



## From Ballroom to DanceSport - Aesthetics, Athletics and Body Culture

by Caroline Jean S. Picart;

State University of New York Press;

I.S.B.N.: 0 7914 6630 2; 167 pages, \$21.95

Author, Associate Professor, film buff, scientist and 2nd place 2005 U.S. *Champion*, Caroline Joan S. Picart has written a detailed testimonial of Ballroom dance at this pivotal moment of this dance form being recognized as an additional sport for competition in Olympic venue. Ms. Picart has the lived experience of straddling a number of stereotypes concerning race, sexuality, nationality, class and gender. This insider-outsider position serves well to open the boundaries of habit and regulation while Caroline dances through different worlds and views motion pictures that have ballroom dancing as a background and/or primary focus. In writing her book, she wrestles like most women in sports to place other dynamics into the foreground of why human movement potential matters to ladies, girls, homosexuals, 'real men', hand-icapped and virtual sentient beings.

That said, let's talk about the can of worms that one must fish with in promoting a sports image as opposed to a performing arts image of ballroom dancing.

In April 1999, *The United States Ballroom Dancers Association (USABDA)*, which was founded in 1965 for the same aim of promoting ballroom's Olympic status, was granted affiliate membership by the *United States Olympic Committee (USOC)*, thus opening the way for amateurs to compete alongside professionals. As *IDSF President Rudolf Bauman* announced, "The most important change in 1999 will be the complete deletion of the word 'Amateur' from our statutes... What are the consequences of this major step? All *DanceSport Competitors* are 'Athletes'.

Picart sites the slow process of ballroom *DanceSport* getting on the radar screens of the Olympics. In 2000, it was featured as an exhibit with 500 couples for the closing ceremony in Sidney, Australia. This clocks the beginning of the seven years of inclusion for status before games begin. At the earliest, this translates to Ballroom *Dance Sport* being a competitor by the *International Olympic Committee (IOC)* in 2012.

In this interim, the *International Dance Sport Federation (IDSF)* can use its authority to determine logistics and specific requirement to satisfy, to merit the awarding of metals: Gold, Silver, Bronze, Mention, etc.

This is very important for *DanceSport* advocates want to obtain the financial remuneration, recognition, T.V. coverage and global multi-billion dollar endorsement that other metal winning athletes receive.

Following is an analysis and summary of the main arguments the *IDSF* puts forth in order to sell *DanceSport* as a viable Olympic sport (and business):

1. *The inclusion of DanceSport in the Summer Olympics will add to its appeal, as ice dancing has contributed to the appeal of the Winter Games (a problematic appeal, given the controversies surrounding the objectivity of ice dancing, but also an equally persuasive argument, in terms of garnering popular viewer ship as controversies add to a sport's mass coverage.*

2. *Dance Sport already has such a popular base that inclusion would not require a significant increase in the number of athletes and officials.*

3. *DanceSport, unlike other sports, does not require major construction, as it can be performed in a wide range of already existing venues or arenas. Temporally, it will only take two days to complete rounds, unlike other sports.*

4. *DanceSport not only has 100% gender parity, but it is also one of the few sports in which men and women athletes can simultaneously compete against each other on the same surface.*

5. *DanceSport attracts a high international TV viewership, mostly female something that most sports*

channels usually cannot reach as easily. An eleven-year joint venture contract with IMG (1997 - 2008) ensures the worldwide TV distribution of DanceSport.

6. DanceSport adheres to the strict anti-doping requirements characteristics of Olympic sports.

7. DanceSport is "non aggressive" and "no violence has ever occurred amongst competitors or the audience" - a clear attempt to distance itself from the likes of the Harding-Kerrigan scandal in ice skating, or the attacks on athletes perpetrated by overzealous fans such as in tennis, among other sports.

8. DanceSport does not cause "extreme stress" on the human body, and thus does not cause "systemic injuries" to the body - a rhetorical claim that directly contradicts earlier testimonies stressing the physical expenditure necessary for maximum performance.

9. DanceSport integrates physical activity with musical expression and social interaction, and is invaluable as a basis for the physical and mental formation of young athletes.

10. It is highly democratic, accommodating all ages and abilities in appropriate ways, and does not require extra equipment or heavy expenditure for beginners.

Page 84/85

*A Luta continua...*

Let's touch back on the two other personal analysis themes that Caroline Picart addresses in depth: Ballroom dancing has an extensive heritage/legacy in our celluloid archives and also in the Collective (UN) Consciousness. She sites the movies of Fred Astaire/Ginger Rodgers, Gene Kelly of the 1930's and 1940's as well as *Dirty Dancing* (1987), its remake, *Dirty Dancing: Havana* (2004), *The Tango Lesson* (1997), *Strictly Ballroom* (1992), *Tango* (1998), *Shall We Dance* (1997) and *Dance With Me* (1998) to provide analysis of how the actual dancing fuels the plots and storyboards with both action and reflections.

You need more than 'two thumbs up' to acknowledge Ms. Picart's keen cogent sensibilities to film medium as a mechanism to both shape and absorb the role of what I will call a 'primitive griot'. Indeed the pictures in the windows of our mind are kaleidoscopic and yet specific to our values and aesthetics mores. She honor that function with respectful clarity and insights of paths towards changes of stereotypes.

I want to focus this final portion of my review of this excellent book by discussing the challenges of nomenclatures and stereotypes. *From Ballroom to DanceSport* gives an opportunity to do some 'script rewrite' of the two general categories of dancing described as *Ballroom Dance* and *Latin American Dancing*.

The categories purport to give parity and information on evolutionary trends in national dance forms that now compete locally, regionally, nationally

and in international venues. On paper that reads great; in realities, the categories maintain binary comfort zones for European dominance like colonial times of lore. Given that this is now the 21st Century, such binary notions of 'white' as right, pure, clean, beautiful, ethereal and so on... and, all people of color are 'others', exotic, dark, ugly, evil, negative yet sexy, etc don't serve the reality that we all breathe the same air and live & dance in social constructs of race, power & door prizes.

Our author demonstrates that the film, *Strictly Ballroom* confronts a spate of the issues for ballroom dance on its vision quest to DanceSport. Here it is done through parody:

*Its radical outlining of the problems that plague DanceSport, both as a mode of representation and as a set of institutionalized practices (for example, the de facto restrictions of creativity, the judging system's openness to corruption, the whitening of Latin dances, and the constant cover-up of the darker sides of the industry in favor of a glamorous fairy tale that performers and spectators have a stake in upholding) is therefore weakened by its equally problematic appeal to the stock ugly duckling-Cinderella fairy tale and the romantic narrative of the rebel overcoming the establishment by sheer force of genius and charisma. Purely as a diegetic, the film's gains in reconstructing conventional modes of representation are ambiguous. However, as an act of recreation - or of restaging DanceSport conventions for reaching out to a wider public audience, Strictly Ballroom is decidedly a step forward.*

Page 113; lines 15 - 27

This is an opportune time while all the clarification of how to be a contender in Olympic 'big bucks endorsement land is going on... to also make some changes in rules, regulations, body language, traditions, costumes, participant readiness, judging, teaching and all ... to erase binary racists and class/cultural depictions of partners leading and following in the categories labeled *European Ballroom Dance* and *Latin American Ballroom Dance*. These constructs no longer merit perpetuation. Teachers, judges and participants need a say on what can now define an *amateur* and *professional*. Changes can be made... changes should be made on the professional Ballroom Dance art circuit. Where the DanceSport circuit is concerned, please, please let someone say amen and find a better name than DanceSport for this new world order of pomp and circumstances they are chasing. Ice Dancing can get away with such a name; but what does DanceSport tell you in imagery about ballroom dance under the gaze of different metals and endorsements comparable to the likes of skiers, ballplayers and runners? What about Capoeira? Is this not also DanceSport? DanceSport as a name is much too vague and makes it all the more clear that artist and art forms get the short shaft for compensation, visibility and leverage. In the realms of respect and the real world of dollars, Euros, IMS and the likes..., a change is gonna come. ♪

