

Lisa Riley, dancing here in the *Strictly* Christmas special with Robin Windsor, impressed Craig Revel Horwood enough to win the leading role in his show *Strictly Confidential*



Sunetra Sarker's beautiful arms impressed the judges this year



Jake Wood (pictured dancing the samba with partner Janette Manrara) was one of the surprise hits of Series 12

Strictly surprises

Taking on the "dark horse" mantle in 2014's *Strictly Come Dancing* were snake-hipped Jake Wood and game Sunetra Sarker – both, of course, coming under the "Little-known but unexpectedly watchable actors" category. Our resident blogger **Marianka Swain** counts down her top five surprise contestants from past series

5. Ann Widdecombe, Series 8

Love them or loathe them, the comedy acts do add entertainment, as well as reassuring similarly

hapless hoofers. Some are cast in that role (Julian Clary, Russell Grant, Mark Benton); others (Ann, John Sergeant) are a revelation. Who would have thought

a strident Conservative politician campaigning for the return of the death penalty could charm with a loopy *Titanic* tribute?

4. Cherie Lunghi, Series 6

There is inarguably an age bias to the show, given its relentless pace, unforgiving costuming and requirement that you occasionally abandon all semblance of dignity. Nevertheless, leaderboard-topping Cherie produced a series standout rumba. Other golden oldies include Felicity "Bendy" Kendal and finalist Pamela Stephenson.

3. Susanna Reid, Series 11

Amid growing mutterings about lithe ringers with extensive stage-school training, presenter and mum of three Susanna offered a refreshing alternative. She and new pro "Kevin From Grimsby" made it all the way to the final, wowing with an operatic Blackpool paso along the way. Fellow aberrant Lisa Riley impressed Craig enough to win the leading role in his show *Strictly Confidential*.

2. Gethin Jones, Series 5

A beacon of hope for all late bloomers – and those languishing in professional obscurity – the unknown *Blue Peter* presenter didn't hit his stride until halfway through, but instantly gained a vocal fanbase still bemoaning his semi-final exit. He's not the only one to take his time: see also Michael Vaughan, Chris Hollins, and...

1. Darren Gough, Series 3

The burly cricketer shockingly beat out hot favourites Zoë Ball and Colin Jackson, scoring the

first male win and, crucially, proving that all different types of masculinity are compatible with ballroom. He kicked off a sporting renaissance (Mark Ramprakash, Matt Dawson) – although, conversely, those who bet on Olympic golden girl Victoria Pendleton would have been sorely disappointed with her "surprising" performance. ●

Read Marianka's take on the *Strictly Come Dancing* final at www.dancing-times.co.uk/dance-today-blog