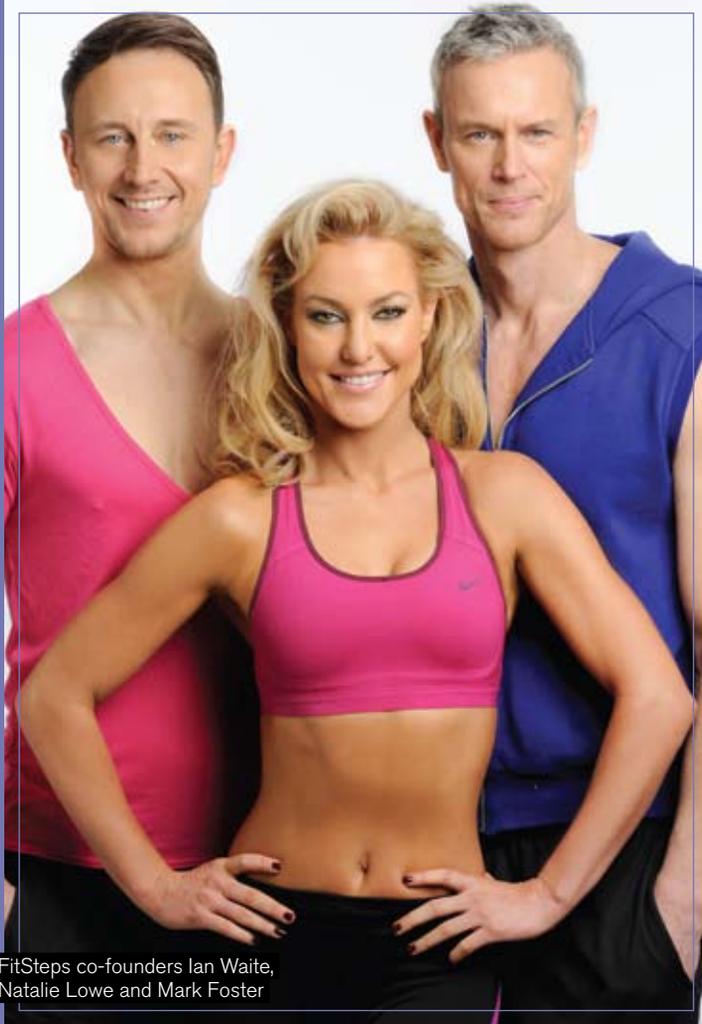


STRICTLY COME FITNESS

As two more pros from our favourite show launch their own get-fit programme, **Marianka Swain** explores why dance is the best route to becoming a summer scorcher



FitSteps co-founders Ian Waite, Natalie Lowe and Mark Foster

“It’s a show that’s adored all over the world, by everyone from kids to grannies, so we know there’s a real passion for dancing,” explains *Strictly* professional Natalie Lowe. “The next step is building on that engagement in other areas, like health and fitness – and creating a programme that’s for everyone, not just celebrities.”

Natalie’s next step comes in the form of FitSteps, co-founded with fellow *Strictly* pro Ian Waite and contestant Mark Foster. “I was meant to dance with Mark on the show – unfortunately I couldn’t participate that year, but we partnered on the tour and really hit it off. He’s such a fantastic fitness ambassador and he loved the workout he got from ballroom, as well as how good it made him feel. That aspect definitely inspired me – I really enjoy making people feel better about themselves.”

Natalie figured out how to achieve that well-being through dance by discussing anatomy with her team of

fitness gurus, “so we could figure out exactly which steps target different areas of the body and how we could combine them to get the greatest results in an interesting way. I don’t do anything physically apart from dancing and the odd swim, so I know from experience it’s the best workout you can do, but it’s been fascinating to learn exactly how that movement affects that muscle or helps with toning and conditioning.

“But people doing our classes won’t have to think about any of that if they don’t want to – they can just enjoy learning the Standard ten dances, picking up a great skill and having a good time. It’s not ‘Oh, I have to make myself go to the gym’; the physical rewards come almost without you noticing.”

That element is key to the rise of dance fitness, believes Zumba Education Specialist Caroline Parsons: “In January, there’s a boom in gym attendance, which then dips as people become bored and unmotivated. If you enjoy working out, you’ll



Zumba Gold offers modified, low-impact moves for older dancers

keep doing it. I have regular students who admit they haven’t exercised since being forced to do PE at school; now, they come back week after week because the music is great and they have fun.”

Strictly’s Flavia Cacace, who recently launched a Zalsa fitness DVD with celebrity partner Russell Grant, agrees: “Music is everything. It’s also a brilliant form of exercise because it engages the brain as well as the body. Russell always hated the gym, but he loved the creative energy of dancing, and it definitely worked – he lost 11 stone!”

Natalie adds: “I started ballroom when I was four and it’s given me a really positive mental attitude. I’d love to see kids getting out and trying new things, rather than sitting in front of the computer, particularly boys. Dancing is becoming more cool, with really blokey sportsmen on *Strictly*, and I think understanding how physically strenuous it is will help with that. Dancers are hardcore!”

The variety of styles, which helps make dancers such impressive all-round athletes, also forms the perfect basis for a balanced workout. “From fast merengue working the heart and lungs to slower tango helping with core stability, it covers all the bases,” notes Caroline.

“Plus we have extras like introducing weighted maraca sticks for added toning or our most recent innovation, Zumba Sentao, which involves chairs, as well as programmes targeting specific groups like

“FITSTEPS IS CURRENTLY RECRUITING INSTRUCTORS. ‘WE OFFER TRAINING, RESEARCH MATERIALS AND SUPPORT FOR STARTING AND MARKETING YOUR OWN BUSINESS,’ SAYS NATALIE. ‘PLEASE GET IN TOUCH IF YOU’RE INTERESTED’”

GET SWIMSUIT READY: TOP FIVE EXERCISES

- 1. Merengue march with bicep curl** to target arms: march on the spot, bring your arms up to shoulder level, make a fist and curl your arms to your shoulders as you march. **CAROLINE**
- 2. Paso doble shapes** for conditioning: think control and torsion – just the basics done slowly have great intensity, like pushing through water. **NATALIE**
- 3. Side salsa with squat** to tone legs: basic salsa steps (side, together), but replace side steps with squats – take feet wide, bend the knees and bring your hands to your thighs for support. **CAROLINE**
- 4. Focus on your core** to get a bikini-friendly stomach: for every exercise, think about standing tall and initiating/supporting from the core. **FLAVIA**
- 5. Samba marathon** for energy: the fast Latin dances are amazing cardio, and maintaining that speed for a whole song will get you in the summer party spirit! **NATALIE**

kids [Zumbatomic] or mothers and babies [Zumbini].”

Flavia created variety on their DVD by using a “mix and match” approach with different dance workouts and ensuring you can build up the skill level, but it’s also accessible – “my motto was definitely enjoyment above perfection”.

Natalie believes dance fitness can be intimidating, “because it’s very foreign, so we’re focusing on making it fun, and we do have different ability levels and Golden Steps and Kid Steps for different ages. I’d definitely recommend trying a few classes though, as it always takes time to get used to something new.”

It won’t just be students experiencing a new programme: FitSteps is currently recruiting instructors. “We offer training, research materials and support for starting and marketing



Aqua Zumba

“It’s also great for those who don’t have a dance partner. One female student told me she hadn’t danced since her husband passed away, but she felt so happy doing our classes – it’s been a real saving grace for her, discovering this community. That emotional outlet is just as important as the physical one.

“I’ve been preparing for the *Strictly Confidential* tour, so I’ve been doing a lot of sitting down learning scripts – it’s made me realise how easy it is to get into that rut, and how it can affect your self-confidence. I urge everyone to get up and do something; you might not realise how easy it is to take that first step and change your life.” ●

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WWW.ZUMBA.COM
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