

Ballroom Dance Puts the SWING Back Into Exercise

ALBANY, N.Y. - With its acrobatic twirls and jazzy kicks, the three-step swing is one of David and Joey Ono's favorite dances.

"After a while, you learn to move your body sideways or backward depending on his touch," said Joey Ono, who took up ballroom dancing with her husband to shed the weight they'd gained since marriage.

For many couples looking to get fit, the dance floor offers an exhilarating alternative to the drudgery of the gym, and experts say sticking to an exercise regime is easier when it's not a chore.

"That's why we lead such sedentary lives. Many of us haven't had fun being physically active since we were children," said Cedric Bryant, chief science officer at the American Council on Exercise.

Ballroom dancing is helping change the way people see exercise, especially for older Americans attracted by the sense of nostalgia it evokes. Adding to the attraction in recent years are pop culture hits like "Dancing with the Stars" and "Shall we Dance?"

Membership in USA Dance, a ballroom dancing organization, has doubled to 20,000 over the past decade. And that only represents a small fraction of the people in the country who dance recreationally, said Ken Richards, the organization's spokesman.

Depending on the step, ballroom dancing can burn anywhere from 250 calories to 400 calories an hour — about the same as a brisk half-hour walk on a treadmill, and the more demanding dances like the salsa, samba and cha-cha can be comparable to an intense session at the gym, Richards said.

Dancing works muscles in different parts of the body and sharpens balance and coordination. Memorizing steps, kicks and twirls also flexes the mind — a critical benefit for older Americans.

"You don't get that from walking in place on a treadmill," said Dr. Ferdinand Venditti, spokesman for the American Heart Association and chief of medicine at Albany Medical College.

For baby boomers and older people, Venditti said, the duration and frequency of physical activity are more important than the intensity.

“And if you enjoy it, you’re more likely to do it a lot,” he said.

Time flies a lot faster when dancing, too, meaning people may dance for long periods.

Not just for couples

Some may even improvise steps into their daily routines, such as cooking, cleaning or walking down the street.

“It takes you to another place. It’s not like exercising,” said Pauline Bono, a 48-year-old Albany resident who started dance classes with her husband because they “weren’t gym people.”

For the Onos, dancing was a way to spend time together, along with dropping some of the weight they’d gained since getting married nearly two years ago.

Joey Ono, 47, and her 58-year-old husband now visit the gym about twice a week, but they don’t look forward to those workouts with the same sense of anticipation as their weekly dance appointments, where they salsa to favorites like Huey Lewis’ “Heart and Soul.”

Although most people who take up ballroom dancing tend to be older, more young couples also are walking into the studio these days, said Lorraine Michaels, who runs an Albany dance studio.

Richards of USA Dance agreed that the age of dancers seems to be “coming down more and more.” Some universities have ballroom dance clubs.

Not all those who take lessons are couples — many arrive alone and are paired up in class

But for couples, Michaels said, dancing allows a bonding not possible in everyday verbal communication.

“Especially when you’re married, you never get a chance to do teamwork,” Joey Ono said. “This is doing something where you have to pay attention to each other’s cues. It’s really a test of how much you can give in and be more understanding.”

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