

Keep holding

on

Does the ballroom hold limit dancers and choreographers?
Marianka Swain asks the experts



Diego Arias and Ekaterina Ermolina express themselves in hold and out of it (left) in the brilliant Sangria Tango

One of the latest dramas to unfold on *Strictly* involved professionals choosing to break hold – and Len’s heart – because “the music told me to!” or “I have to express myself creatively!”

Darren Bennett disagrees: “Ballroom is all about characterisation, so being in hold isn’t an issue. Each dance has its own unique character,

communicated through frame, body action, leg action and so on.

“On top of that, you bring your style to it – think of Paul Killick or Bryan Watson, who danced similar steps to everyone else, but made them their own.”

Lilia Kopylova adds: “It’s no more limiting than the vocabulary of another dance form, like ballet or hip hop. I can express myself through my style, just

as they do through theirs.”

That expression comes from narrative and musical interpretation, not any set formula, explains Lilia. “When we’re choreographing, we don’t think, ‘Let’s do five basics in hold, five out of hold and two lifts.’ We listen to the music, decide what feels right and what story we want to tell.

“As long as you’re connecting with each other and the audience, ➤

KEEP HOLDING ON

you don't need to cram in tricks. You can be incredibly dynamic doing basics in hold."

Darren notes there are musical elements that suggest certain movements: "You want to match the highlights and the phrasing. You can hear where a rotation might work well or a dramatic drop. But you also have to think about what's appropriate for the space and the occasion."

Coach Andrea White agrees: "When you're social dancing, you can let loose. If it's a professional performance or a competition, yes, you want to be true to yourself and innovative choreographically, but you also have to be sensible – showcase your skills in the best possible way.

"Judges and even audiences aren't too impressed by dancers ditching hold all the time. The magic of ballroom is two people working together to create something special. Lose the hold, and you lose a part of why we love this style."

Strictly falls somewhere between competition and entertainment, "so they're quite open-minded about hold," observes Lilia. "We had more rules to start with, but they generally leave it up to each pro to interpret – it's a TV show, and if you never push boundaries, audiences might get bored."

"In our first series, we were told to do a ten-second entry and exit, and stay in hold the rest of the time – that's definitely changed!" says Darren. "American smooth came in because we had extra weeks, and we suggested it as 'ballroom out of hold', which fitted the producers' vision nicely.

Chong He and Jing Shan come up with a new approach to the traditional ballroom hold at the World Amateur Allstars at Dance Options Cheam



Photograph © Jamie McGregor

Top tips for hold heaven

"Be available - use the hold to give and receive information. Lead comes from the body, not the arms, but a constant frame helps you maintain connection.

"It's not 'my frame' versus 'your frame'. It's actually the opposite - my frame is for my partner, their frame is for me. If you pull your shoulders back, you're taking away their frame."

Darren

"The hold isn't an invitation for one person to do all the work and the other to be passive - you're both active in every movement.

"Keep your hold strong and still, otherwise when you have body rhythms, everything's moving at once and it becomes a mess."

Lilia

"The best dancers have a consistent but flexible frame. Your hold is different with each partner, each dance, each space.

"It's like being in a relationship - you find out what works best for the two of you together, and maintain those fundamentals while being open to new ideas..."

A great frame isn't a brick wall. It's a platform."

Andrea

"In our first series, we were told to do a ten-second entry and exit, and stay in hold the rest of the time - that's definitely changed!" says Darren

KEEP HOLDING ON

"Now, lots of the performances are more American style. I definitely think it's easier out of hold, particularly if your celeb partner has a bit of ability."

"I disagree!" says Lilia. "Male celebrities can look better in hold, with the female pros doing the heavy lifting – literally. Out of hold, they have to worry about their hands and arms."

Andrea thinks both have a point: "Women who are already confident dancers often feel constrained by the hold initially, while it can be a source of comfort for guys.

"The important thing is not to view it as boxing you in, but opening you up to another person. You'll never move across the floor as quickly on your own, or get the same sharp movements, or create amazing shapes.

"More than that, the trust of your partnership is expressed visually through a beautifully balanced hold. You may not have total freedom, but you can build something incredible through that emotional and physical bond.

"It gives ballroom real power as a narrative language. Think of *Dirty Dancing*. Yes, we all remember the big lift, but some of the key moments of the story involve two people connecting by creating a frame."

Dancing in hold does present challenges, but so does the rigid form of a sonnet or the structural demands of a musical. Great artists don't shy away from challenges: they use them to make their work even more spectacular. ●