whether the dance form could make it in Britain

“**P**ro-Am is the ultimate luxury,” explains professional dancer turned teacher Karen Hardy. “You can fulfil a dream of dancing at a higher level than you ever thought possible and doing so in a beautiful outfit, at a glamorous event, with the perfect partner. It’s not just a way of learning; it’s a complete experience.”

This luxurious pastime, which, as the name suggests, involves an amateur dancer teaming up with a professional for one-on-one practices, performances and/or competitions, is big business abroad, particularly in the US, Japan and Hong Kong, but has yet to take off here.

“Strictly Come Dancing” professional and coach Kristina Rihanoff, who’s experienced the American Pro-Am craze, believes there’s a cultural difference: “In the UK, people take great pride in their ballroom champions and really separate that from the social world. I



Honor Roche (Pro) dances with Johnson Imode (Am)

you have to put in the time and push yourself. I’ve seen students in the lesson before our gala show panicking and making mistakes, but when they feel that adrenaline rush on the night and know they have to deliver, they amaze me – and themselves – with what they can do.”

**P**ro-Am is also a great way for people to get into dancing at any age, notes Kristina: “I wish my mum had something like that in Russia. There was this inspirational woman in the US who went from being a middle-aged housewife and mother with very low self-esteem to one of the top Pro-Am competitors in the country. She might have fallen by the wayside in a group class or not been asked to dance at a social, but, through one-on-one coaching and the opportunity to get her competitive juices flowing, she discovered this other side of herself and got a new lease of life.” ▶

think there’s resistance to the idea of social dancers breaking into high-level competition or performance largely by paying for time with a professional.”

Adjudicator and dance promoter Philip Wylie, of Holiday and Dance, notes we do accept the Pro-Am relationship in the form of teacher/pupil: “Medallist competitions are gaining popularity. They’re allied to our tradition of dance education, but competing also encourages students to engage with posture and presentation and both teachers and pupils can celebrate their achievements. The question

is whether there’s a demand for something outside of that examination-based structure.”

Karen believes Pro-Am offers something new: “I’ve seen how much happiness it gives students, which is why I was so keen to introduce it at my studio. It can dramatically alter their learning curve and do wonders for their confidence. Plus, I’ve personally experienced the satisfaction it gives the professional when I was doing ‘Strictly’, which is essentially celebrity Pro-Am.

“Committing to a showcase or competition means you can’t take it or leave it each week;



Nick Jury (Pro) and Grace Ward (Am)

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**Karen Hardy**

Professional and teacher Andrew Cuerden, of Latin Motion, thinks Pro-Am might work in British Open Circuit competitions, but its introduction would be challenging: “The main obstacle is economics. If you have several students competing at a high level, that takes a lot of time and effort, so for some professionals abroad Pro-Am is a full-time job.

“However, it can only become a viable option here if there’s an equivalent number of keen students with a disposable income – if not, professionals can’t commit to it and there won’t be enough strong couples to make an Open Circuit category worthwhile.

“Also, Pro-Am isn’t for everyone – you have to put a lot into it, but you’re ultimately dancing to your student’s best, not your best, and catering to their desires; for some, that would require a



Nick Jury (Pro) and Natalia Kantovich (Am) dance at Karen Hardy’s Black and White Ball. Top right, Lindsey Muckle (Pro) and Alexey Vlasov (Am) dance the jive at Karen Hardy’s Rio Latin Nights Gala

certain financial incentive.”

Philip observes: “We do already have a sliding payment scale – the top echelon of coaches charge more than others, and there’s obviously a difference between a group class and individual lesson. If a pupil wants to try Pro-Am, it would really be up to their teacher

to test the market. I do think it could generate additional activity, particularly for pros in the latter half of their career, and if there was a recognised title or major brand sponsorship, that would provide an extra incentive for professionals to put the time in and pupils to pay that bit more.”



Karen believes it’s a question of balance: “Pro-Am takes the challenge level higher than you can achieve, as opposed to social dancing or a class that’s in your comfort zone, but once you’ve increased your skill set and ability to take on new challenges, you can go back to classes or socials with that renewed confidence and awareness of how to improve.

“I think it’s something that Brits need to do or witness to fully understand, as we don’t like change – we have to be convinced of the value of something new! Plus, this isn’t necessarily an activity that everyone will like – the unique aspect of Pro-Am is that it’s tailor-made to the individual.”

**P**hilip thinks studios should at least consider new variations: “We’ve had a great resurgence on the back of ‘Strictly’, but it doesn’t hurt to diversify, whether that’s offering

dinner dances, wedding lessons and other styles alongside ballroom or breaking down the barriers between competitive and social, professional and amateur. That’s what we try to do on our dance holidays – if you love ballroom, you have something in common with the person next to you, whether they have a number on their back or not – and sometimes we need new events to make that happen.”

Kristina thinks the key is highlighting qualities that appeal to the British dance community: “A great Pro-Am team has a strong work ethic, mutual respect, clear goals and enjoyment of the learning process – all elements that we have in our established dance traditions. If it’s financially viable, I don’t see why it couldn’t thrive here.”

Karen draws inspiration from Pro-Am galas overseas, such as Paul Killick’s Miami event: “When

I took my students, they were petrified initially, but they loved the glamour, social aspects and scale of it – it’s really one big party, which is what dance is all about!

“This structured process requires discipline, but once you’ve mastered those skills, you can have fun with them. The professional gets to show off their student’s progress while the amateur can glimpse their partner’s brilliance in this environment – it’s really a great endorsement of ballroom professionals’ work ethic, talent and ability to share that passion with others.” ●

#### Websites

[www.karenhardystudios.com](http://www.karenhardystudios.com)  
[www.officialkristinarihanoff.com](http://www.officialkristinarihanoff.com)  
[www.holidayanddance.co.uk](http://www.holidayanddance.co.uk)  
[www.latinemotion.co.uk](http://www.latinemotion.co.uk)



Ryan Hammond (Pro) and Karen Spickernell (Am) dance the cha cha cha

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**Philip Wylie**