

STARS OF THE SMALL SCREEN

Strictly made celebrities of its dancers, so why aren't professional competitors waltzing on to our TVs? **Marianka Swain** investigates

In May 2004, over nine million tuned in to watch Natasha Kaplinsky win the first series of *Strictly Come Dancing*, a celebrity reboot of a show that ran, on and off, for almost 50 years. The original *Come Dancing* was cancelled when ballroom fell out of fashion, but its star-studded successor stunned everyone by becoming ratings gold, peaking at over 14 million in the eighth series.

Unsurprisingly, that success spawned numerous copycats and related programming, from short-lived reality shows like *DanceX*, *Strictly Dance Fever* and ITV's woeful *Stepping Out* to factual programmes like *Len Goodman's Dance Band Days*.

However, one variety of ballroom that remains glaringly absent is professional competitions. We have a packed calendar showcasing the best dancers in the world, strutting their stuff in aesthetically pleasing venues like the Royal Albert Hall and Empress Ballroom, so why aren't they appearing on our screens?

One simple, if depressing, explanation is budget. The tricky logistical operation of filming a competition doesn't come cheap, plus expenses like clearing music rights, and the cost can only be

justified to commissioning editors if it comes with big audiences.

Strictly mitigates the risk by attaching household names, from athletes and actors to comedians and newsreaders, likely to bring in a range of viewers, whereas professional competitions have a niche fanbase.

Many take place in venues that aren't necessarily filming-friendly, unlike a dedicated TV studio, and the dancers' costumes, make-up, choreography and performance are designed to impress judges live on the floor, not for camera blocking and close-ups.

That's not an issue for ballroom fans who understand the demands of professional competitions, hence the success of online streaming service DSI TV, but to attract a large mainstream TV audience, events have to be packaged as accessible entertainment.

PBS found a middle way with *Championship Ballroom Dancing* in the 1980s, rebranded *America's Ballroom Challenge* in 2006. It aired selected parts of the Ohio Star Ball, anchored by sunny hosts and helpful commentary, not unlike the way the BBC packages obscure sports during the Olympics.

Nevertheless, you do need an interest in ballroom to tune in;

shows featuring multiple dance styles and a personality-driven reality-TV framework are much safer bets. Sky1's Tessa Matchett loves *Got To Dance*'s "broad mix", which appeals to "boys, girls,

men, women, young and old". Worldwide hit *So You Think You Can Dance* is similarly expansive.

Strictly also has an international franchise, but doesn't always retain its ballroom focus.

The American version added contemporary, hip hop, jazz and disco, while others feature local dances. Even our *Strictly* diversified beyond the standard ten dances of a professional

competition, with American smooth, Charleston, Argentine tango, swing and salsa.

The BBC's Sarah Ellis says there would be "a huge amount of factors to consider" in



Martin Cutler interviews Domen Krapez and Monica Nigro for DSI TV

broadcasting competitions, but “we feature plenty of dance outside of *Strictly* in our arts programming”. Indeed, there are numerous documentaries and performances on both the BBC and dedicated channels like Sky Arts. Perhaps competitions are harder to classify and market, given that they straddle art and sport.

Reader Gillian Rydill remembers the UK Championships featuring on the BBC and Eurosport, but “it’s been years since I’ve seen ‘proper’ competitive dancing. I’d love to watch that high standard on TV, even if it’s not in primetime.” It’s a fair point – people tune in at unreasonable hours for esoteric prospects like darts and poker, so why not ballroom?

Shirley Ballas notes there are dozens of dance shows on American TV, covering everything from celebrity Pro-Am to babies doing disco. “We’re oversaturated! But any publicity for dance is great, as it feeds back into the industry.”

Strictly has certainly revitalised ballroom, particularly the social side, but what about inspiring the next generation of professional competitors? “You can’t do better than watching the champions at work,” observes coach Dorothy Kent. “But there are loads of great clips on YouTube, so I’m not sure you need comps on telly.”

DSI TV is a good solution to our increasingly internet-based viewing habits, offering competitions, backstage features and seminars on a pay-per-view or subscription basis. That means the content reaches its international dance audience directly and efficiently, without

WOULD YOU WATCH PROFESSIONAL BALLROOM COMPETITIONS ON TV?

“I’m not fussed about the celebrity angle, don’t usually know most of them anyway – I just like the dancing bits! However, it does help me care about the individual if I know more about them.”

Sarah Jarvis

“With so many channels with space to fill, it would be good to see competitions televised.”

Theresa Smith

“*Strictly* is the only competition I watch routinely. I like the interaction between pros and celebs, the journey over several weeks – the entertainment.”

Layla Tango

“I agree – I enjoy watching the partnerships forming. I don’t think I’d be interested in watching it competitively for too long.”

@Dilly4

“You can have too much of a good thing.”

Hyder Pirwany

“It would be nice to see professional competitions on television, but I’m not sure they’d be interesting to the majority of non-dancers. After all, they’re long and can be boring – endless heats with the same music and dance. A highlights show of the finals at major comps might be a good compromise.”

Jenny Hale

“You could bring back the type of regional competition that made *Come Dancing* so popular, but take it further – follow dancers’ progress to European and world championships. Or spotlight a few couples from different parts of the country, showing them holding down jobs, travelling, practising for hours, getting sponsorship, sorting out dresses etc. It would be great to get a real insight into how dedicated these people are and what it takes to become world-class.”

Nicola Smith

the worry of attracting ratings from the general public in order to justify budgetary demands.

However, *Strictly* revolutionised the dance world by reaching people who’d never encountered ballroom before and bringing them on to the floor. At its best, TV is

a democratising force, stretching beyond an elite group to millions of potential fans, and if ballroom is to thrive and survive, we can’t keep it in a bubble. Whether it’s through print media, TV, film or online, we need to share it with everyone. ●

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