



STEPPING OUT

This month, **Marianka Swain** talks to two international champion couples

The fight for same-sex dance titles grows tougher by the day, with an increasing number of competitors from different countries offering new challenges, yet four dancers continue to reign supreme: Hungary's Csaba Csetneki and Balázs Gáti in men's ballroom and Germany's Caroline Privou and Petra Zimmermann in women's.

However, it hasn't always been plain sailing, notes Petra: "In the beginning, it was very difficult for same-sex couples to find coaches and places to train – we were actually kicked out of several studios. But we persevered and finally, in 2000, one of the biggest dancesport clubs in Cologne offered us membership. That was the starting point of our career and, to this day, we still represent that club."

The pair, partners in life as well as dance, have never danced with male leads; instead, "We've developed everything together right from the beginning," explains Caroline. In contrast, Balázs danced for nearly five years with a female colleague before changing to same-sex. His male partner didn't want to compete as much



Hungary's Csaba Csetneki (right) and Balázs Gáti

as him, so he did a try-out with Csaba, who came to ballroom late but "would like to think I was born to dance!" After a strong debut at the Nordic Open, "it was obvious we should stick together".

They experimented with switching lead, but, with their height difference, decided it wouldn't work, "apart from a short sequence in the Viennese waltz," says follower Balázs. However, he has years of Latin experience and Csaba just Standard, which

means they bring different elements to training. "We're lucky that it makes a great combination and we can help each other, whether it's moving the other forward or slowing them down, focusing or loosening up – just like an old married couple..."

Caroline and Petra also have different ideas on everything from choreography to costumes, "but we've never had a major disagreement," believes Petra. "It feels very easy to find a solution that not only works for us as a partnership, but is also satisfying for us both individually."

That synergy is key to their remarkable career, but the real victory is having the opportunity to do what they love, says Caroline: "Dancing isn't about winning or losing, but enjoying life and making the most of it. Of course winning is fantastic, but dancesport depends on the opinions of adjudicators, so it's out of your control. Our goal is to give our best in every competition and get better each time. When we make

our audience and the judges enjoy our dancing as much as we do, that makes us truly happy."

Both couples are thrilled by the development of the same-sex scene. "It's fantastic to see so many new social dance clubs, formations and competitions," observes Csaba. "The smaller competitions are wonderful for local couples and add new flavours; at the same time, the big competitions have become almost iconic and increasingly professional.



Germany's Caroline Privou (right) and Petra Zimmermann

"Associations like the UK Same Sex Dance Council, Equality TanzSport Verband Österreich and the European Same-Sex Dance Association are making huge progress, and 2013 will see the first official Same Sex World Championship. However, we hope to keep our diversity and uniqueness as we grow."

Petra notes this development is a great political achievement, as it's one of the few sports where you see same-sex athletes competing together, rather than just alongside one another, "but sadly same-sex couples are still subject to discrimination in so many countries. Our last European Championships took place in Budapest with enormous safety precautions."

Caroline adds: "Our personal experience is that most people have prejudices without ever

having seen or talked to a same-sex partnership, but once they see couples on the floor, moving beautifully to the music, we hope they'll realise there's nothing to worry about and they might even enjoy watching. Our dream is that same-sex competitions will eventually be integrated into prestigious events like the International Championships at the Royal Albert Hall."

The pair's impact has been recognised in their home country, where the general public voted them Cologne Sports Team of the Year 2010, and they were invited to perform at a Berlin

gala celebrating 100 years of dancesport in 2011 alongside Amateur world champions Benedetto Ferruggia and Claudia Köhler. This success is all the more remarkable considering they also have PhDs in clinical neuropsychology and work in a hospital full-time.

"Completely committing to whatever we do is essential for us," says Petra. "We dance evenings and weekends and use holidays to travel to competitions and shows. It's hectic, but we have great family support and we've been fortunate enough to make wonderful friends all around the world."

Csaba and Balázs also have an essential home team: "Our families and friends come along to cheer, demand updates when we're competing abroad and always ask for copies of our DVDs!" says Balázs. "And we're so grateful for the warm welcome wherever we go."

"We've had such an amazing journey, getting closer and closer to competitors who were our role models, and going from not even making finals to winning titles and being invited to shows," adds Csaba. "But the best part is sweating it out in the studio until we can hardly control our shaking legs, knowing that all our hard work has – and will – pay off in the most amazing way." ●

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