



# STEPPING OUT

This month, **Marianka Swain** talks to Strictly Wheels who performed at the Same Sex Open

“If you don't take risks, you're never going to have new experiences,” believes Paula Moulton, who, with partner Gary Lyness, has capped an extraordinary run – *Got To Dance* and *Britain's Got Talent* appearances, international wheelchair dancesport titles – with a performance at the Same Sex Open, where they were rapturously received. “Dancing in Blackpool was definitely on my bucket list!” notes Paula. “And it was particularly special because our trainer was there to see it.”

In 2010, Paula and Gary, close friends for over a decade, signed up to trainer Ray Bulpitt's “learn to dance” course for wheelchair users and their standing friends. “Six months later, Ray persuaded us to enter *Got To Dance* – we hadn't even learned to jive, let alone mastered any steps!” recalls Paula. “Then we entered our first wheelchair international competition as Amateurs, basically to see what dancers were like at that level, and we were astonished to win the Latin.”

“Our style of dance is different to many people's – we translate



ballroom steps as directly as we can, rather than having the standing partner dance around the wheelchair dancer,” explains Gary. “It's easier in the travelling ballroom dances than side-by-side Latin figures, but we're naturally more Latin performers.”

“We're striving to be the best dancers we can, not just symbols of inclusion,” says Paula. “I've had a special dance chair made – it's more lightweight, with carbon-fibre wheels positioned under my centre. We try risky moves, and I've fallen out of it several times, including when competing, but you get picked up and carry on.”

“It's brought us closer together – Gary part acts as my carer, and you do develop another level of trust when you ask someone to help you put a bra on! But

when we train, we put friendship to one side and we're honest about steps going wrong. We really want to push ourselves.”

They would love to become the first couple to represent Great Britain at Elite level, but desperately need funding. “We want support from the National Paralympic Committee, and it would be great to see more wheelchair dance clubs and opportunities,” says Gary.

“In Holland, there are competitions catering to both mainstream and wheelchair dancesport – we don't have that integration here. Just as the Sugar Dandies made same-sex dance accessible through *Britain's Got Talent*, we've got over that hurdle of people understanding what we do; now we want to keep developing.”

Paula adds: “My medical team say this is better for me than anything I'd get on the NHS! It falls between art and sport funding wise, but there's room for development in both: as an addition to the Paralympics, and as part of an increasingly inclusive dance world. Ballroom in particular is open to all: young and old, same-sex, wheelchair users, everybody! We should try to see past what is different and focus on the common ground.” ●

Tickets are now on sale for the Pink Jukebox Trophy at the Rivoli Ballroom on February 13, and competitor entries are due in by February 1. Visit [www.pinkjukebox.co.uk](http://www.pinkjukebox.co.uk) for more details.