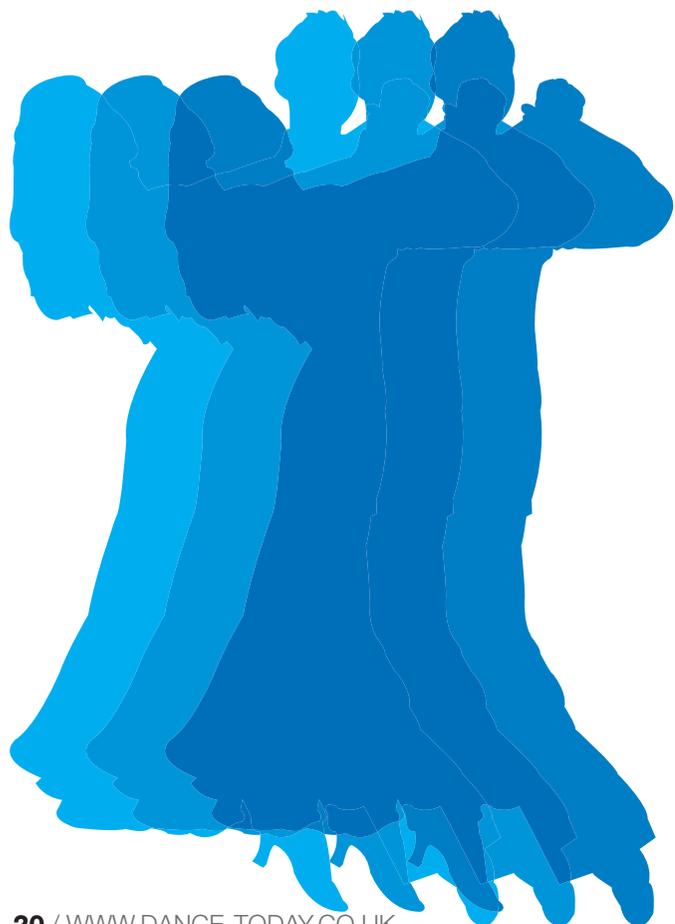


LEADERS VERSUS FOLLOWERS

As male and female contestants prepare to do battle on a new series, **Marianka Swain** asks *Strictly* celebrities and professionals to address the age-old question: who has it toughest?



Well, this should be simple: the woman has to dance, the man has to dance AND lead. Right? Wrong. "It's definitely changed – today's top partnerships are 50/50," observes Darren Bennett. Lilia Kopylova agrees: "There's still this lingering, old-fashioned understanding that the guy leads and the girl follows, but ballroom is now so athletic, so fast, that the follower can't just sit back and go for a ride."

However, increased athleticism can have a negative effect on the bond between leaders and followers, notes Natalie Lowe: "Back in the old days, we didn't know exactly what our bodies could do – it was more instinct than science. Now, we're choreographically powerful and we can push boundaries, which I love, but it is an incredible feeling dancing with someone who really knows how to lead, how to get in tune with their partner, and that's becoming a rarity."



Photograph © Debbie Rowe
Darren Bennett and Lilia Kopylova



Photograph © Paul Goltas
Ian Waite and Natalie Lowe in this summer's *Strictly Confidential*

Ian Waite thinks a strong lead is still a deciding factor for judges, "maybe because it's easier to spot, particularly in ballroom". Darren adds: "I can identify bad lead and follow because the couples lose their symmetry – you both need spatial and physical awareness. On the other hand, some couples get too bogged by the lead and it stops them moving because they're almost shackled together."

"The responsibility for smooth leading really begins with the follower – she has to tell the man where she is and that she's available to be led before he can communicate. If she loses that contact, she won't be ready for the information; if she anticipates, it's jarring. So, the follower has a very difficult, very subtle job, maintaining that balance, particularly when moving in and out of hold or changing rhythms."

However, "every figure needs a different lead," notes Lilia.

"You have to generate power for some steps or support a follower when she's turning, without doing too much – if you 'over-help', you knock her off her feet! The best leaders adapt their style to each step and each follower."

Of course, the rules change for *Strictly*, explains Ian: "The male pros become a strong guide for our partners, though the male celebs don't have to worry about truly leading when the female pros know what they're doing – it's their choreography, after all. So it's more about

keeping hold of your celeb and getting them to the right place."

"We call it the *Strictly* grip and rip!" reveals Darren. "It's not so much finesse as telegraphing moves for when they forget their steps, but even then, it's important our body energy is in tune so we can communicate – something can always go wrong on the live show. That's where the male pros have a slight advantage, because it's easier to hide that guidance."

Lilia agrees wholeheartedly: "I used to develop giant muscles in my arms because I was trying to steer these big guys around the

"WE CALL IT THE STRICTLY GRIP AND RIP!" REVEALS DARREN. 'IT'S NOT SO MUCH FINESSE AS TELEGRAPHING MOVES FOR WHEN THEY FORGET THEIR STEPS'"

floor – if I waited for someone like Darren Gough to lead, it just wasn't going to happen. Arlene once said how beautifully he led me across the floor and I thought 'Yeah, whatever!'"

Former contestant Mark Foster, who set up the FitSteps dance programme with Ian and Natalie, shares Lilia's view that female celebs have it easier, "but then there are more female voters supporting the male celebs, so it evens out". Natalie adds: "Even James Jordan agrees the male celeb does have to have some sense of direction and basic timing. If a follower has those qualities and a leader doesn't, you're stuck, but if it's the other way round, the leader can influence the follower more naturally.

"However, the celebs are expected to manage on their own too, so it's a relief when you get someone with good instincts – although you then face high expectations. Voters love an underdog, and because most believe leaders have the tougher job, reinforced by

FOLLOW MY LEAD

WHY LEADING IS HARD

"You have to think ahead and communicate the lead before the step, while moving – the ultimate multi-tasking!" **Natalie**

"Testosterone-fuelled physicality can actually hinder you, so you have to find a positive way to channel it." **Darren**

"You need quick reactions to spot trouble ahead and work around it, particularly in ballroom, when your partner's blind to what's behind her." **Natalie**

WHY FOLLOWING IS HARD

"You have to stand on your own feet and have great control, but also be open to your partner's decisions." **Lilia**

"In Latin, the followers tend to have more difficult foot patterns and spins." **Ian**

"You both have to maintain artistry while being athletic, but that's harder on the follower because we have this image of the lovely effortless female." **Natalie**

comments from some of the judges, plus not as many men dance in this country, the guys are let off the hook sometimes."

"You're probably safest with a celeb who starts off in the middle of the pack," says Lilia. "Denise Van Outen had such a hard time because the audience

decided she had an advantage." Darren isn't sure Jill Halfpenny would win if she was competing now, "which is a shame, because it's great for the integrity of the show – although Darren Gough was a really important 'people's champion' who encouraged so many people, particularly men. The downside of the myth that leaders have to do twice as much is that guys think there's no point even trying."

Mark agrees: "I realised early on I didn't have a chance of winning, but we can't all hold the glitterball, just as we can't all be Olympians; the important thing is to have a go." Perhaps we should declare an end to this timeless war in the hope that accepting we all face challenges – and yet we all love it – will bring a higher number of both leaders and followers to the dancefloor in future. ●

"YOU'RE PROBABLY SAFEST WITH A CELEB WHO STARTS OFF IN THE MIDDLE OF THE PACK," SAYS LILIA. 'DENISE VAN OUTEN HAD SUCH A HARD TIME BECAUSE THE AUDIENCE DECIDED SHE HAD AN ADVANTAGE.' DARREN ISN'T SURE JILL HALFPENNY WOULD WIN IF SHE WAS COMPETING NOW"