



Ballroom Blitz

A TV show inspires a new wave of dance fever in Vegas. Here's what it's like to put yourself out there.

STORY BY REBECCA ZISCH

WEEK after week, more than 18 million Americans are devoted to watching the competition on *Dancing with the Stars*. And I admit I'm one of them. What is it that's so fascinating about moderately famous people doing the mambo, the paso doble and my favorite, the quickstep?

We sit at home rooting for some and critiquing others. But why just watch when we could be dancing ourselves? I would love to be able to do a fast, exuberant, Astaire-Rogers-style quickstep. If Jerry Springer can do it, then it can't be that hard, right? So, I did it: I got up from my couch to find out how someone might learn the ways of social dancing right here in Las Vegas.

My first step was toward the Internet, which produced an over-

whelming number of "Las Vegas dance lessons" hits, so I called a few, hoping to narrow down the list and to ease my fears.

Fears such as, *Would I need to find my own partner?* Absolutely not, everyone said. *Did I need special shoes?* Not at first, but I was told discounted ones would be easy to find if I decided to continue. *Would I need to sign over my first born?* Not necessarily. Packages of group and private lessons are actually pretty affordable and usually require a commitment of only one or two months.

Before I signed up for anything, I visited some studios, met instructors and took a twirl around a few dance floors. After my initial apprehension, I was actually eager to get started. Maybe, if things went right, I could even learn the quickstep.



My first stop was Charlotte Jorgensen, who—as any *DWTS* devotee will remember—coached John O’Hurley to a second-place finish in the first season. She recently opened Harmony Dance Studio in Green Valley.

Social dancing has never completely gone out of fashion, but Harmony Dance Studio’s holistic approach is different from the nearly century-old Arthur Murray studios. To start with, the warm natural light and earth tones made it feel more like I was going to get a massage than learn the rumba. On the menu, besides group and private dance instruction, Harmony offers “Body Arts Consultancy,” including meditation, physical therapy, martial arts and Reiki. Harmony is “about people and how they feel,” Jorgensen explains. “We want people to feel welcome, enjoy themselves and be healthy.”

That impression is amplified by the vibrant staff, including brother-sister dance partners Vicky and Ricky Sahota. Unlikely as it may seem, the 20-something professionals started dancing just a few years ago when they were both studying nursing at the University of Alberta. Yet during a private lesson with me, Ricky was as comfortable and light-hearted an instructor as someone who’d danced his entire life. As he stylishly led me through the waltz, easily transitioned to the fox-trot and even the jive, I gained an understanding of how the dances related to one another and the rhythms of the music. After one lesson, I felt more graceful and capable than I could have imagined. He helped me visualize that I could learn to do this as well as the contestants I see on television.

In the 2007-08 season alone, *DWTS* went through two complete contest cycles with two new episodes each week. Its popularity across generations ultimately gave it four of the top 10 spots for the entire television year. But besides attracting viewers at home, more and more people of all ages began signing up for lessons. The idea that ballroom dancing classes are populated by retirees is obsolete, thanks to the growing sector of young Americans who’ve been inspired by *DWTS*, which plays up the sex appeal and updates the dance music.

Before Charlotte Jorgensen danced with a star, John O’Hurley (above), on television, she was the winner of several competitions, including the 1999 U.S. Open. Today she runs the Harmony Dance Studio in Green Valley.

Twenty-something couple Elena and Max Shik had never taken a dance class, but Elena got the itch after they started watching competitive dancing shows such as *So You Think You Can Dance*, the Fox network’s *American Idol* for the world of dance. She saw that East Coast swing was being offered as part of the College of Southern Nevada’s noncredit courses, and while she knew that Max wouldn’t like salsa or Latin dancing, “I thought he might enjoy swing.” So she told him, “All I’m asking from you is to enjoy these four lessons. If you don’t like it, we never have to do it again.”

Max admits that he agreed just to please his wife, but then, “I was surprised to learn I could actually dance.” They started with a four-week session of group classes (\$36 each), then quickly signed up for four more semi-private classes (with only one other couple). And now they’re working on their technique and learning more complex turns. They’re almost comfortable enough to go out to the swing dance nights at places such as the Tuscany and Arizona Charlie’s, but that’s still a few lessons away. “I want to enjoy it without thinking too much,” Max says. “I just want to be able to do it.”

At the other end of the spectrum, Mike and Florence Barnett have been married for 32 years, and I met them just moments after they’d

If Penn Jillette Can Do It ...

Las Vegas has been well-represented on *Dancing with the Stars*, with the first six seasons featuring *Spamalot* star John O'Hurley, entertainer Wayne Newton and boxing champion Floyd Mayweather. And if you've ever seen them perform, you can see how they fit in as contestants. Then came Penn Jillette, the large, postmodern magician who's known more for his quick wit and hands than his feet. In fact, he'd never even danced before. As he told *USA Today* before competing: "When you look like Sasquatch, it's more comfortable watching the show." We had to know what that nationally televised beginner's lesson was like.

Before *Dancing with the Stars*, had you ever pictured yourself taking up social dancing?

No, I never did. I really don't do many social things. I did a little dancing at Ringling [Brothers and Barnum & Bailey] Clown College, but it's generally not the kind of thing I do.

So why did you decide to be on *Dancing with the Stars*?

One of the jobs I have is to let people know about the Penn & Teller show. And since millions of people watch [*DWTS*], there is a huge group of people that had never even heard of Penn & Teller that are now coming to the show. And the more interesting thing is that they really like it. It actually makes me wonder what shows are out there that I don't know about but would really like. Maybe there's something in Branson that I should be checking out.

What was your favorite part about being on the show?

I loved every part of it that had to do with dancing, and I was annoyed by every part that was a reality show. [My partner] Kym Johnson was a sweet, hard-working professional, and I loved learning how to dance. Really I just love to learn new stuff. I took up the upright bass when I was 45. I'm learning western roping right now. A weird thing about *Dancing with the Stars* is that the other [contestants] seemed to be shocked that they were learning something new.

Did you learn anything else from being on the show?

I learned that I've lied about my height for the last 30 years. I always thought I was 6-foot-6, but [NFL player] Jason Taylor said that he was, and that's his official NFL height. So, when I took my son to the pediatrician, I used their fancy measuring thing and it turns out I'm 6-7. I also learned that if you put me in an air-conditioned dance studio with a beautiful woman and we're jumping around, I have a good time.

Did you wish you'd lasted longer than the second week?

Oh, of course. I didn't do anything disingenuous; I worked as hard as I could. ... But here's how much my staff believed in me: They scheduled the new season of *Bullshit* [Penn & Teller's Showtime series] to begin shooting during Week Four of *Dancing*

with the Stars. I would have been in contract violation on my own show if I didn't show up. But my staff just slotted it in without even talking to me. They just assumed I wouldn't last that long.

All of the stars talk about how difficult the show is and how much weight they lose doing it. Did you lose weight?

I figured if I was going to wear tight pants on TV I should lose weight *before* I started dancing. So I was running eight miles a day before I even met [Johnson], and I never got winded during the show. Now I'm working really hard to put back on the 53 pounds I lost beforehand. Everyone says, "Physically, this is the most difficult thing I've ever done." But it's nothing compared to winning tennis championships [like fellow contestant Monica Seles]. And *Dancing with the Stars* is nothing compared to doing my show on Broadway. Every person in America is working harder than me—nurses, coal miners, farmers. Three hundred million people in the U.S. are working harder than the people *on Dancing with the Stars*.

Will you continue dancing?

My wife has been taking lessons and she is optimistic that I might join her. I'm not against it, but I'm busy working and taking care of my children. There are a lot of things that I say I want to do, but when the bullet hits the bone, I'd rather be reading and writing if I have free time.

There are a lot of people who are very interested in dancing but are nervous.

Do you have any advice for them?

Anything that crosses your mind that you might want to learn, go learn it. Learning stuff is the only thing that makes you human. Nothing is more important than learning. And every moment you spend watching *Dancing with the Stars* is a moment you won't get back and a moment you could have been learning something new.

— Rebecca Zisch





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–Sandi Becker

Sandi Becker went from being Eddie Guerra's student to dance partner in four months.

taken their first-ever dance class together. Besides being big fans of the TV dance programs, they were inspired to learn to dance while traveling. "When you're on a cruise ship," Florence says, "you see all of the lovely dancing couples and you think, 'I want to do that.'"

"And it's good exercise," Mike adds.

Seeing celebrities on *DWTS* drop pounds each week has made social dancing the new fun way to exercise. Summerlin stay-at-home mom Sandi Becker calls it "the best way to stay in shape. It's the one kind of exercise I don't have to drag myself out of bed for." And speaking of looking good, the type of dance she's fallen for is ballroom competition, because it's "all about getting the dress and spray tan."

Becker had never danced in her life before her first lesson two years ago. She was "self-conscious" at first, but in four months she found herself competing in Latin categories with her instructor, Eddie Guerra,

A DANCE STUDIO SAMPLER

DANCE CHARISMA Everything from the tango to swing. Private and group instruction, plus social dance parties. 3650 S. Jones Blvd., Suite 16, 364-8700, dancecharisma.com

DANCE LAS VEGAS Dance fitness classes available, as well as group and private ballroom dancing lessons. All classes \$10. 633 N. Decatur Blvd., 882-7080, dancelasvegas.com

HARMONY DANCE STUDIOS Salsa, hustle, swing, Argentine tango, fox-trot and more, taught by Charlotte Jorgensen of *Dancing with the Stars* fame. 2510 Anthem Village Dr., Henderson, 432-7424, harmonydancestudios.com

PRO BALLROOM DANCE A focus on Latin and ballroom, with private and group lessons. 8665 W. Flamingo Rd., Suite 110, 808-7126, proballroomdance.com

SALSA LAS VEGAS Group and private salsa lessons, plus "Latin Nights" at venues throughout the week. Westside Academy, 2605 S. Decatur Blvd., No. 215, 214-2777, salsalasvegas.com

ARTHUR MURRAY STUDIOS Traditional lessons for beginners through advanced levels. 4550

S. Maryland Pkwy., Suite N (798-4552), 4440 S. Durango Dr., Suite A (876-3131), arthurmurraylasvegas.com

STUDIO OHM Private and group classes include flamenco, salsa and tango. Bellydance and exotic pole dance also available. 7060 W. Sunset Rd., 810-4156, studiohmlv.com

STEP BY STEP Cha-cha, swing, paso doble, merengue and samba available at this 20-year-old studio. 1801 E. Tropicana Ave., Suite 22, 795-0041, stepbysteplv.com

DANCE FUSION Programs include ballet, tap, jazz and hip-hop. Available for children and adults. 8790 Maryland Pkwy., Suites 4-7, 436-5655, dancefusionlv.com

DELGADO DANCE STUDIOS Instruction in creative movement, Latin and traditional ballroom, as well as other forms of dance. After-school program available for third grade and up. 4220 S. Grand Canyon Rd., 465-5777, delgadodancestudios.com

THE POINTE DANCE CENTER Structured hip-hop, ballet and jazz available for ages 2 to adult. 9340 W. Flamingo Rd., Suite 118, 363-3070, thepointedancecenter.com

ZAPATOS ROJOS This is not a studio but a handy website that lists teachers, classes, events and other stuff related to the Argentine tango—such as the Las Vegas Tango Weekend and Festival, Sept. 18-21. 806-6927, zapatosrojos.info

from Pro Ballroom Dance. "If I can do it, anybody can do it," she says. "You may never feel ready but you have to just do it."

To prove it to me, Guerra, who competes nationally in American Rhythm categories, took me through the basics of merengue, mambo and cha-cha in only 30 minutes. Thanks to his clear explanations and simple pointers about hand positions and eye contact, I'd forgotten to feel awkward. More amazingly, I think I actually retained some of it.

If you want to give your new dancing ambition a whirl without any kind of commitment, Dance Charisma is an established local studio where newcomers can just drop in for their "first class free" on Monday evenings, and everyone who comes can then schedule a complimentary private session. One important lesson I learned at my newcomers session was that you don't need a partner to get started—12 of the 16 people came alone, including me, and group classes always rotate partners.

Everyone at David Alexander's Beginning Viennese Waltz class came without a partner, and their ages ranged from 17 to 70. Alexander has been teaching here since 2001, and from speaking with his students, it's clear he has built a reputation on his precise, yet convivial teaching methods, well-attended dance parties and reasonable prices.

"David really takes the time to make sure everyone understands, and he can always find a new way to explain something," says longtime student Monica Weisseman. I can personally attest to this, since the Viennese waltz, with its dipping, swirling and unnatural posture, is known as the most difficult of ballroom dances, but with Alexander's help, I managed to not feel completely like a lumbering platypus.

Alexander is also a founding board member of the Las Vegas chapter of Dance USA, an organization that promotes social dancing. When I attended its Spring Fling event at Dance Fitness & Sport on Decatur Boulevard, more than 35 people had gathered for a free rumba lesson and social dancing. Despite the obvious differences in proficiency, everyone had a good time.

Besides Dance USA, there are dance studio websites and groups on meetup.com that try to keep local dancers informed of the bars and clubs where they can practice their moves. (Many of the weekly events include a free class at the beginning, too.) Gustavo Rico of Salsa Las Vegas says it's still difficult to keep up since dance events are always changing nights and venues. But he's dedicated to the philosophy that dancing is meant to be a shared experience, so he hosts dance parties and finds places for his students to practice to live music. Most recently, he encouraged students to try the Silverton on Thursday nights, an event that features a live band.

"Dancing gave me so much happiness," Rico says, "that it made me a better son, friend and dad. It's an experience of happiness and healthiness, and I need to share this with people."

Including, of course, his partner on and off the dance floor, Jenny Patterson. Rico and Patterson are both originally from Mexico City, but they first met when she tried his salsa class at Las Vegas Athletic Club four years ago.

"I'd never moved a bone in my body before that class," she says. "I didn't know what I was doing." Now she's the one teaching others, sharing the joy she's gained since that first dance class and encouraging others to get out, be social and dance.

As much fun as it's been to watch couples competing on TV, the real-life passion that I've found is so much more infectious—and sometimes more entertaining. So much so that I plan to continue, just as soon as I summon the courage to attempt the quickstep. **DC**

Rebecca Zisch is a writer, humorist and bon vivant. She can be heard regularly on Nevada Public Radio commenting on popular culture.