

STEPPING OUT



THE SAME-SEX
DANCE SCENE

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Marianka Swain reports on the ESSDA European Championships at Blackpool

This was the culmination of three years' work: filling the Empress Ballroom with Europe's top same-sex dancers, and hosting the first European Championships held in the UK," explains Bradley Stauffer-Kruse, who organised June's landmark event with partner Sören. "We've always tried to build a festival, not just a competition, and we had an entire weekend coinciding with Blackpool Pride, making it a total celebration."

The British contingent was thrilled to have the championships on home soil, and it translated into an impressive medal haul, but there was strong representation from across Europe. Sören estimates it was the highest number of participants and spectators of any same-sex competition in the world this year.

The occasion brought out the best in everyone, observes Bradley. "There were a number of close battles, particularly in women's ballroom and

men's Latin, plus good entries in our new Senior categories and intense competition for the top showdance places."



Men's A ballroom champions Csaba Csetneki and Balázs Gáti

Germany's Caroline Privou and Petra Zimmerman remain unassailable in women's A ballroom, and Hungary's Csaba Csetneki and Balázs Gáti retained the men's European crown. Spain's Antonio Castillo and Santiago Granizal fought their way to the men's A Latin title, while newly formed partnership Kelly Monshouwer and Liejette Spindler from the Netherlands landed the women's.

The proceedings were given a mayoral stamp of approval during the opening ceremony, and prominent activist Peter Tatchell congratulated participants on their contributions to LGBT visibility, "but reminded



Men's A Latin champions Antonio Castillo and Santiago Granizal

us that not everywhere is so open – we must continue to work towards greater LGBT freedom," recalls Sören. Blackpool was a paean to tolerance, with the Pride rainbow flag flying from the top of the Tower. "It's always nice

JUDGEMENT TIME

As co-president of the European Same-Sex Dance Association (ESSDA) and judge on the Belgian *Strictly*, Davy Brocatus isn't easily wowed, but admits being part of this competition was "an honour. We'd never normally take pictures on the job, but all us judges had our photo taken, as it's a once-in-a-lifetime experience judging on the Blackpool Dance Festival floor."

Davy stresses this is the first

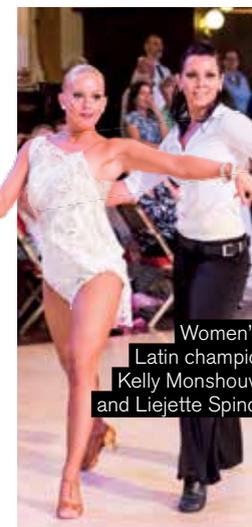
time ESSDA has allowed an official European Championships without the umbrella of the EuroGames – the association was impressed enough by the Blackpool Same-Sex Dance Festival to make an exception.

Their faith was rewarded: "The whole weekend was a pleasure, and by combining the competition with Pride, all the international visitors were made to feel extremely welcome in the dance capital of Europe."

to be part of something bigger," says Bradley. "As much as we love ballroom, same-sex dancing is also an important social and cultural experience.

"We made the gallery free admission for the preliminary rounds to encourage Pride punters to come in and have a look. Lots had never seen same-sex dancing before, so it was a pleasure welcoming them to a new world."

That world has increasing support, notes Sören. "We have VisitBlackpool, Supadance and *Dance Today* totally behind us, as well as new sponsors Chrisanne, DSI and Houndshill Shopping Centre, plus DSI TV filmed all the



Women's A Latin champions Kelly Monshouwer and Liejette Spindler

finals, giving us another way to connect with a wider audience."

Most important, same-sex dance is becoming part of "the great tradition that is Blackpool," believes Bradley. "It was very emotional for people to enter the Empress and see so many same-sex couples on the floor; some of the older dancers thought it would never happen. "Many people worked tirelessly so that this day would eventually come, and we're thankful to them for setting us on this path – and grateful we had the chance to fulfil it. We'd love to see the European Championships return to Blackpool in 2017!" ●



Women's A ballroom champions Caroline Privou and Petra Zimmerman

WE ARE THE CHAMPIONS

"Ten years ago, we were thrown out of a local dancing school because they didn't tolerate same-sex couples. Now, we're in the Empress Ballroom, where some of the greatest dancers in the world have competed," marvel reigning women's A ballroom champions Caroline Privou and Petra Zimmerman. "We felt proud and humbled to defend our title here, and to share this ultimate Blackpool experience with our fellow competitors."

Antonio Castillo, who won men's A Latin with Santiago Granizal, agrees: "We were already motivated to win, but having the opportunity to do it here really spurred us on. We got goosebumps just stepping on to that floor – it's something we'll never forget."

Csaba Csetneki and Balázs Gáti, men's A ballroom victors, reveal mainstream dancer friends are envious, "as they've never had this chance! Winning the European title again, but this time in the Empress, is something we'll always treasure."

Kelly Monshouwer only began dancing with Liejette Spindler in March, and was "flabbergasted" to top the women's Latin. "We were so impressed by the high standard, and were thrilled just to make the final.

"I really didn't expect to win, which is why I promised my family and friends I'd stop smoking when I became European champion! We couldn't have made it without the enthusiastic support of the other couples, who added to a fantastic atmosphere."

Csaba has huge admiration for Bradley and Sören's achievements: "The entire weekend was dedicated to dancing and having a great time." Caroline agrees, adding her thanks to the ESSDA board, who contributed to a "highly professional" event, and "all the organisers, dancers, teachers and journalists who worked so hard over the years to make this dream come true."