

# STEPPING OUT

Is it possible to introduce same-sex dance into mainstream competition and judge it fairly? **Marianka Swain** investigates

**S**ame-sex dancers are becoming increasingly accepted in the dance world and in wider society as well, but there's fierce debate about what the next step should be: continue developing as a separate section of ballroom or integrate fully with male/female partnerships, both in social dancing and competitive. The latter would mean changing views on what constitutes an acceptable dancesport partnership in major competitions, and could also mean altering rules and the way events are structured.

"The ballroom world is slow to accept change," admits teacher and judge Christine Harris. "It's a complex organism with all sorts of factions, spread across the globe, and people involved at a high level are hugely proud of its tradition. Lots of judges are shocked by a minor change in wardrobe or execution of a step, let alone a change of gender, and most of

those distinctions – age, level, Pro/Am – are set in stone." However, same-sex dance teacher and adjudicator Heather Gladding believes such re-education is possible: "I started in mainstream, so I know it can take a while to get past that traditional image of a guy in tails leading a girl in a long dress,



Women's ballroom champions Caroline Privou and Petra Zimmerman (left)

but I've become so familiar with same-sex that I honestly don't see a distinction when I'm judging now – it's just another couple on the floor, and I go straight to their leading and following skills, connection, technique, style, musicality, impact, frame and so on. I really think if judges had time to get used to it, there wouldn't be an issue."

George Tzoulas and partner Michael Hall have entered mainstream competitions, "because we wanted to showcase same-sex dance and develop its validity," explains George. He agrees that judges can – and should – look at the same skill elements regardless of gender, but understands it might not be that simple: "When we first competed in same-sex events, male and female partnerships were judged together. Several years later, organisers separated the two, arguing that men have a physical advantage when it comes to strength of movement, so I can see the reasoning that it might also be unfair to judge male/male partnerships against male/female, or male/female against female/female."

**W**omen's same-sex ballroom champions Caroline Privou and Petra Zimmerman agree. "No one needs to be convinced that men and women differ physically, and that contributes to sporting performance in a decisive way – that's

why there are hardly any sports in which they compete together," notes Petra. "Ballroom has become increasingly athletic, but even if you regard it as more of an art than a sport, there are undeniably physical aspects that will define your performance on the floor."

"We'd have to consider that fairness aspect very carefully before making any major changes to which partnerships could compete side by side," says Christine. "Competition boards would have to look at different steps and how we as judges respond to them – for example, whether a male/male couple creating more movement in a standard travelling figure would automatically lead to higher marks."

Heather disagrees: "There are no two couples who have exactly the same physical ability. If you break it down like that, why not have one competition for shorter couples and one for taller ones? I judged a mixed competition at the Nordic Open, and you just had lots of great couples vying for attention by dancing to the best of their ability. Plus there's always an element of subjectivity, so for every judge who wants more power, there may well be another one who appreciates a subtler version."

However, Christine believes the biggest barrier may not be



Leading men's ballroom champions Csaba Csetneki (left) and Balázs Gáti

athletic, but artistic: "Personally I enjoy seeing individual interpretation when I'm judging, with couples exploring new things and surprising me, but not all judges feel that way! There are lots of top adjudicators who have grown up watching traditional male/female partnerships on stage, on screen and on the floor, become top competitors themselves in those partnerships and now want to crown the stars of the next generation who conform to their expectations. It would be tricky to convince them to abandon that legacy."

Heather believes such a change has already been made: "We've seen new couples

shocking the old guard in every generation by experimenting with looks, style and tricks, until eventually that development becomes part of the norm. I realise this is a big, lucrative industry, with sponsors, press, audience expectations and so on, but people are always interested in the next challenge, the next development, so I don't see it as a risk. Same-sex dance has begun that integration in the public consciousness and the press – why not in competition as well?"

Csaba Csetneki, who with Balázs Gáti forms one of the leading male same-sex ballroom partnerships, adds: "We do appreciate the difficulties in judging more of a variety of couples – particularly if same-sex dancers swap lead! – but diversity is always exciting for everyone involved. More than that, we would have an amazing opportunity to learn from one another and hopefully push each other to even greater heights. I would hope judges want to see that as much as we do." ●

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