

A Judge's Perspective

Wayne Crowder- May 2007



As an adjudicator, one is asked by the competition organizer to make a critical evaluation of the dancesport athletes and rank them in order as to your preferences. In other words, you are asked to give your opinion. This is truly an honor, and one that most adjudicators take very seriously. I have had the honor of serving on some prestigious panels of judges and been extremely impressed with the level of professionalism that exists. Any attempt to explain what each judge uses as his or her criteria for judging a competition would be ludicrous. But having spoken with many judges and drawing from my own experience, I will attempt to explain some common criteria that adjudicators use to rank an athlete's competitive performance.

As in life, a competitor gets one chance to make a good "first impression". The general appearance of the couple is the first thing a judge sees. Neat, tidy hair for both man and lady as well as the appropriate makeup for the style of the dance and age category should be taken in consideration when preparing to compete. Costuming, whether you're dancing in Championship or Syllabus categories, should be considered carefully. Needless to say a whole book could be written on the subject of proper fashion for the competitor. But simply put, a sharp classic Prom look that meets the requirements in the Dancesport Rule Book for the category danced would be a good start. A little research in fashion sense would give the competitor an idea of what and what not to wear to compliment their body type. Be sure to wear the proper shoes for the appropriate dances. Latin shoes for Latin/Rhythm categories, Standard shoes for men in the Standard/Smooth dances, while the ladies should wear pumps for Standard/Smooth. This is not just for appearance, but performance. A Latin heel or sandal does not lend itself to the smooth glide of a Waltz or Foxtrot and can impede the flow of movement. While it is true that you are not being judged on your looks but rather the dancing, proper costuming can hide many faults or accentuate your positives.

The most important aspect of appearance is the frame and connection when the couple assumes a dance position. Proper posture with relaxed shoulders held in a natural state, is the goal of all dancers. Special attention should be given to the man's frame and how the lady positions herself within the frame. The Ballroom Technique book describes the man's frame with a very slight slope from the shoulder to the elbow. In most of the competitions I've judged recently, I see many men holding their elbows perfectly level with their shoulders. This exaggerated position produces a stiff look that also affects the ability to move. The man's frame should not overpower the lady by crossing the center line thereby causing her to break her shoulder line to conform to this exaggerated position. The same can be said in the Latin & Rhythm dances of Closed Position and Open Facing Position as well. In Open Facing Position careful attention needs to be given to the "free arm" in allowing it to work naturally with the body action being produced or the figure being led.

The one aspect of judging a dance competition that all judges would agree with is the need to dance on time with the music. Every judge has stories of marking couples that

execute good movement, frame, and connection, last, due to being off time. It happens in all dances, but occurs most frequently in the Mambo and Foxtrot. Breaking fast on the second beat in Mambo, requires a preparation on the first beat. Latin music is complex and a good understanding of the rhythms is essential. In the Smooth/Standard dances, a “slow” beat involves the action of moving to and from the standing leg during the time given by the music. Too often the “slow” beat is danced as a “quick” with the foot landing at the beginning of the “slow” and with the continued momentum of the couple, the next step is taken too quickly resulting in the couple being off time.

Good dance technique goes a long way in winning a dance competition. Footwork is paramount for good movement. The proper use of footwork, such as a heel toe, toe, toe heel used to dance a Closed Change as man, for example, in the Standard or Smooth dances promotes the proper actions that lead the figure, continue the flow of movement, as well as renders the character of the dance. The fourth step of a Forward Lock, Chasse from Promenade, Progressive Chasse, just to name a few, is toe heel and NOT heel toe. This improper footwork is the reaction to a Rise and Fall problem, where the athlete is rising too early in the figure. If you reach your highest position on step four of these figures instead of step three, the footwork will take care of itself. This is one example of how a Rise and Fall error produces the incorrect foot action, thereby causing an interruption in movement, which further translates to connection problems for the couple. In the Latin and Rhythm dances, proper use of the feet utilizing a ball flat action, turned out feet, and inside edge of the toe, are essential to produce the balanced movement needed to portray the character of the dances. A turned out foot danced with a ball flat action produces a “checked action” that changes directions quickly, as opposed to a straight foot that allows a rolling through action seen in a natural walk. This checked action is so prevalent in the Latin dances. The proper footwork is essential but the way the dancer uses their feet adds to the quality of movement. Soft use of the feet, ankles, and knees, keep the movement free and effortless; and clean, crisp footwork with each step purposefully placed; are just some examples of how a dancer uses the footwork to denote the character of the dance.

Knowing your choreography is fundamental. But knowing how to change that choreography to navigate around the floor and avoid other couples is essential. Choreographed routines should always take a backseat to floorcraft. In order to combine or mix and match figures, a clear understanding of the various positions danced is needed to provide the partnership skills necessary to win a competition. Transitioning from Closed Position to Outside Partner Position, Promenade Position, or Fallaway Position, needs to be accomplished smoothly without impeding the couple’s movement. In the Latin/Rhythm dances a proper understanding of the frame positions and how the man uses his frame to produce a position to execute the figure is important. Over leading, by allowing the connection to cross over the center line separating the couple affects the partner’s balance. Comparing this with a couple who has a good understanding of a balanced compression before the execution of a figure, (lead and follow), the overall quality of movement when both partners are dancing over their feet is vastly superior. In all of the dances, the proper use of Contra Body Movement and Sway creates a smooth body usage that is in sync with the couple’s movement. Proper use of the dancer’s body to produce the couple’s movement should not look contrived, but simply what is needed to execute the figure.

Musicality is the way we express our dancing to the music that is being played. A judge takes into consideration the level category that is being evaluated. For example, in the Bronze category, staying on time with the music is sometimes difficult enough. At the Championship level, dancing to the musical phrasing is essential. Simply put, musicality in its simplest form is the beat value given to a step. Dancing a Whisk in Waltz, the timing is 1,2,3. The dancer can cross the feet promptly on 3 or drift the foot in place, thereby giving a hovering affect. The Chasse from Promenade in Waltz is normally done 1, 2&, 3. However, dancing it with a slight pause using the timing of 1, 2&, hold the 3, step on 3&, gives a different look to the figure. Don't change the timing of every Chasse from Promenade, but use the timing to accent the music or slow an exit of a figure. Caution should be used when experimenting with the timing of figures and your coach or instructor should be consulted before doing so. A dancer's expression can signature the couple and set them apart from the rest of the field.

Each of the 10 dances in the International Style and the 9 dances in the American Style has their own character. A competitive dancer uses the various technical skills learned, to create the unique character of the dance being performed. A Foxtrot danced with impeccable Waltz Rise and Fall does not express the character of the Foxtrot. Likewise, a Jive or Swing that lacks the part weight, bounce action of the chasse does not denote the character of the Jive or Swing. Each of the dances has a Rise and Fall, footwork, poise, and body actions that make that dance unique. The overall performance should serve to express the character of the dance. Research into the history of a dance is an excellent way to gain insight into its true character.

The couple's appearance, frame and connection, technical skills, partnership skills, musicality, and expression of the dance are elements of the performance of the couple. Confidence, charisma, and connecting with the audience complete the total performance. Knowing your choreography, and knowing how to execute the figures danced, is essential in the development of confidence seen in the performance. Only figures that you have built confidence in should be used on the competition floor. You will never impress the judges with the difficulty of a figure poorly danced. You will always impress the judges with a simple figure danced with quality. "Performing the common uncommonly well" should be every competitor's mantra. Charisma or power that comes from within to influence others with your dancing comes only through virtuosity. Whereas comparing technique, partnership skills, etc. is somewhat more objective, the opposite is true for the evaluation of a couple's overall performance. This is purely a subjective decision that is justified only in the mind of the adjudicator. Realizing there are aspects of your marks that you cannot change should only make the competitor work harder on the aspects of your marks that you can change; technique.

The emphasis in which each judge places on the criteria listed above changes with the individual judge. This is but an overall view of what judges are looking for and in no way implies that these are the only criteria used. Judges are hired to give their opinion, their evaluation of the competitor's performance and rank them in the order. Some judges place footwork at the top of their list, others place overall movement, and one judge told me that he "just looks across the floor and says first, second, and so on".

There will always be an element of subjective opinion, about which the competitor can do nothing about, but sound technical skills will always be rewarded.

Wayne Crowder is a Championship Adjudicator and a member of the United States Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing with the following certifications:

Licentiate International Standard

Licentiate American Smooth

Licentiate International Latin

Licentiate American Rhythm