

PLAYING FAIR

Have we sacrificed ballroom etiquette for a more aggressive approach in competition? **Marianka Swain** investigates



If there's one thing we Brits love, it's fair play. We can handle defeat, but any suggestion of cheating, bias or just plain unpleasantness riles us up quicker than flagrant queue-jumping.

Ballroom appears the very epitome of courteous interaction, yet there's long been talk that, behind the (fringed) curtain, it's a sea of fierce rivalries, steely tactics and the odd dash of sabotage. Mockumentary *Strictly Ballroom* vividly illustrated that dichotomy, showing the gulf between sequined appearance and dastardly reality.

So, is there any truth to it? American coach Angela Cole says it's mainly apocryphal, "although real life can never match the Disney ideal you try to create in ballroom. Maybe that's why people are shocked when they discover dancers are just human – that they get tough when they're focused on winning, or make mistakes and get in each other's way – because we buy into them as otherworldly creatures."

Richard Miller, coach and father of current British competitor Luke, thinks the problems stemmed from the introduction of new international couples in

the 1980s. "I don't believe there was malicious intent, but many weren't trained in line of dance – using all four corners, covering the floor without crossing the centre line – so while we were dancing very formally, they were cutting us off or barging through.

"Some international coaches were giving out fixed routines and telling them to stick to those no matter what so they'd impress the judges, never mind if it caused a pile-up. It wasn't ideal, but our coach always said 'Keep calm' – if there's a delay up ahead, hold your ground and stay poised. It's not worth starting a fight over!

"It got so bad, Bill Irvine started handing out advice on floorcraft between rounds at Blackpool – he almost wanted to stop the competition altogether so he could get in there and educate people. Now, it's miles better, because more coaches are travelling round the world, passing that wisdom on.

"However, the eastern European mentality of ballroom being something that can change your life, so push yourself to the limit, that did harden up our dancers. I'm not a fan of the approach they took when they first came here – lots of

TOP TIPS FOR SURVIVAL

Core strength "It's the key to success. If you have to hold up suddenly, adjust, maintain a position when someone else bumps into you, you need inner steel. Stay strong, win big." **Angela**

Flexibility "Break down each dance into sections and mix it up. There's no point blaming someone for forcing you to change your routine – it happens, and judges can't mark you for what you were planning to do. Give yourself options." **Richard**

Communication "Whatever happens, your partner has your back. Work on your communication so you can react quickly and figure it out together. The best couples never let you know they're having to improvise – it's smooth sailing." **Angela**

elbow bumping and aggression – but over time, we have all started to take ballroom more

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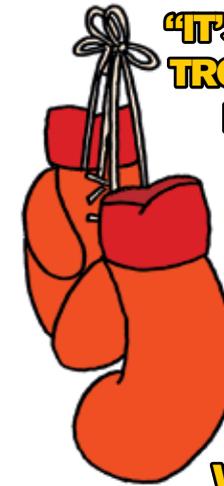
We asked current and former competitors to share some of their experiences. Names have been withheld to protect the innocent (and not-so-innocent!).

"My first Pro competition, this Italian girl stumbled out of a spin, threw her arm out and whacked me right in the face. I saw stars! Pretty sure she knew I was there, but never confirmed my suspicions..."

"In a Junior comp, I did once lead my partner straight into another couple and knocked them over. Too busy looking at the judge marking us."

"It's a war zone. I've been trodden on by three-inch heels, elbowed in the head a lot (we're a petite pair), slipped on shed feathers, collided in mid-air during quickstep, and lost my contact lens when someone's float whipped my eye. My mates play rugby, and I always say it's got nothing on ballroom!"

"I've definitely had my share of knocks in competition, and probably given them too – accidentally, I hasten to add. It comes with the territory. You just keep smiling and remember it's all worth it when you're doing that encore dance."



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seriously, treating it as a vocation rather than a hobby, and that can only be a good thing."

Angela agrees: "I want everyone to see ballroom as a physically demanding, impressive sport, and the shift from that gentle social dancing to the more athletic style means risky choreography and tricks, and that can lead to collisions on the floor.

"You see it in later rounds – guys going big with their leaps in paso or really driving round in Viennese to get that extra attention from a judge – and when you up the content or the force, you lose some of the control. After putting all those hours in, you want it to pay off. You want to wow sponsors and do your country proud, and you want that first place."

Angela notes one of the hardest things about ballroom is balancing that pressure and will to win with

artistry: "You've got to bottle it up or try to express it through beautiful movement. It's tough! You can't show your competitiveness openly like in boxing.

"Sometimes, it just spills out. I've seen meltdowns backstage, partners fighting, blaming each other, blaming a rival for getting in their way or copying one of their tricks, or complaining a judge favoured someone else for whatever reason.

"But when it comes down to it, dancers take pride in what they do, and when they win that title, they want to win clean, beating the best in the world to become the best in the world. It's not a perfect system – there's subjectivity, and anything can happen on the floor – but it's really down to you to go after your dreams. Other people will only stand in your way if you let them." ●

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