

Love at first step

Dancing may be the key to romance, but what makes a partnership endure both on and off the floor? **Marianka Swain** talks to new and established couples who met their partners through ballroom, from top pros to teachers and students



Andrea Ghigiarelli and Sara Andracchio began dancing together as children. Photograph courtesy of Andrea and Sara



Top left and above, Amateur ballroom champions Andrea and Sara compete at Blackpool. Photographs by Ron Self



Andrea Ghigiarelli and Sara Andracchio on their wedding day. Photograph courtesy of Andrea and Sara

“Dancing reveals someone’s true personality,” explains Kristina Rihanoff, who has been dating her “Strictly Come Dancing” celebrity partner, Joe Calzaghe, for over a year. “It’s all about exploring emotion through movement, so you can’t hide your true nature, particularly when you’re in a competition and under pressure. It allowed me to get to know the real Joe right away – I thought, as a top boxer, he’d be big-headed, but he’s actually very shy and sweet, and he melted my heart. It’s beautiful when strong men can also be vulnerable, and I got to see, through dancing, what it could have taken me a lifetime to discover.”

Melina Hamilton, who runs Stardust Ballroom (www.stardustball.co.uk) with fiancé Mark Kendal, originally her student, adds: “You can tell so much about a person from how they approach dancing. I admire

Mark’s determination in tackling difficult figures, although sometimes he then forgets how to do simple things, which drives me nuts! I do have high expectations, more than with any other student, because I know what he’s capable of and I’m emotionally invested, so that can be hard. And we’re both quite bossy, so I have to be careful not to enjoy my teacher role too much, or it’s tense when we get home! Communication is key – we try not to let things fester after a stressful lesson.”

British Amateur ballroom champions Mark and Olga

“We try not to give out home contact details to students, so we can have quality time together away from the dance world”

Elsbury, who combine competing with married life, agree that there are pros and cons. “It was definitely tricky when we first started dating, about six months into our partnership – when she finally gave in to my pestering! – because we’d argue in practice and drag that tension home, but as our relationship got more serious, we’ve learned to separate the two,” explains Mark.

Richard Miller, who runs Miller Dance Centre (www.millerdance.org.uk) with wife Lynn, with whom he used to compete, agrees separation is key: “We’ve made an agreement to never take dancing home. We try not to give out home contact details to students, so we can have quality time together away from the dance world.”

However, a shared understanding of that world can be positive, notes Kristina: “Joe has so much respect for what I do after going through it himself. Previous ➤

boyfriends have often dismissed it as 'that stupid dancing' and don't get why it takes up so much time, but Joe knows it's my life, not a hobby. He's seen how hard it is, physically and emotionally, and he's very supportive.

"We both grew up pushing ourselves to the limit, spending hours becoming the best we can be, and we admire that about each other. Now, if I watch a dance programme, he's interested and wants to learn more." Mark agrees it helps to have a supportive partner: "It's hard dating a non-dancer, who doesn't understand why you're getting steamy with someone else in rumba or going off to China for a competition together, even in the most trusting relationships. I don't have that problem with Olga, because we do everything as a team."

That shared experience is one of the best parts for Italian Amateur ballroom champions Andrea Ghigiarelli and Sara Andracchio, whose parents partnered them when they were nine and eight, along with Andrea's brother and Sara's

sister, who are now also partners and also married. "Our families are all dancers, all lovers! It's very unusual, staying together as a partnership our whole lives," notes Sara, "but I couldn't imagine being with anyone else. It's a wonderful feeling to win a title with the most important person in your life, and it helps you reach your full potential having a

"It was touch and go whether she could dance again, but I never considered finding someone else"



British Amateur ballroom champions Mark and Olga Elsbury combine competing (top) with married life (above). Top photograph by Ron Self. Above, courtesy of Mark and Olga



Mark and Olga Elsbury on their wedding day. Photograph courtesy of Mark and Olga

partner who supports you. We go through every experience, good or bad, together, strengthening us as a couple."

While Andrea and Sara have "a very similar approach to practising and the same goal", other couples find it's their differences that make them a good team. British Latin Professional champions Gregor Rebula and Rachael Heron, who began dating two months after they started dancing together, are polar opposites, according to Rachael: "He's very chilled and patient, while I'm more fiery. He's the backbone of our partnership, and I know I can let loose."

Melina believes she and Mark bring very different things to their business: "He's very practical and has a great imagination, while I'm good at developing

Lessons in love from dancing couples

- *Communication is key*
- *Leave any dance-related tension on the dancefloor – don't take it home*
- *Spend time together outside the dance world*
- *Mutual respect and acceptance are crucial*
- *Make the most of every moment*

the look and style of things. We do disagree sometimes, but we try to find a compromise. If it's about teaching, I have the final say; if it's on the business side, ultimately I'll trust his judgment. We enjoy seeing different sides of each other through dancing and working together – it keeps our relationship fresh and exciting."

Richard and Lynn began their partnership with different ambitions: "She was always more focused on competing than I was; I knew, very early on, that I wanted to teach," explains Richard. "Now, our different styles make us a strong package as teachers – I like spending longer on the basics and building up technique, and Lynn's great at the flashy stuff for eye-catching competitive routines."

Dancing can also be common ground for very different people. Natalie Crowe and Katie Lord, who met through the University of East Anglia dancesport club, are now dating and competing together for the university team. "We do very different degrees, with big workloads that don't

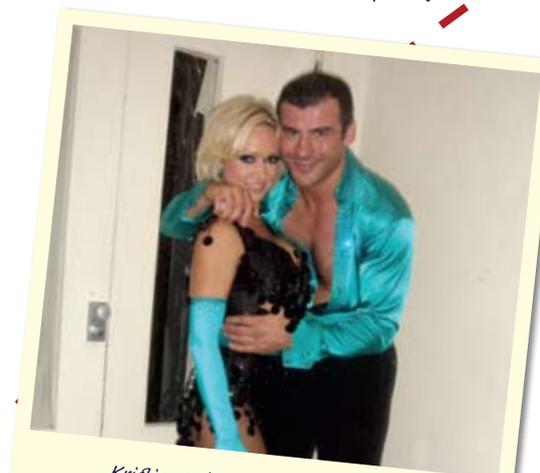
leave us with much free time, so we probably wouldn't have met otherwise," explains Katie.

"Also, I assumed she was straight, so I never would have approached her in that way, but we got to be close friends through dancing, and she then admitted to me that she had a crush on someone in the team – eventually, I got it out of her that it was me." Natalie adds: "Everyone on the team has been very accepting of us, and now that we're dancing together as well, it just feels natural."

Kristina thinks her pairing with Joe was extremely lucky: "It's a beautiful way to meet someone. It's one of the few hobbies men and women can do together, and if it wasn't for 'Strictly', where else would I have met him? We're from different worlds. He was actually approached

to do the show earlier, before I was on it, but he had work commitments, so the timing was perfect – it was meant to be. Now, for the first time in my life, my boyfriend is also my greatest friend – I trust him with my life."

Mark and Olga feel their relationship gives them security: "We know that, even if we have a bad result, neither of us is about to jump ship. We're partners for life, and whatever happens, we'll work through it." Rachael thinks you have to be careful about committing to a partnership: "It's a long-term investment. If you're travelling and competing and stuck with a person you don't get on with it, it doesn't work. Forming that bond, whether it's romantic or not, is key. Gregor and I have had arguments you can count on one hand. I trust him completely." ▶



Kristina Rihanoff and Joe Calzaghe met on the seventh series of 'Strictly'. Photograph courtesy of Kristina

DANCE RELATIONSHIPS

Richard and Lynn's trust was born out of calamity when Lynn developed Guillain-Barré syndrome aged 16. "She was on a ventilator, and it was touch and go whether she could dance again, but I never considered finding someone else," recalls Richard. "When she recovered, we threw ourselves into competing, and we haven't looked back – it brought us together and we realised we had to make the most of every moment."



Similarly, Katie and Natalie haven't had an easy ride as a girl/girl couple on the university circuit, but they keep pushing each other to succeed. "I get upset when she beats herself up for forgetting steps," says Natalie. "But when we both do our best, it's an amazing feeling, doing it together." Katie adds: "We're looking forward to the Pink Jukebox Trophy – it's great being in a supportive environment, where we can really go for it. We love doing Latin, as we can be cheeky and bounce off each other – really be ourselves."

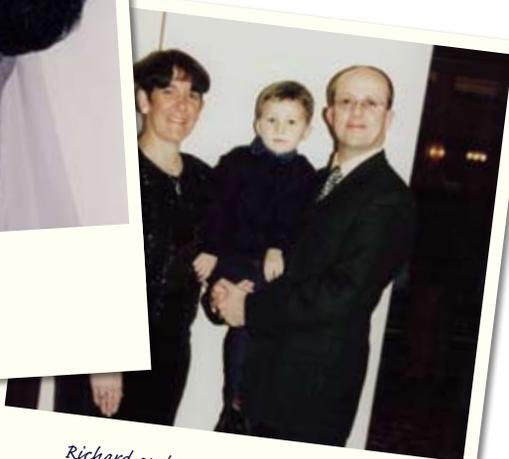
For Richard and Lynn, the best thing to come out of their union is their son, Luke, currently British Junior champion with partner Hanna Cresswell. "I was so nervous watching him in his first competition, and then he went the wrong way round the floor!" remembers Lynn. "But it's been wonderful seeing him succeed – he's already outdone us! – and it's a joy to pass on what we love to our child."

Richard adds: "It's quite surreal seeing him compete, but he loves doing it and we're very proud parents. We try to keep him grounded – he helps out with studio admin and the website, which is a good fallback; dancing is a precarious business. I'm so fortunate to have made it a successful career, and met the love of my life doing it, so I can only hope he has the same experience."

There may be more second-generation dancers on the way, as Andrea and Sara would love to start a family someday. "We make so many sacrifices for dancing – we don't have as much time as we'd like to see friends and do normal things – but we're dedicated to being champions," explains Sara. "Once we've fulfilled that goal, it would be lovely to settle down in Rome and have children. We have a great tradition of

dance and love in our families, and we don't want it to end."

Melina is also keen to start a family with Mark, but, for now, she appreciates what they have: "Dancing is an activity of the moment. Every time you dance with your partner, you create a new memory between you. Sharing that with the person you love is a great gift." ●



Richard and Lynn Miller with their son, current Junior champion, Luke. Photograph courtesy of Richard and Lynn

Kristina Rihanoff is on the "Strictly Come Dancing" 2011 UK Tour, which runs until February 15. For venue and ticket information, visit www.ticketzone.co.uk or call 0844 875 8758.