

Competition Survival Guide

Okay, for you first timers and 2nd/3rd/4th timers to competitions, here's a little survival guide on what to expect at your first competition, how to prepare, and what to do.

What do I wear ???

For competitions organized or sanctioned by NDCA (National Dance Council of America) or USA Dance, see the USA Dance rulebook. Visit www.usabda.org and browse the Competitors pages.

Guys:

Shoes: Your dance shoes with black socks - no white socks! If you don't have dance shoes, wear nice dress shoes with leather soles and heels that don't mark the floor.

Pants: Same pants are okay for both Latin and Smooth. Black pants preferred. Pants should be belted at the waist and have a gentle "break" at the ankle. You do NOT want your pants to drag on the floor.

Latin Top: A snug-fitting, knit shirt with a collar is preferred. If you wear a color, try to match it to your partner's costume.

Smooth: A traditional dress shirt will do for starters, and should be worn with a tie. Shirts must be worn tucked in for NDCA or USA Dance competitions. Tip: Pale grey undershirts actually show up less than white ones under a white shirt.

Guys, if you wear black-on-black, make sure the blacks match. Believe it or not, some can look blue, grayish, or even green under certain lights.

All clothes should FIT - no oversized anything.

Hair: facial hair should be clean-shaven or neatly groomed. Stubble is not appropriate for ballroom competitions! Short hair should be styled neatly. Long hair should be confined in a ponytail or braid.

Ladies:

Shoes: Dance shoes, or if you don't have them, dressy heels with an ankle strap; peep-toe or sandal styles for Latin/Rhythm; peep-toe or closed-toe styles for Standard/Smooth. For safety, no more than a 2" to 2 1/2" heel is advised. A closed-toe shoe should not have a really long, pointy toe shape. Ideally, the heel will be centered under your ankle for best support. Smooth leather sole is okay, suede is better – your friendly neighborhood shoe repairman can apply a suede sole for a few bucks.

Latin/Rhythm: Sexy medium-to-short dress, something that you would wear to a club. Pants are acceptable in lindy, WCS, Salsa, and Nightclub Two-step events. The longer a skirt, the fuller it can be – or, if snug-fitting, a slit will give you freedom of movement. A very short, very full skirt will guarantee you full panty exposure during turns! Trunks or panties should match the skirt, should have full back coverage, and should NOT be flesh-color.

Standard/Smooth: Long flowing dress or skirt that lets you move, pants are a no-no. Workable, inexpensive off-the-rack dresses can be found at Windsor stores (www.windsorstore.com).

Hair needs to be OUT OF YOUR FACE! You want the judges to see your smiles; after all, you are performing (plus you don't want to knock your partner out with hair flying everywhere). Make sure your hair looks neat. Braids, ponytails, chignons/French twists, or up-dos are all acceptable choices, but practice with your chosen style well in advance so you are sure it will stay put.

Everybody, all dances: practice in your competition clothes before the big day – you don't want any wardrobe malfunctions!!

What do I do when I get there?!

Okay, before you do anything, guys and girls must check in and get your tickets/hand stamps/whatever. Typically comps will have a heat sheet ready for you which tells you:

Your heat number and APPROXIMATE time of the heat
What dances you are doing and with whom

Gentlemen, you will also be getting a number to put on the back of your shirt. This is how judges will identify you. The registrar should have a supply of safety pins, but be prepared and bring at least four with you.

Pay attention to what heat is running at the time of your arrival; you don't want to be unprepared. Anticipate how much time you need to get ready and how fast (or slow) they are moving along with the heats. PAY ATTENTION!

Ladies, if you need to change, go find the dressing room and find a safe place for your gear. If your first heat is less than five heat numbers away from what's running when you arrive, CHANGE NOW!

Narrowing down the Field: Heats, Rounds, Finals

-Once you get to the comp, each couple is issued a number, which is pinned to the leader's back for every event. Until the final rounds, couples are referred to only by

number, and then usually just the winners are named. For team matches, each school is denoted by letters with everyone on a team wearing the same letter.

-Each event will begin with a given group of competitors. If this group is large enough, the event may be divided into several preliminary rounds, called heats. It is important to remember the number of your heat so you will know when to return to the dance floor.

-If there are eight couples or fewer, most competitions will run a final. If there are eight to twelve couples, most competitions will run a semifinal; if more than twelve, a quarterfinal; if more than eighteen couples, a preliminary round.

-Each heat dances for approximately 90 seconds. During this time, the judges mark the couples they wish to return to the next round by circling the number of the couple on their clipboard. Once the judge has selected the appropriate number of couples, their marks are rushed to the "scrutineer" to be tallied. The other heats dance immediately afterwards until the round is over.

-In multi-dance events in Smooth or Standard, if there are more than twelve couples in a heat the judges will sometimes "split" the heat for safety and for a better view of the dancers. Each group will do (for example) the quickstep, one right after the other, and then each group will do the next dance. Each group will enter and exit the dance floor from a specified corner.

-The next time the event is called, the announcer will call back to the dance floor the numbers of the couples kept from the previous round (usually about half the previous number) to dance again.

-It is important that you are always paying attention. You don't want to leave the area and miss a callback. Similarly, keep an eye on your partner. Avoid having to scramble to locate one another.

-If one half of a couple is dancing with more than one partner, all parties should arrange a way of contacting the others so no-one gets lost. Walkie-talkies aren't a bad idea.

- A typical callback would sound like: "We would now like to announce the callbacks for the semi-final round of Beginner Cha-Cha. The judges have re-called the following 12 couples: Couples 122, 134, 134, 152, 166, 178, 179,180,187,191, 210, 211. Judges please call back 6 from the 12. May we have a Cha-Cha please."

-This process repeats until the final round. Those finalists dance one more time, and the judges rank them in order. The results are all announced together later in the comp. Finalists are rewarded with ribbons.

ACK!!! My event's up!!! What do I do!?!

Okay... your event has been called up... first and foremost... DO NOT PANIC!!!

Before your heat is called (ideally 1 or 2 heats prior), you should head over to the on-deck area, which is usually in one of the corners of the dance floor.

You will check in with the on-deck captain and s/he will line you and your partner up in a line according to your number.

You'll wait there until your heat is called. Look over the floor to choose where you want to begin. The on-deck captain will start the line moving as the announcer calls couples onto the floor for your event. The announcer will call each couple's number, so when your number is called, step out, present your partner and then head for your chosen starting point. Stand in front of your partner, waiting for the music to start. If you are doing standard/smooth, make sure you are facing line of dance (counter-clockwise).

Once you pick your target starting point, head straight there. If someone beats you to it, pause and look around to identify a new target point. Try not to run back and forth across the floor! Keep in mind the necessary orientation and the length of your first pattern, and leave yourself room to maneuver.

Choosing your spot is important. If you are doing standard, you may find several couples clumped up in the corners because most standard choreography starts with a combination danced down a long side. Try to choose the least-populous corner. Once you advance a little, arrange your choreography so that you start on a short side of the floor.

PRESENTATION IS VITAL!!! Walk out on the floor with confidence, like you are going to tear up the floor and win! And of course, good posture always helps. Gentlemen walk on the left side of the lady, and lead her out onto the floor. Keep your heads up, smiling, and alternate looking at each other and looking out at the spectators. Eye contact spells confidence, which means *these people are worth watching!*

AHH!!! I'm supposed to dance now?!?!

Okay, now is the time to show your stuff and *have fun!!!!*

The announcer will typically say:

“and event number blah... the *insert dance here*... Music please...”

So when the music goes on, take dance position, but you don't have to start immediately. Wait just long enough to get a feel for the music so that you start on time. When you're ready GO FOR IT! And DO NOT STOP until the music stops. You will dance on the floor for about a minute and a half.

A few pointers to try and remember while dancing:

1. STAY ON TIME!!!!
2. DO NOT look down!
Looking down communicates that you're not sure what you're doing and doesn't show confidence.
3. STAY ON TIME!!!!
4. Act confident!
If you mess up, forget it and move on. Act like you know what you are doing, even if you don't. Do the basic a couple times until you get back in the zone! Chances are the judges didn't catch it.
5. STAY ON TIME!!!!
6. Yield the right-of-way!
As much as you want to win... we are not allowed to take out other couples on the dance floor. So try not to run into any other couple on the floor. If you do, acknowledge them with an apologetic nod, and then get out of their way.
7. STAY ON TIME!!!!
8. Have Fun!
Dancing is meant to be fun. Enjoy yourself out on the floor, show off, have fun!
9. STAY ON TIME!!!!
10. STAY ON TIME and HAVE FUN!!!!!!

Okay...it's all over!!!

All right, you've made it through your first event. Don't go rushing off the floor quite yet! If you are dancing in a multi-dance event (e.g. cha-cha, rumba, and swing) take your position for your next dance. You will have a few seconds before the announcer calls the new music.

The announcer will typically say "Thank you dancers..." once the heat is over.

Also, take note whether the event was a prelim, quarter, or semi-final round, especially if there are numerous couples. You might be called back. So listen to the announcer when they do call backs for your heat. When that happens, drop what you are doing and head back to the floor.

Before you leave the floor, present yourself and take a bow, and walk CONFIDENTLY off the floor.

So now you are all done with that event. Take a rest, do whatever, and get ready for your next dance!

AWARD TIME!!!!

When the awards session comes around, all the couples who were in the finals are called back to the floor, and the announcers announce your placing.

If you didn't make finals, don't feel down. You got on the dance floor and gave it your best. Just getting out on the floor and dancing in front of the people you don't know takes a lot of courage as it is!

If you are in a final with six or fewer couples, you will generally receive some kind of award – most often a ribbon. Walk up to the presenters side by side, shake hands with each presenter as they give you your award, then move to the side and stand facing out onto the floor. The other finalists will be lining up next to you, with the winners closest to the presenters, for a photograph. Smile!

When it is all said and danced ... relax ... you are done competing. But don't head home quite yet, cheer on your friends from the sidelines! Scream out their name/number and congratulate them when they are done!

Team Events and Fun Dances

In addition to the individual couple events, most competitions include team events, where four couples are scored together. Team events are divided into American and International. There are no syllabus or experience restrictions. You can prepare open choreography.

Fun dances are often the highlight of the comp. Examples include: Rookie/Vet Waltz, Same Sex Cha-Cha, Inter-Collegiate Jive. The rules for these vary but a good time is always guaranteed. The Team Coordinator will inform you of what the fun dances will entail well in advance. Most importantly this is the time to relax during a comp and have fun.

COMPETITION CHECKLIST

Here is a list of items you may find useful and/or necessary to take to competitions.

Very Important:

Try and get a good night's sleep the night before a competition, and don't leave it until the morning to get your stuff organized.

Stuff to bring...

Plenty of food and drink if the venue doesn't seem likely to have any. Check the registration materials carefully and feel free to ask the organizers about food availability.

Shoe Brush

Money (for food, gas, irresistible deals from vendors, etc.)

Camera/Video Camera ... this is very important. You will need this to get that priceless shot of your dance partner. Also to capture shots of ridiculous mid-move expressions, and to record any incredible victories obviously. BUT: Don't bring the video camera if there is a professional video crew at the comp. You won't be allowed to use it, unless the organizer specifically says in the registration materials that you may.

Pen to record info in the program.

Highlighter to highlight events.

Safety pins ... Band-aids® ... Advil® ... hand towel ... deodorant and/or sanitizing wipes.

Ladies:

Your complete costume(s), preferably in a LABELED garment bag for protection. If you have a two-piece costume, make sure both pieces are on the hanger before you put it in the bag! If you are wearing tights, bring extras.

Make-up: don't plan to share ... eww. False eyelashes welcome. It's best to do your makeup at home if you have time, because dressing rooms frequently don't have space to lay out all your tools. Bring what you need for touch-ups.

Hair stuff: nets, pins, bands, spray, hand mirror, comb and/or brush. Again, it's best to do your hair at home, but bring what you'll need to fix it if necessary.

Jewelry: wear the minimum. It can be a hazard on the dance floor.

Breath mints: Not Optional!

Body glitter/hair glitter: should be used sparingly.

Men:

Your entire costume(s), preferably in a LABELED garment bag. Bring a spare undershirt (skin-tight microfiber or very fine cotton is best looking under a dress shirt) and spare socks.

Bring hair gel, comb, brush, breath mints.

Both:

It's advisable to wear something that is both comfortable and fairly stylish. This is not a barn dance, so you want to look nice; but you won't want to wear your competition costume all day and night. Bring your practice shoes as well, so you can dance during breaks in the competitive events.

Also bring a light jacket or sweater, even if it is a hot summer day outside. Once you are done dancing, you're going to feel the A/C.

If you are dancing at Championship level, bring along a steamer/iron and touch up your costumes after arrival.

An emergency sewing kit can be a life-saver. Whatever the essential fastenings on your costume are, have spares and bring thread, needle, and scissors. Both partners should practice fixing loose buttons, etc so that if a lady is about to lose a snap, the gentleman can fix it for her ... and vice versa. We don't want any wardrobe malfunctions, do we??

Does this sound like a lot to think of? Well, it is! The best gear bag is a garment bag that can be folded up and that has wheels and a handle, like a carry-on. If you pack carefully, you can get everything into the bag and only have one thing to juggle. Ladies, leave the big handbag at home and carry only the essentials. As you can see, there's plenty of them to be going on with.

What NOT to bring:

A book, magazine, or newspaper.

Alcoholic beverages.

A laptop.

A QUICK GUIDE TO COMPETITION DIVISIONS

Ballroom competitions are divided into International and American Styles.

DANCE STYLES

International style is danced all over the world and is the style in which the USA Dance National Amateur Champions dance at the World Games. International style has two divisions:

Standard – which includes

- Slow waltz
- Tango
- Viennese waltz
- Slow foxtrot
- Quickstep

Latin – which includes

- Cha-cha
- Samba
- Rumba
- Paso Doble
- Jive

Standard dances are notable for being danced entirely in a closed dance hold. That is, there is none of that fancy open or side-by-side Fred & Ginger-type stuff. Standard is based on a set of combinations that are very consistently taught worldwide.

Many competitors choose either Standard or Latin for their specialty. Couples who can compete in both (and thus are eligible for Ten-Dance Championships) are rare and always worth watching.

Keep in mind that dancers do not have to “declare for” a given style. Some couples prefer classic ballroom and will compete in both Standard and Smooth; others prefer the faster, sexier dances and compete in both Latin and Rhythm. Some may like Standard and Rhythm, others Smooth and Latin – it’s entirely the couple’s choice which divisions they will enter.

American style is danced principally in the US, Canada, England, and Australia. It also has two divisions:

Smooth – which includes

- Waltz
- Tango
- Foxtrot
- Viennese Waltz

Rhythm – which includes

Cha-cha
Rumba
Swing
Bolero
Mambo

American Smooth is the style of social ballroom as well as of theatrical ballroom dancing; USA Dance National championships in Theatre Arts are almost always based on a Smooth dance. Many top International Standard professional competitors also choose Smooth as the style for their show dances.

American style is often the way to go for people who come to ballroom dancing as adults; inexpensive group social ballroom classes generally utilize basics from American style. Thus, an accomplished social dancer may be well-equipped to commence competing with a minimum of expensive coaching.

That said, ALL devoted competitors are urged to scratch together the coaching fees at some point! A good coach can fix problems you never knew you had, magnify your strengths, and take you places you never imagined.

The four divisions of ballroom are further subdivided into Syllabus and Open events and yet further into age divisions.

SYLLABUS EVENTS

Syllabus events are generally divided into Bronze, Silver, and Gold. All syllabus events are subject to strict limitations on the combinations dancers can use. This structure is intended to allow dancers to begin competing at a very early stage in their training while protected from competing against more-advanced dancers.

Newcomer (Bronze syllabus): those who have been dancing for a semester or less

Beginner (Bronze syllabus): those who have been dancing for less than one year

Intermediate (Silver syllabus): those with at least a year of experience

Advanced (Gold syllabus): those with at least two years of experience

Each syllabus contains a restricted list of steps and patterns. Dancers who use material out of category may be disqualified. Examples of acceptable syllabus steps and patterns are posted on the USA Dance, Inc. national website at www.usabda.org.

Dancers may use material from Bronze when dancing Silver, and from Bronze and/or Silver when dancing Gold. Dancers may not use Gold material in Bronze or Silver events, and may not use Silver material in Bronze events!

Some competitions provide single-dance Syllabus events. More commonly, Syllabus events will require a combination of dances. The usual combinations are:

International Latin

Bronze = cha-cha & samba OR rumba

Silver = cha-cha, samba, & rumba

Gold = cha-cha, samba, rumba & jive

International Standard

Bronze = slow waltz, foxtrot, and quickstep

Silver = slow waltz, tango, quickstep, and foxtrot

Gold = slow waltz, tango, quickstep, slow foxtrot & Viennese waltz

American Rhythm

Bronze = cha-cha & rumba

Silver = cha-cha, rumba, and swing

Gold = cha-cha, rumba, swing & bolero OR mambo

American Smooth

Bronze = waltz & tango OR foxtrot

Silver = waltz, tango, and foxtrot

Gold = waltz, tango, foxtrot, and Viennese waltz

Some competitions also provide “Newcomer” events which are usually a single dance – Waltz or Cha-cha being the most common – in Bronze syllabus. These events are an excellent way to get your feet wet (so to speak) with competition. However, Newcomer means just that – you can’t do a Newcomer event at more than one competition; it’s in the schedule specifically for people who have never competed before.

Always check with competition organizers to verify which dances you’ll be expected to do!

OPEN EVENTS

Open events are generally divided into Novice, Pre-Championship, and Championship. Note that these divisions, while commonly described as proficiency levels, are open to all; one need not progress through the Syllabus levels before competing in Open events – though it is advisable to begin competition at the Syllabus levels.

Open events are free of choreographic restrictions in every category except Standard. Anything except lifts is permissible. Thus, you will see dancers creating very showy picture lines, including drops, splits, and other poses. In Standard, dancers must still remain in closed dance position!

Open events are almost always multi-dance events for amateur couples. The dances are combined as follows in NDCA and USA Dance competitions:

International Latin

Novice = Cha-cha, samba & rumba

Pre-Championship = Cha-cha, samba, rumba & jive

Championship = all five dances

International Standard

Novice = Waltz, Slow foxtrot & quickstep

Pre-Championship = waltz, slow foxtrot, quickstep & tango

Championship = all five dances

American Rhythm

Novice = Cha-cha, rumba & swing

Pre-Championship = Cha-cha, rumba, swing & Bolero

Championship = all five dances

American Smooth

Novice = Waltz, tango & foxtrot

Pre-Championship = Waltz, tango, foxtrot & Viennese waltz

Championship = all four dances

You may ask why the pre-champ and championship divisions of American smooth include the same set of dances ... the answer is, because American style doesn't include Quickstep (we wish it did). In this case, there will be a clear delineation of proficiency between pre-champ and championship dancers. Championship events will also often include faster Viennese waltz music. The competitors will create more complex choreography, to the point that every dance may look like a show dance.

A NOTE ON MAMBO

Mambo is the least well-performed of all the competitive dances. Many dancers think that because they know Salsa, they will be able to do Mambo. It ain't necessarily so!

Mambo is distinguished by commencing on the "2" beat of a measure in 4/4 time. The foot and leg action has much more in common with American rumba and cha-cha than with Salsa, which is often taught in clubs by people with limited ballroom training.

Some organizers and judges will let dancers slide if they don't break on the 2 in Mambo. Some organizers just give up and call it "Sals-bo." However, to seriously compete in Rhythm championships, it is essential to master the correct timing. If you want to compete in Mambo, get your coaching from an American Rhythm specialist.

Selling It: The Character of the dance

Competitors are “on stage” from the second they set foot on the dance floor to the second they get off. That includes walking on, waiting for the music, and walking off the floor. The more experienced dancers will coach you on how to be effective in these areas. During the individual dances, there are characteristics and expressions you should be showing. Here’s a short list.

Overall: Smile! This is supposed to be fun, remember? So look like you are enjoying yourself in all dances, except in choreographic moments calling for more intensity. These tend to come up in International rumba, American bolero, paso doble, and all kinds of tango.

Swing/Jive: Big, big smiles. Look like you’re having the most fun you have ever had in your entire life.

Cha-Cha and Samba: Sensual & flirtatious. Partners should be teasing each other. It’s the game of now you have me, now you don’t.

Rumba: Steamy and romantic. Gaze deep into each other’s eyes.

Waltz and Viennese Waltz: Elegant and graceful. Float across the floor angelically.

Foxtrot: Smile and look pleased. Get a nice, relaxed, “no problem” look about yourself and feel the music. Look like you are taking a leisurely Sunday stroll in the park.

Tango: Serious and dramatic: You’re tough and you dare anyone in the place to say otherwise. Leaders, your partner is a prize trophy, show her off.

DANCE RELATIONSHIPS

Waltz is probably the oldest ballroom dance. It began as a country dance in a more or less open hold. Viennese waltz evolved during the 19th century, and slow waltz emerged with “popular” music in roughly the 1890s. International style Viennese waltz is the closest to a pure form for this dance.

Foxtrot and quickstep are closely related and were developed along with popular music of the 1890s. Many standard pop tunes from the 30s through the present day are performed in a perfect foxtrot tempo. Quickstep is often danced to big-band music or modern swing. American foxtrot in competition is danced with great attention to a slow-quick-quick rhythm, while International foxtrot tends to blend the beats.

Tango, in its ballroom forms, bears little resemblance to its progenitor, Argentine Tango. American tango takes many of the figures from Argentine but displays them in a progressing style distinguished by considerable theatricality. International tango is strongly rhythmic and distinguished by what some consider excessive sharpness.

American Rumba is based on Afro-Cuban rhythms and developed in the 1920s. Its basic is a box step suitable for dancing in close quarters. Rumba is one of the most popular social dances. International rumba features a different basic, utilizing a rock step and a side step, done to somewhat slower music, and emphasizing different beats.

Bolero is an exaggeration of International rumba, danced to even slower music, and featuring a rise-and-fall element purloined from slow waltz.

American swing is based on the classic mid-century jitterbug. Jive grows from the same basic, but is danced at a faster tempo, characterized by flicks and kicks.

Mambo is the parent of Cha-cha; both commence on the 2 beat. Cha-cha music is sufficiently slower (in the present day) to include the syncopated 4-and-1 (cha-cha-cha). Classic mambo music is considerably slower than modern salsa music, which is all too often used for mambo events in competition. American and International style cha-cha use the same rhythms and many of the same patterns, but have different foot and leg actions.

Paso doble is a conflation of merengue and flamenco, a walking basic combined with stamping, kicks, and a great deal of theatrical verve. Paso doble is the one dance in which you often see a gentleman fly through the air! There is no social dancing analogue for paso doble, but we recommend using some of its flavor when you dance merengue – just for fun.

THEY SEE ALL: WHAT JUDGES LOOK FOR

Posture – one of the most important aspects. Good posture makes you look elegant and exude confidence. It improves balance and control, and allows your partner to connect well to your body in the smooth dances. One's competition results are often directly proportional to one's postural correctness. "Persistent practice of postural principles promises perfection."

Timing – if a couple is not dancing on time with the music, no amount of proficiency in any other aspect can overcome this. The music is boss.

Line – by this we mean the length and stretch of the body from head to toe. Attractive and well executed lines, either curved or straight, enhance the shapes of the figures.

Hold – the correct and unaffected positioning of the body parts when in closed dancing position. For instance, the line of the man's arms should be unbroken from elbow to elbow. Also there should be symmetry of the man's and woman's arms coming together to form an oval, which, although changing in size should remain constant in shape so that the dancers remain in correct body position relative to each other. The silhouette of the couple should always be pleasing.

Poise – in smooth/standard dancing, the stretch of the woman's body upwards and outwards and leftwards into the man's right arm to achieve balance and connection with his frame, as well as to project outward to the audience; also, the man's counterpoise.

Togetherness – the melding of two people's body weights into one, so that leading and following appear effortless, and the dancers are totally in synchronization with each other.

Musicality and Expression – the basic characterization of the dance to the particular music being played and the choreographic adherence to musical phrasings and accents; also the use of light and shade to create interest value in response to these accents and phrases. For instance, in foxtrot, the stealing of time from one step to allow another to hover; or a quick, syncopated turn in an otherwise slow rumba; or the snap of a head to suddenly freeze and then melt into slowness in tango.

Presentation – Does the couple sell their dancing to the audience? Do they dance outwardly, with enthusiasm, exuding their joy of dancing and confidence in their performance? Or do they show strain and introversion?

Power – Energy is exciting to watch. In a jive, it's often the most energetic couple that wins this dance. But the energy must be controlled, not wild. For instance, powerful movement is an asset in waltz or foxtrot, but only if it is channeled into the correct swing of the body, and not just by taking big steps. The lilt of the music must be matched by the action of the body. In a waltz for instance, the dancer's body action must clearly show the influence of the one down beat and two upbeats. So the release of power into the beginning of a figure must be controlled and controlled and sustained during the rise at the end of the figure.

Foot and Leg Action – the stroking of the feet across the floor in foxtrot to achieve smoothness and softness; the deliberate lifting and placing of the feet in tango to achieve a staccato action; the correct bending and straightening of the knees in rumba to create hip motion; the extension of the ankles and the pointing of the toes of the non-supporting foot to enhance the line of figure; the sequential use of the four joints (hip, knee, ankle, and toes) to achieve fullness of action and optimal power; the bending and straightening of knees and ankles in waltz to create rise and fall; the use of inside and outside edges of feet to create style and line – all fall under this most important of categories.

Shape – shape is the combination of turn and way to create a look or a position, For instance, in Paso Doble, does the man create the visual appearance of maneuvering his cape? Does the lady simulate the billowing flow of the cape through space? In

foxtrot, does the man use the appropriate shape on outside partner steps to enable body contact to be maintained?

Lead and Follow – Does the man lead with his whole body instead of just his arms? Does the lady follow effortlessly or does the man have to assist her?

Floorcraft – This refers not only to avoiding bumping into other couples, but the ability to continue dancing without pause when boxed in. It shows the command of the couple over their choreography and the ability of the man to choose and lead figures extrinsic to their usual work when the necessity presents itself.

Intangibles – such as how a couple look together, whether they fit emotionally, their neatness of appearance, costuming, the flow of their choreography, and basically whether they look like dancers, all have an affect on the judge's perception and therefore on his markings.

Different judges have different predilections in what they want to see, and weight these factors differently. One judge, for instance, might be especially interested in technique, while another wants to be moved by musicality and expression. While both factors are obviously important and need to be considered, it can result in couples getting widely disparate markings. Couples wondering what a judge saw to give them a particularly high or low mark should know that any one of the many factors listed above could be responsible. The use of a heel when a toe is warranted can just as easily hurt you in a judge's eyes as a meticulous closing of feet can help. Because the judge sees each couple for only a few seconds, anything that draws the attention, either positively or negatively, could very well be the deciding factor on how you are marked.

Competitors, please be assured that virtually no qualified adjudicator will mark you for any reason other than his or her honest evaluation of your performance. Most judges hold their own opinions highly, and try to do a conscientious job. Anyway, no one judge can make or break you. The use of panels of these experts usually insures that the end result is the correct and equitable one.

Final Thoughts

Each of you will take away something different from competitions. Much of this guideline will matter little to you as you step back onto the dance floor for your first call back or feel that first shining ribbon in your hand, but hopefully what you have read here will have helped you achieve that moment.

And if you don't get called back, don't get discouraged. Sometimes there are no answers. Just go out, compete and have fun!

USA DANCE, NDCA, and DANCESPORT

By Alexandra Y. Caluen, USA Dance Los Angeles

There are two major organizing bodies for DanceSport in the US. USA DanceSport, the competition branch of USA Dance, Inc., is the governing body for amateur DanceSport. NDCA, the National Dance Council of America, is the governing body for professional DanceSport.

COMPETITION COSTS

Amateur couples competing with USA DanceSport are responsible for getting themselves trained, costumed, and to the event on time. In most cases, they do not have to pay separate entry fees for each individual event. Almost all of the organization and execution of these events is done by unpaid volunteers.

NDCA, the National Dance Council of America, sanctions for-profit competitions organized primarily for the benefit of dance professionals, who bring their students to compete in pro-am events, and who often compete themselves in professional “open” or “rising star” events for which prize money is paid.

In most NDCA pro-am competitions, a given instructor’s students who are competing in pro-am will share the expense for travel, lodging, and entry fees for their instructor, as well as their own travel, lodging, entry fees, etc. In addition, the students may pay by the hour for their instructor’s floor time as if in a private lesson. The pool of money collected by the competition organizers over and above competition expenses is divided up for scholarship prizes, professional event prizes, top-teacher prizes, etc. The latter are determined by the total number of entries each teacher brings to the competition.

NDCA, rumor has it, has for years discouraged those dance professionals who organize NDCA competitions from also organizing USA DanceSport competitions. Whether or not this is true, many NDCA professionals provide coaching, judging services, and other benefits to amateur competitions organized by USA Dance and by collegiate dance clubs. Their assistance and expertise is invaluable (and much appreciated).

EVENTS AND DANCE STYLES

NDCA competitions, moreover, are at present the only competitive venue for students without amateur partners, who wish to compete with their peers and be partnered by their instructors. There has been some debate on the inclusion of pro-am events at USA DanceSport competitions. An obstacle to this proposal is the potential diversion of revenue from NDCA. The professional partners of pro-am competitors would most likely participate under similar rules with regard to compensation and expenses. Should USA Dance begin to include pro-am events, steps would have to be taken to ensure some benefit to NDCA.

A further consideration is that NDCA competitions generally offer limited events for adult amateur couples in American style. The Emerald Ball, one of the nation's largest DanceSport competitions, in 2006 offered a total of six such events – Novice, Open, and Open Senior multi-dance events in Rhythm and Smooth, priced at \$25, \$30, and \$35 per person per event. In contrast, International style competitors could choose among Pre-Novice, Novice, Pre-Championship, Open, Open Senior, and Open Masters in both Latin and Standard – twice as many events.

Since many adult dancers start out in social ballroom classes based on American style, beginning competition in American style would come most naturally. It should be noted that “Open” events, while indeed open to all, typically draw Gold and Championship-level dancers, which can be quite intimidating to an inexperienced competitor. “Novice” events are open to beginners but, being multi-dance, require a fairly high level of technical expertise.

NDCA competitors may also enter single-dance Syllabus and Open events which run concurrently with pro-am events. Such events are priced at \$35 per person per dance for the Emerald Ball. Generally speaking, in USA DanceSport competitions the only single-dance events are open nightclub events or a Newcomers event.

MEMBERSHIP IS ESSENTIAL

Any amateur ballroom dancer who wishes to compete must join either NDCA or USA Dance. One of the points of contention between the two organizations is that, in years past, amateur couples who were members of USA Dance did not have to also join NDCA in order to enter NDCA competitions. That is no longer the case. An amateur couple wishing to guarantee the experience of more than two large-scale competitions in California in a given year must, in most years, pay dues to both organizations. USA Dance competitor dues are higher than for NDCA, a difference offset by the disparity in entry fees.

In addition to local and regional USA Dance competitions, numerous collegiate competitions are held every year, and adult couples are welcome to enter. These competitions are very inexpensive and offer a wide array of events for all proficiency levels. At this time, however, most collegiate competitions in California are not sanctioned competitions. Thus, placement in collegiate events has no effect on a competitor's national ranking if that competitor also enters USA Dance or NDCA competitions.

In the midst of a reassessment of its mission and programs, USA Dance is considering mixed-proficiency competitive events, in which for example a beginner may be paired with a more experienced dancer for events in which only the beginner is judged. This is a great way for an advanced dancer, who may aspire to teaching or performance dancing, to obtain valuable experience and to share the cost of coaching.

A final avenue of competition is offered through the AAU (Amateur Athletic Union), which comprises a network of sport-specific clubs responsible for organizing fundraisers, showcases, and competitive events. The AAU organizes and hosts the Junior Olympics, which are held annually for student up to age 21 and offer events in dance styles ranging from hip-hop to ballet and clogging to DanceSport.

This brief overview is intended to help clarify the various areas of competition for the benefit of newcomers to DanceSport. Additional information is available on the USA Dance national website at www.usabda.org, through NDCA at www.ndca.org, and on the author's home chapter website, www.usadance-la.org. The information herein relating to NDCA was reviewed by Sonny Perry, a Los Angeles professional competitor and coach, with the author's thanks.

A SAMPLE COST BREAKDOWN

To all those who may be wondering about the economic differences between competitions organized by USA DanceSport and NDCA, let me offer the following example.

Competition 1: Golden State Challenge, October 7-8, 2005; Universal City, California.

Events entered (2): American Rhythm Novice (cha-cha/rumba); American Rhythm Pre-Championship (cha-cha/rumba/swing).

Event session: Saturday daytime.

Session admission tickets: \$10 per person

Event entry fees: \$30 per person per event.

Total admission and entry fees for two events, daytime session: \$140.

Video, 1 event (3 dances): \$12 per dance, \$10 media: \$46

Photos: \$12 each times 6 photos, plus \$3 shipping: \$75

Total cost to attend and participate in NDCA competition, including professional video and photography: \$261.

Competition 2: USA DanceSport California State Amateur Championships, November 12, 2005; San Jose, California.

Events entered (4): American Rhythm Silver (cha-cha/rumba/swing); American Rhythm Gold ((cha-cha/rumba/swing/bolero); American Rhythm Novice (cha-cha/rumba/swing); American Rhythm Pre-Championship (cha-cha/rumba/swing/bolero).

Competitor Admission and Unlimited Entry fees: \$25 per person

Video and Photography: competitor/spectator video allowed; no cost.

Total cost to attend and participate in USA Dance competition: \$50.

The basic structure of the competitions, the judging standards, and the competitive divisions are closely matched between the organizations. However, as you can see, there is a considerable cost advantage to USA DanceSport events.