



Stepping Out

The same-sex ballroom and Latin dance scene

Below: Peter Meager & Niels Hartvigson competing at the Rainbow Trophy in Hannover in November 2016.

Marianka Swain speaks to Pete Meager about the future of same-sex dance

Pete Meager first tried same-sex dancing at a Rivoli Ballroom social night in 2015. "As I'm quite competitive, and I like to do things well, I asked about lessons. That led to one-on-one training, the UK Fun Competition, and then working my way up through the levels of the Pink Jukebox Trophy. So my story is anyone can do it – if you have passion and dedication, you can get to a high standard quickly and have a great time."

Pete is now heavily involved with organisation and recruitment. As a UK Same-Sex Dance Council (UKSSDC) board member, he's "focussed on developing and encouraging competitive dancers. So that means approaching schools and social clubs to say 'We'd love you to join us', and then guiding people through those competition stages. I'm a comparatively new dancer, so I can share what was easy or hard for me. The UKSSDC is thinking about what we could be doing differently over the next five years – like connecting dancers throughout the UK. Currently, 90% of the membership comes from London, because it has the majority of same-sex classes."

Initiative Out4Dance is already helping by providing information on events and classes around the country – from a new tea dance in Brighton to a budding Queer Tango group

in Edinburgh. "It's all about building that community. Information is really important – like for when you do a first competition, the UKSSDC is developing a pack explaining what happens on the day, what should you wear, who you can go to for advice, hosting and housing abroad. We're hoping to communicate further in advance too, so people can plan ahead and find cheap flights."

Pete thinks the introduction of a pro-am-style starter category in the Fun Competition could be beneficial, as some might find it less scary initially "partnering their teacher rather than another beginner". Dancers can also take advantage of new Competitive Edge workshops, where they'll learn from experienced coaches and adjudicators. "We've found judges at same-sex competitions are really supportive and happy to offer feedback, so this is taking it one step further."

Pete understands some people's fears about same-sex dance losing its identity and "family feeling" if there's more integration, but thinks it's important to be welcoming to all and hope that's reciprocated. "There's a few same-sex dancers doing mainstream competitions and they get some adverse reaction – I think that'll keep happening until the next generation comes along. Mutual

respect is the goal."

As for the next generation of same-sex dancers, Pete's concerned that there aren't enough young people or starters, and thinks universities could be an untapped resource. "Yes, it's more transient, but it's nationwide – and even just us doing one workshop in, say, Manchester means we could then point students towards schools in the area that are open to coaching same-sex dancers."

Attracting more people is vital, as "no one wants to travel to a competition and win by default. My inspiration was seeing those brilliant same-sex dancers fighting it out for a title. We're beginning to see more international cooperation, and also working with groups like Out for Sport London and Sport England. Multisport competitions are sometimes criticised for their organisation, so

how can we assist local teams in delivering? We shouldn't give up – it's a great way to make dance widely accessible. Also through fairs, conferences and corporate events, whether it's young gay couples looking for a hobby or companies wanting workshops and entertainment."

A major challenge for the future is addressing fluid gender identity. "We have to be open to people deciding whether to enter male or female categories, but perhaps then state you have to stay in that category throughout the competition? We'll need to figure out inclusivity without being unfair or too complicated for organisers."

Pete is full of praise for women's ballroom champions Caroline Privou and Petra Zimmermann, who "come to every competition and do public events, promoting same-sex dance and showing

that amazing high standard." He's also delighted that brands like Supadance are offering sponsorship. "We need to help people discover same-sex dance without necessarily looking for it; more TV, mainstream and social media would help. We've got an incredible community who've fought to nurture something wonderful – now, we need to expand our horizons and invite others to join us." ■

