



**Marianka Swain** reflects on the British Dance Council's proposed ruling

In this column, I've reported on same-sex dancers growing their own events and also becoming more accepted by the wider community. However, in July, the British Dance Council (BDC) proposed a rule amendment defining a competition partnership as "one man and one lady... unless otherwise stated", meaning same-sex dancers would have to contact every event promoter to find out if they're allowed to enter.

BDC president Bryan Allen said the policy shift was a result of some mixed-sex competitors feeling all-male couples had a physical advantage, and that it redresses the balance, since there are same-sex-only competitions. He stressed the BDC isn't banning same-sex couples, and suggested promoters could establish mixed-sex-only and open categories. But same-sex dancer Heather Devine points out mixed-sex couples might choose to just dance in their closed category, making that

far more competitive than the open one. It's unequal, and creates a form of segregation. Bryan also suggested adding same-sex categories to mainstream competitions, but, again, that results in an inequitable offering. With crammed timetables, it would likely be just one event, rather than the myriad age and skill categories offered to mixed-sex couples. A rule change would not only affect the handful of same-sex couples who've recently ventured into mainstream, but numerous female/female partnerships, who account for about 80 per cent of ISTD medallist competition entrants.

The BDC board of directors' decision has not been made public,

with Bryan simply stating no change will be made until January 2015, with prior notice given. Heather, who corresponded with the BDC over a long period of time, is disappointed by the minimal response. "Given the media interest, and the effort we've made to explain our views and be helpful, I'm surprised they're not engaging at all."

One competition promoter, who preferred not to be named, is concerned about the lack of communication. "I want to do the right thing and put on a fair event, and I need clear guidance. Some entrants aren't sure how it works with same-sex

dancers taking part, and to be honest I'm still working that out as well. What worries me is the BDC trying to sneak this through and put the onus on individual promoters to sort it all out, rather than taking responsibility as an industry leader."



Alex (left) and John at Bournemouth 2014



Bournemouth Masters Open Pre Champ, John and Alex in centre, Heather and Chrisi Lyons right

John Church and Alex Lewalle, who won the 2013 UK Closed Over-35 Pre-Championship, agree the stealth proposal is worrying. As one of only two all-male couples regularly dancing in mainstream, they'd hoped to be informed, but only discovered it by chance. "The BDC gave us little confidence the proposal had the purest of intentions, and we're concerned vagueness in wording could give way to all sorts of abuses," says John. He notes event organisers might come under pressure from individuals to ban same-sex couples, which would "marginalise us and jeopardise our opportunities to develop as competition dancers".

Some might argue same-sex events are

split into male and female categories, why shouldn't we separate mixed-sex, male and female in mainstream? In fact, British same-sex competitions initially mixed genders, and some international ones still do.

As to whether all-male couples have a physical advantage, that depends on how you assess ballroom. Many consider it more art than sport, so strength isn't enough to clinch titles. Erin Boag and Nicole Cutler spoke about judging same-sex couples in our February issue – they found it easy to analyse technique, topline, footwork and timing, "regardless of gender", but note it might take time for other judges to accept that view.

The BDC argues same-sex couples are already well catered for, so a change to mainstream rules won't make much difference, but Alex and John consider this "misinformation"; indeed, there are only two annual UK same-sex competitions. Both are currently same-sex-only, which could be

changed in the name of fairness, although there are hardly many mixed-same couples desperate to enter when they have so many other options available.

Bryan equates all-ladies events to same-sex competitions, but there's no offering for male couples, and competitors tend to dance to the audience rather than with one another, observes same-sex dancer Peter Wilson. That allows the assumption women are partnering due to ballroom's gender imbalance, rather than choosing to dance with someone of the same sex – perhaps it's the latter that's truly causing discomfort for some.

At last month's Bournemouth festival, John and Alex and

Heather and partner Chrisi Lyons got good results and warm support in several events, but judges failed to mark them in others, meaning John and Alex couldn't defend their title. The inconsistency is an example of current confusion – exacerbated by the BDC's proposal – that needs to be addressed.

International same-sex ballroom champions Caroline Privou and Petra Zimmerman note in German mainstream competitions, the rule defining a partnership as mixed-sex is already in force. "English dancers have something very special, and are far ahead of Europe," believes Caroline. "We're keeping our fingers crossed for them, and hope maybe one day we can join them."

It would certainly be a shame if the UK lost its reputation as a forward-looking nation, both on and off the dancefloor, but with a complex issue that affects so many people, the best solution is surely for all organisations, including the BDC and UK Same Sex Dance Council, to communicate constructively and work out a transparent, long-term strategy that's fair for everyone. ●

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