

DANCESPORT

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READY FOR THE OLYMPIC GAMES?

Is DanceSport ready for the Olympic Games? More specifically, are the Olympic Games ready for DanceSport?

This question is one that is being debated by devotees and detractors around the world. Ever since formal recognition by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 1997,¹ the International DanceSport Federation (IDSF) has raised its hopes for DanceSport being placed on the Olympic Games program, perhaps as early as 2008. The host city, yet to be determined, must agree to the inclusion of this artistic "sport" before it can become part of the official program.

But what is DanceSport? Since DanceSport has not yet become a household word, it is necessary to define, describe, and provide an historical overview for the reader. The term DanceSport embraces an activity which is gaining both popularity and momentum worldwide as we enter the new millennium, and is defined as the competitive aspect of ballroom dancing. And how did ballroom dancing merge on the scene as an athletic event, as a "sport," one might ask. The original concept of ballroom dancing, for years, conjured up a variety of images: old dance styles performed by old dancers, impeccably dressed men and women clutching each other romantically, or awkward dance lessons in early physical education classes where there were never enough boys and the tallest girls had to lead. Today, ballroom dancing incorporates athletic components with the artistic, in an effort to entice young people with a competitive bent to engage in ballroom dancing, and ultimately, DanceSport.

From Country to Court ... or Backwoods to Ballrooms

From an historical perspective, one must look to the folk and peasant dances of Europe for the forerunners of our ballroom dances. From the choral dance of the Middle Ages emerged the practice of dancing in couples, which in turn led to the popular

court dances of Renaissance Europe. These court dances (e.g. pavane, galliard) were based on traditional peasant-style patterns, but the dance masters of the day created a new and dignified style of dance, offered only to the aristocracy. Pomp and pageantry were the societal goals of the day, showing off the heavy brocaded clothing, in vogue, and contrasting sharply with the freedom of movement and lighter garb of the rural peasant.²

In the early 1700s, the stately minuet made its debut. Although it had emerged from humble beginnings, it was now praised for its magnificent courtly transformation, complete with ceremonial bows and dainty footwork. It was the waltz, however, that changed couple dancing forever. In the late 1700s and early 1800s, the waltz became known as wild and risquerecombining spirit, expression, and passion and it was the rage throughout Germany. But it was not readily accepted everywhere; Switzerland, for example, forbade it and English society did not accept it until 1812. Was this due to the newly adopted closed position which forced the couple into an "indecent" position against each other? Most assuredly so! Near the close of the 18th century, France and Austria eventually followed their neighbor's lead in adopting the waltz, and the Vienna Waltz soon became the classical, whirling favorite of European ballrooms.³

In the mid-1800s, the polka joined the waltz in popularity, rising from the rank of Bohemian folk dance to ballroom status. In fact, the only serious rival to the waltz was the polka!⁴ The early 1900s witnessed the rise of the tango and the fox trot, both of which have become standard ballroom fare. From the barrios of Buenos Aires in Argentina rose the sensuous tango, a dance famous today for its dramatic pauses, strategically placed in the midst of sophisticated gliding steps. "Fox's Trot" became America's favorite dance when Harry Fox introduced a combination of quick and slow rhythms to ragtime music.

Soon, dance teachers in New York capitalized on its soaring popularity. Later, the fox trot became a staple of the Big Band era, Arthur Murray introduced his famous "magic step," and a smooth style replaced the original trotting style.

The fox trot was not the only American dance to become a hit; swing made its debut in 1927 at New York's Savoy Ballroom and started a trend of breaking away from the traditional closed position to an open position. Originally termed the "lindy," after Charles Lindbergh's successful trans-Atlantic "hop" from New York to Paris, this dance survived numerous name and style changes over the years ranging from jitterbug, jive, and boogie-woogie to rock 'n' roll and the present swing craze.⁵ Acrobatics and the current updated versions of the Big Band sound (e.g. Brian Setzer Orchestra and Big Bad Voodoo Daddy) have catapulted swing into the forefront of the ballroom dance scene in the United States, if not other countries as well. Latin American dances, exported from Cuba, the Caribbean Islands, and Brazil⁶ during the 1920s through the 1950s, also became popular in ballrooms across the United States as well as internationally. Rumba and cha-cha originated in Cuba, the merengue in the Caribbean, and the sensual samba in Brazil. Spain introduced the paso doble, a one-step often confused with the fox trot and originally popular in the 1930s, while England created the quickstep, a name adopted in 1929 for the English version of the quick fox trot.⁷

The Rise of Ballroom Competition

Ballroom dancing competitions occurred as early as pre-World War I in European cities such as Paris, Berlin, and Baden-Baden. These competitions were private in nature, since no international organizations for either amateurs or professionals existed at that time. From the 1930s on, international competitions occurred more frequently, after the "English Style" of ballroom dancing had been introduced on the Continent.⁸ The English Style, to digress for a moment, was a system of set standards for ballroom dancing performance established in the 1920s. Ballroom dancers entering competitions appreciated the security of knowing there was an established right and wrong way of executing the dances, and the English Style became the model for performance details.⁹

The first international amateur association was formed in 1935, in Prague, known as the Federation Internationale de Dance pour Amateurs (FIDA). All founding member nations were European, not surprising at that time of the century. These included Austria, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, England, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Yugoslavia. The Baltic States, along with Belgium, Canada, Italy, and Norway soon followed. The first official World Championship was held at Bad Nauheim, Germany, just prior to the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, with FIDA playing an important role in the organization of this competition. FIDA assumed the role of governing body for all international competitions until the outbreak of World War II in 1939, when all international activities came to an abrupt halt.¹⁰

It was not until 1953 that FIDA was once again recognized, this time in Velden, Austria. In the meantime, the first international professional dance organization, the International Council of Ballroom Dancing (ICBD), had been formed in 1950 in Edinburgh, Scotland. Because the interests of FIDA and ICBD were so diverse, there was little cooperation between the two organizations, and FIDA activities were suspended in 1956. By 1964 FIDA had ceased its operations completely. Shortly after the suspension of FIDA's activities in 1956, a dedicated core of amateurs realized that, while competition dancing was steadily increasing, they no longer had a functioning international organization. Therefore, the International Council of Amateur Dancers (ICAD) was founded in 1957 in Wiesbaden, Germany, with the approval of ICBD. By 1958 there were 14 national organizations from 12 countries claiming membership in ICAD. Differences among amateurs led to the demise of FIDA, and recurring problems between amateurs and professionals continued to plague ballroom dancing. The Bremen Agreement of 1965 eased tensions when the establishment of a Joint Committee on competition dancing was formed, comprised of equal numbers of ICBD and ICAD members. This, in turn, led to better cooperation between the two governing bodies.¹¹

The Formative Decades of DanceSport

Ballroom dancing experienced a period of "ups and downs", both in the social and in the competitive realm, during the decades between the 1960s and the

1990s. The United States, in particular, entered a period of "no-touch dancing" when Chubby Checkers introduced the twist in 1960; disco mania followed shortly thereafter, and an entire generation grew up without dancing together. Competitive ballroom dancing, however, continued to survive, both nationally and internationally. In 1964, a petition for ballroom dancing to be included in the Olympic Games was circulated at competitions in the USA. Some 4,000 signatures were secured and the United States Amateur Ballroom Dancers Association (USABDA) was formed the following year. USABDA was interested in promoting social, or recreational, ballroom dancing in addition to competitions, but its primary objective was the Olympic Games. In 1966 USABDA was admitted to membership in the international amateur governing body, ICAD, and the United States was officially represented at the World Amateur Modern Championship that same year. This led to annual representation in world competitions from that time onward.¹²

A significant event that aided ballroom dancing popularity in the United States during the early 1980s was the creation of an annual television broadcast, Championship Ballroom Dancing, by the Public Broadcast System (PBS). Each successive year this program was rated as one of the highest entertainment specials on television. "The dancers in this year's competition have what it takes: athletic prowess, high energy, grace, and most of all, a passion for the sport. It's beautiful to watch," stated producer Aida Moreno.¹³

By 1987, USABDA had been designated as the sole governing body for amateur ballroom dancing in the United States. USABDA membership doubled in the late 1980s, dance studios noted increased enrollment, and the median age of those engaged in ballroom dancing was down. Universities across the United States were offering courses in ballroom dancing and a revival in touch dancing was well on its way.¹⁴

Since the word DanceSport had been in existence for many years in Europe, ICAD decided that it was time for a definite distinction to be made between competitive dancing and social, or recreational, dancing. The name International Council for Amateur Dancers was, therefore, changed in 1990 to the International DanceSport Federation (IDSF), with a view to being recognized by the International

Olympic Committee as a sport, and ultimately a viable entry onto the Olympic Games program.¹⁵

Many changes occurred in the early 1990s. Barriers between East and West were removed, and a considerable increase in Eastern European membership occurred within IDSF. Asian membership also soared, and the time was right for pursuing full recognition by the IOC. In April 1995, at the IOC Executive Board meeting in Monaco, IDSF was granted provisional recognition as a "recognized federation, pursuant to Rule 29 of the Olympic Charter."¹⁶ Both ballroom dancing and surfing had made the cut, out of applications from over a dozen sports, and they now joined four other provisional sports and 13 sports with full recognition, most still waiting participation in the Olympic Games. The IDSF had yet to convince the IOC that it was worthy of full recognition, and this had to be accomplished within two years. Conformity with the Olympic Charter and participation were crucial elements to be addressed. Receiving full recognition, however, would not mean immediate acceptance into the next Olympic Games. In fact, Atlanta 1996 and Sydney 2000 were both ruled out, while 2004 and 2008 remained remote possibilities. The immediate significance of provisional status, however, was the added prestige given to ballroom dancing, along with potential for securing financial sponsorship for more intensive training programs.¹⁷

A once elusive goal was attained on 4 September 1997 at the 106th IOC Session in Lausanne, Switzerland, when IDSF was granted outright recognition as a full member of the Olympic family. Noted in the official letter by IOC President Juan Antonio Samaranch was the stipulation that the Olympic symbol (rings) could not be used by the newly recognized federation, and IDSF was also requested to verify in writing that it would respect the IOC Medical Code.¹⁸ The 1997 IOC decision was the result of many years of dedication and effort by ballroom dancers worldwide. In fact, it had begun in 1982 when the International Council of Amateur Dancers (ICAD), as it was then known, applied for Olympic recognition.¹⁹ Many hurdles were overcome during the intervening years on the road to the 1997 landmark decision. By this time, over 70 national organizations on five continents had become members of IDSF, and over 40 of these had been recognized by their National Olympic Committees

(NOCs). A long-term joint venture was also signed in 1997 with Mark McCormack's International Management Group (IMG) for television, sponsorship and marketing rights; and DanceSport was included, for the first time, as one of the few new sports in the World Games in Lahti, Finland, in August 1997.²⁰ For those not familiar with the World Games, this competition was established in the 1970s as a multi-media sport showcase, held every four years, for the best athletes in the world engaged in sports not yet included in the Olympic Games. Growth from 12 international sport federations, initially, to 21 in 1997, demonstrated the success of the World Games. The 2001 World Games are scheduled for Akita, Japan, and DanceSport will definitely be on the program again.²¹

A banner year for DanceSport occurred in 1998, when it was included for the first time in the 13th Asian Games, held in Bangkok. The Asian DanceSport Federation managed to incorporate the 3rd Asian Championships as part of the Asian Games, and a crowded sports hall at the Bangkok Metropolitan Youth Centre highlighted the enthusiasm for ballroom dancing competition. Due to its success, DanceSport will appear on the regular program of the 14th Asian Games in 2002, scheduled for Pusan, South Korea. Another important milestone was reached in Bangkok: professional couples were integrated into the competition, under IDSF rules for the first time, and judged by a panel of international amateur and professional adjudicators. This was deemed a highly successful competition, and emphasized the importance for negotiations with the World Dance and Dance Sport Council (WD&DSC), formerly known as the International Council of Ballroom Dancing (ICBD). The WD&DSC is the international organization for professional dancers. The integration of amateur and professional dancers remains a future goal of both organizations.²² It is IDSF's vision to delete the word "amateur" from its statutes as soon as possible, so that all DanceSport competitors will be "athletes" with no distinction made between amateurs and professionals. When this has been achieved at national levels, it will be possible for IDSF federations worldwide to nominate their top athletes for championships and, eventually, for the Olympic Games.²³

Recent Developments

In May 1999, one more NOC recognized an IDSF member organization as its national governing body for DanceSport: the United States Olympic Committee (USOC). As the only United States member of IDSF, The United States Amateur Ballroom Dancers Association (USABDA) was now an official National Governing Body

(NGB), eligible to use USOC training facilities and to apply for grants to aid DanceSport athletes in their training.²⁴ May 1999 also saw the Monaco DanceSport Council granted provisional IDSF membership, at the request of IOC member and President of the IOC Medical Commission, Prince Alexandre de Merode. Merode indicated interest in organizing an IDSF Super World Cup in the Principality of Monaco and Monte Carlo, together with IDSF and IMG.²⁵

IOC President Juan Antonio Samaranch accepted an invitation to attend the 1999 IDSF World Latin and American DanceSport Championships in Bern, Switzerland, November 1999. President Samaranch's debut at the DanceSport competition is interpreted as a clear indication of IOC approval at the highest level and bodes well for acceptance of DanceSport into the medal program of the Olympic Games.²⁶

To Be or Not to Be?

The question remains: Is DanceSport ready for the Olympic Games, or to put it in other terms, are the Olympic Games ready for DanceSport? Even if DanceSport is a viable entry onto the Olympic Games medal program, one must consider both pros and cons before making an informed judgment.

Those in favor of DanceSport argue that it has as much right as Ice Dancing and Synchronized Swimming, sports already in the Olympic Games. In fact, IOC Director General Francois Carrard compared Ballroom Dancing to these sports and admitted that some IOC members were originally opposed to adding this newcomer to the list.²⁷ DanceSport has also been described as "ice dancing on hardwood" by some devotees, and the prospect of having 50% women athletes, as well as 50% male athletes, provides another positive attribute of this gender-equal sport.

Economic costs are negligible; facilities can be found nearly everywhere and special venues would not have to be built. DanceSport is practiced in numerous countries, and on each of the five continents around the world; it does not depend on weather or climate and can be enjoyed by all ages, from young children to older adults. In fact, the Elderhostel program in the United States boasts of a variety of ballroom dancing opportunities on college or university campuses across the country, which provide not only exercise for mind and body, but the opportunity to meet new people.²⁸

Robert Lipsyte of *The New York Times* cited the popularity of two successful feature films which have drawn unprecedented audiences to theatres recently: the amusing Australian film, "Strictly Ballroom," and the touching Japanese film, "Shall We Dance?" (winner of 13 Japanese Academy Awards²⁹). Lipsyte also states, "One advantage of ballroom dancing becoming an Olympic medal sport would be the chance for people to see the International Standard, the real stuff, on prime time; it might even convince NBC that it has found the sport of the millenium to replace football."³⁰

IDSF proposes DanceSport as "the perfect telesport of the future," especially in Asian countries where a substantial number of people enjoy social ballroom dancing.³¹ In Austria, all IDSF/IMG competitions are slated to be broadcast in 1999 by a private television company, due to the extraordinary viewership in 1998.³² Obviously, there are many proponents for DanceSport throughout the world, and all are striving toward Olympic Games participation.

Those who oppose DanceSport as a medal contender in the Olympic Games are adamant regarding the following: Dance is not sport, ballroom dancers are not athletes, judging is too subjective with "beauty being in the eye of the beholder," and the Olympic Games program is overburdened as it is, no new sports should be added before some are dropped. Many amateur performers believe that DanceSport is not an appropriate title for an activity that is, essentially, an art form and not a sport, even though definite athletic conditioning is a requisite for competitive dancing.³³ Others feel that it is high time to omit the wording "ballroom dancing" and that it is necessary to use "DanceSport," with a capital "S" in the middle, in all publications as well as in names of organizations, to give it a significant logo and the modern image it

deserves.³⁴ Obviously, there are two camps divided on this issue, but the momentum appears to be on the positive side of DanceSport.

From a philosophical perspective, DanceSport fulfills one of the basic tenets of Olympism: Sport for All. There is no discrimination regarding age, race, religion, or gender. The renovateur of the Modern Olympic Games, the Baron Pierre de Coubertin, espoused an egalitarian desire of sporting opportunity for everyone. This aristocratic French historian and pedagogue believed in educating the entire person: body, mind, and spirit. Although Coubertin did not initially intend to include women in sport, he would probably be fond of this aesthetically athletic form of exercise which embraces both the Sport for All concept and the concept of elite competition.

The prospect of DanceSport³⁵ being included in the Athens 2004 Olympic Games remains a possibility, according to the outcome of a March 1999 meeting in Lausanne, Switzerland (with IDSF President Rudolf Baumann, IOC President Juan Antonio Samaranch, and IOC Sports Director Gilbert Felli).³⁶ With the backing of the IOC hierarchy as we approach the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, perhaps DanceSport will succeed in its quest for entry in the Olympic Games, either in 2004 or 2008. What is your vote?

ENDNOTES

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