

STAYING WELL

PHYSICAL PURSUITS

BY DAVID SHARP



FITNESS Q&A

Q: Is ballroom dancing strenuous enough to count as exercise?

A: Without question. According to heart-monitor studies, the effort expended by elite ballroom dancers dancing quickstep is approximately equal to that of Olympic runners in an 800-meter dash.

In recognition of ballroom's physical rigor and telegenic dazzle, dancesport (the name given to competitive ballroom) may soon be elevated to the status of a full-fledged Olympic sport.

Q: If I barely know my left foot from my right, how long will it take me to learn ballroom dancing?

A: If you're a beginner, expect to spend six months to a year acquiring the grace and smoothness that are the hallmarks of a competent dancer.

STRICTLY BALLROOM

What other workout lets you stand cheek to cheek for hours on end?

Suppose you could conjure up a workout so enchanting, so filled with fun and romance, that it sweeps you off your feet. Suppose, moreover, that it rivals the rigor of running, that it possesses the precision of figure skating, the sophistication of a Fred Astaire film and the sensuality of a hot date. To those of us accustomed to the tedium of the treadmill and the boredom of barbells, this wish list seems inconceivable. But to those who spend their evenings at the local ballroom, there's little else to add—except, "May I have this dance?"

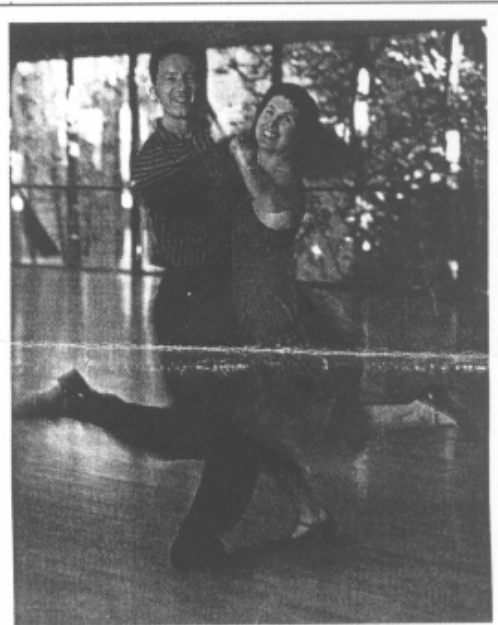
The fact is, no mainstream sport comes close to matching the allure of ballroom dancing. "Ballroom is something you do as a couple, in coordination with each other, and that in itself enriches your relationship," says Archie Hazelwood, the president of the U.S. Amateur Ballroom Dancers Association. For another, each type of dance that falls under the heading of ballroom—and there are many, with names like samba, paso doble, jive, mambo and swing—taps into passions from another time and place.

The waltz, for instance, revives the nineteenth-century elegance of Johann Strauss's Vienna. The tango calls forth the seething machismo of Rudolph Valentino. The foxtrot unleashes the galloping gaiety of the ragtime

era. And the samba triggers the irresistible Carmen Miranda-like impulse to put a fruit bowl on your head.

Dance clubs and studios are burgeoning with a whole new generation of devotees. Fifteen million Americans now dance socially at least occasionally, and about 150,000 people take lessons and go dancing at least a couple of times a week. Ballroom dancing has even sprung up as a competitive sport at such major universities as MIT, Harvard and Yale.

Why the modern-day resurgence? Simply this: many aerobically demanding sports will leave you gasping for breath. But the intimacy of ballroom will leave you breathless. ←



Twice a week, Art and Marianne Lashbrook of San Diego spend up to three hours practicing the intricacies of the waltz, quickstep, foxtrot and tango. The couple is aiming for championship status.