



♂ BOYS CAN DANCE...

... but do they? **Marianka Swain** asks whether the ballroom gender gap is closing ▶

Neil Jones and
(in silhouette)
Ekaterina Sokolova

"When I started, there were two boys in the class and about 20 girls, so we were sorted really!" Looking back, rising British star Luke Miller doesn't mind the imbalance – what 17-year-old boy would? – but it hasn't always been easy: "I was bullied by other boys at school because of ballroom, which I didn't get, because I'm dancing with girls and they're playing sport with a load of sweaty guys! It's not so bad now – once you get past the school years, they leave you to it a bit more."

However, those school years are crucial when it comes to nurturing talent, observes coach and adjudicator John Birch: "It is a big problem. A few jibes at 14 and lots of boys decide it's not worth the hassle. Some take it up again later on, realising it's a great way to meet people and keep fit, but for top-level dancers, you have to maintain training. We're just not seeing enough of that in this country."

"I've got half a dozen brilliant girls looking for partners at any one time," declares coach and former world champion Shirley Ballas. "But it's definitely better than it was. I had a female partner for four years, Irene Hamilton, and Karen Hilton danced with her sister – they were always first, we were always second! Boys were scarce, and you had to be outstanding to snap one up."

The rise of reality TV is helping turn the tide, believes *Strictly Come Dancing* professional Ian Waite: "There are still more girls dancing than boys, but the



Rising British star Luke Miller with his partner Hanna Cresswell

perceptions of Joe Public are changing dramatically. Yes, there's fake tan and rhinestones, but they're starting to understand that's just playing a role – you don't have to surrender your masculinity. And we've seen Olympians panting away after a quickstep, so we've proved it's hard-core athleticism."

"It's definitely good that it's on telly," agrees Luke, who competed on Sky 1's *Got To Dance*. "That makes it pretty cool. It shows ballroom's not what you think – there's no prancing around – and that dancers are just normal people. If that doesn't work, I can always pull out the 'world champion' card!"

Luke's dad Richard, who runs a dance studio, thinks it helps that Luke is also sporty: "One minute he'll be in sequins, the next he's cheering on Norwich in the Premier League with his mates. We try to keep him grounded and not let dance take over, otherwise it becomes very insular – dancers can't relate to non-dancers and vice versa. That's particularly hard on the guys, when there are fewer of them to begin with; the girls have safety in numbers."

"It's a bit of a catch-22," says John. "There aren't as many boys dancing, so the ones that do feel outnumbered and that can put them off, plus it's less likely their friends and family will understand it." Shirley adds: "If dance was part of school life, it would help enormously; that way, it's not a weird choice, because it's a social norm."

"When it's an expensive extra-curricular and parents aren't sure

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about it, they prefer to shell out for rugby instead. We should look at the system they have in Russia, where everyone belongs to their local dance club and the classes are big, so it's a minimal cost, plus it's more of a community."

Shirley's son Mark, now a professional on *Dancing with the Stars*, knew from a young age that he wanted a career in the arts – "when he was ten, he told me: 'I'm just not a briefcase and glasses kid'" – so Shirley sent him to Italia Conti, a more supportive environment for creative young people. However, not everyone has that choice, particularly those growing up outside London: Luke had to leave his local school when the situation worsened.

"It's definitely something we have to address, although it's difficult in this economic climate," admits John. "We need to offer more support across the country, whether that's through schools, councils or dedicated training centres. There are talented boys out there who could be future stars with the right backing, but because it's not in place, lots don't see dance as a serious option."

Richard thinks most parents have that problem as well: "We need to lay out the options and show that it's a strong long-term career, with recognised qualifications and earning potential. Even if you don't make it as a competitor, you can teach, perform, run your own business – we work on that side of things with Luke as much as the competitive training."

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Exuberant male dancing on the floor at Blackpool

Shirley is a big fan of the Arthur Murray and Fred Astaire studio chains in the US, "which are widely recognised as a solid career path and a great way to build up life skills. If you put it that way to parents of a teenage boy who maybe isn't that interested in school, you strike a chord. And for the guys, it's an alternative to sitting in an office all day, you get to do something physical and it'll impress women. It's a win-win!"

As for encouraging them at that crucial early stage, Luke would love to see all-boys' dance classes or schools with male teachers: "That would definitely make it easier to keep going, and it would give us people to look up to – I was lucky to have my dad, and now I really like showing off a bit at the studio and hopefully inspiring other guys." John agrees: "We're slowly getting there, but we need to publicise the great male role models you find in the dance world to fire up the next generation. Watch out, David Beckham – the ballroom boys are coming for you!"

The battle of the sexes resumes next issue when Marianka asks the big question: who has it easier, leaders or followers? Share your thoughts by writing to us or contacting us via Facebook or Twitter.