

# Ballroom Dance Competition Guide

## Everything You Need to Know About Competitions A Guide for Newcomers and Experienced Dancers

*Adapted from the Boston University Ballroom Dance Team and The Holy Cross Ballroom Dance Team with additions by Rushan Guan*

Ballroom dancing has become increasingly popular with college students and young people in the recent years. Ballroom dancing is by its very nature both a competitive and/or social activity that can easily be learned and enjoyed by all.

Ballroom dance competitions allow you to showcase your skills and compete among your peers. But there is no pressure to compete; competitions are also greatly enjoyable as team building events, and you can choose to participate as a competitor or as a spectator.

Competitions can and often are places of seeming chaos and disorganization with couples often running around trying to get on or off the dance floor as their numbers are called in seemingly random order by judges. Whether you plan on taking the floor with a partner, or just coming to competitions to cheer on the team, what follows is an explanation of all that goes on regarding ballroom dance competitions. The purpose of this guideline is to provide the information necessary for you to fully appreciate and understand what is happening on the floor both as a competitor and a spectator.

### Content

*Categories and Divisions*

*What to Expect at a Competition*

*Dressing for Success: What to Wear at a Competition*

*Check List: What to Bring*

*Selling It: The Character of the Dance*

*What Judges Look For: Interview of a Judge*

*Final Thoughts*

## Categories and Divisions

---

### Styles and Levels

The competitions are divided into four main categories:

- American Rhythm - Swing, Cha-Cha, Rumba, Bolero, Mambo
- American Smooth - Waltz, Foxtrot, Tango, Viennese Waltz
- International Latin - Jive, Cha-Cha, Rumba, Samba, Paso Doble
- International Standard - Waltz, Foxtrot, Tango, Quickstep, Viennese Waltz

The competitions are also divided into sections by level of experience:

- Newcomer or Pre-Bronze
- Beginner or Bronze
- Intermediate or Silver
- Advanced or Gold
- Master of Syllabus (not frequently offered at collegiate competitions)
- Novice (not frequently offered at collegiate competitions)
- Pre-Championship
- Championship

### YCN Points System

There is no official system in place currently within the United States to ensure that couples dance at the appropriate level for their level of experience or to measure that level of experience. Currently a point system is used that awards couples points based on how they place when dancing at a given level in competitions. Competitors should keep track of their own points and register accordingly at competitions.

The YCN (Youth & College Network) system recognizes five consecutive levels, in increasing order: Bronze, Silver, Gold, Prechamp and Champ (Master of Syllabus and Novice level will not affect point computations here, and may safely be ignored).

Placing in the final of a certain level earns you points simultaneously in that level and the ones below it. Once you earn 7 (seven) points in a level, you can no longer dance at that level.

Events qualify only if there was at least a semi-final danced. Points are earned as follows:

- In the level you danced in:
  - 3 points for 1st place
  - 2 points for 2nd place
  - 1 point for 3rd place
  - If there was a quarter-final danced, 1 point for 4th-6th place
- In the level below the one you danced in:

- 6 points for 1st place
- 4 points for 2nd place
- 2 points for 3rd place
- If there was a quarter-final danced, 2 points for 4th-6th place
- For all levels below that...
  - 7 points for 1st-6th place

*For instance: Placing 4th in Gold International Rumba with a quarter-final round will give you 1 point in Gold International Rumba, 2 points in Silver, and 7 points in Bronze (thus automatically eliminating you from any Bronze International Rumba events).*

It should be noted that while “dancing up” a level at competitions is sometimes permitted, “dancing down” a level in competition is highly unethical and is not fair to those competitors dancing at the correct level who may now have to compete against more experienced dancers.

If you are going to your first competition and you are dancing in the Newcomer or Bronze level, be reassured: You will compete against people who have the same level of experience as you.

## Team Events and Fun Dances

In addition to the individual couple events, most competitions include team events, where four couples are scored together. Team events are divided into American and International. There are no syllabus or experience restrictions. You can prepare open choreography.

Fun dances are often the highlight of the comp. Examples include: Rookie/Vet Waltz, Same Sex Cha-Cha, Inter-Collegiate Jive. The rules for these vary but a good time is always guaranteed. The Team Coordinator will inform you of what the fun dances will entail well in advance. Most importantly, this is the time to relax during a comp and have fun.

## What to Expect at a Competition

---

### Overview

- Comps are always on weekends, either on Saturday or Saturday and Sunday.
- Most comps are scheduled to begin around 8:30 or 9:00 in the morning, which means we will arrive no later than 8:00am.
- Once there, the Team Coordinator registers the team and gives out numbers to the competitors. For two days competitions, remember not to lose your number overnight.
- Consider arriving early so as not to be rushed. There is almost always an area to practice and warm-up that is set aside from the actual competition floor. This gives you time to work out any kinks or nervousness. Also be sure to dance around the competition floor or at least walk the floor before actually entering the floor to compete. This will allow you to get an idea of how good (or bad) the floor is and identify any potentially dangerous or troublesome spots (i.e. slippery, sticky, holes and cracks, etc.).
- Hurry up and wait mentality. Very few schedules hold to form, with some running hours behind. Stay near the competition floor so as not to miss your events or call backs.
- We usually take over a section of the spectator area. From there, those not dancing a particular event along with those who came just to watch, sit and root others on. Everyone cheers and yells for those out on the floor, screaming the numbers of couples, directing the judges' attention.
- There is no definitive order in which a competition is run, Standard could be before or after Smooth, and Bronze is usually before Pre-Bronze. Check the tentative schedule of the competition, and always remember that the schedule may change slightly at the last minute; in general competitors are asked to be ready to dance at least 30 minutes before the time announced for their event.
- After all the dancing and awards, competitions can finish up very late (7:00pm or later!).
- Overall, it is a VERY long day, so get a lot of sleep the night before.

### Events, Heats, Rounds, Finals

Once you get to the competition, each couple is issued a number, which is pinned to the leader's back for every event. Until the final rounds, couples are referred to only by number, and then usually just the winners are named. For team matches, each school is usually denoted by letters, with everyone on a team wearing the same letter.

Each event begins with a given group of competitors (for example, Beginner International Cha-Cha). If this group is large enough, the event may be divided into several preliminary rounds, called heats (each heat is roughly 20 couples, and decreases to around 12 for the semi-final, then 6 for the final).

Each heat dances for approximately 90 seconds. During this time, the judges mark the couples they wish to return to the next round by circling the number of the couple on their clipboard. Once the judge has selected the appropriate number of couples, their marks are rushed to the “scrutineer” to be tallied. The other heats dance immediately afterwards until the round is over.

The next time the event is called, the announcer will call back to the dance floor the numbers of the couples kept from the previous round (usually about half the previous number) to dance again. Call backs are usually done in numerical order.

It is important that you are always paying attention. You don't want to leave the area and miss a callback. Similarly, keep an eye on your partner. Avoid having to scramble to locate one another.

This process repeats until the final round. Those finalists dance one more time, and the judges rank them in order. The results are all announced together later in the competition. Finalists are rewarded with ribbons.

## Dressing for Success: What to Wear at a Competition

---

Ballroom dancing is, to a large extent, as much about appearance as about dancing. It can be, and often is, a very superficial sport, but obviously is still extremely fun.

As a ballroom dancer, there are certain expectations regarding your presentation. Often judges depend on appearance – confidence, posture, and how you look – to separate the final six couples. So here's what you can do to give yourself as much of a boost as possible:

Newcomers, Beginners and Intermediates: the expectations are in accord with your level. Full-out costumes are not necessary and often are not allowed. What follows are guidelines for those levels:

### Men

#### Standard/Smooth Dances

**Hair:** Long hair should be pulled back with hair gel, looking neat. Go for a slicker, refined look, with no wisps or strands of hair hanging out. A clean-cut appearance is a must. Goatees, beards, and sideburns are STRONGLY discouraged.

**Shirt:** White or black long-sleeved dress shirt and tie, or even better, tuxedo shirt & black bow tie. Be careful not to wear a shirt that is too loose. (Advanced and up wear tuxedo tails especially made for dancing.)

**Pants:** Black dress slacks or tux pants. Again, no baggy pants.

**Accessories:** Black vest or buttoned sweater that perpetuates the formal look. No watches. You may also wear a tie or bowtie that tastefully matches your partner's dress (for instance, a dark green bowtie if your partner is wearing a dark green dress, and so on).

#### Latin/Rhythm Dances

**Hair:** Sleek, refined look is again required. Long hair pulled back, shorter hair should be kept down, no spiky hair! Goatees, beards, and sideburns are STRONGLY discouraged.

**Shirt:** Black or white shirt. Dress shirt or club shirt will suffice. Definitely no loose clothing here, you need to show your line in your dancing. Consider wearing a very tight-fitting black T-shirt ("muscle" shirt). (Advanced and up wear custom shirts, usually long sleeved, that catch the eye.)

**Pants:** Again, fitting black dress slacks. (A narrow cut is complimentary to the dances.) Make sure they allow a free range of motion.

**Accessories:** Belts with shiny accents attract attention to hips, but be careful to not look tacky. NO watches.

### Women

#### Standard/Smooth Dances

**Hair:** Long hair should be put up neatly – in a bun, French braid or twist, etc. Use lots of gel/hairspray and bobby pins. Shorter hair should be gelled down. NO loose hair (wisps, strands, etc. or any exotic styles!)

**Makeup:** Stage makeup – wear more than usual, especially on eyes and lips. Consider fake eyelashes – they really make your eyes pop, and are very affordable/pretty easy to put on.

**Dress:** More formal. You want something that is above your ankles. Be aware that most prom/homecoming type dresses are too long, and if you want to wear one dancing you must shorten it (to avoid tripping, and to allow judges to see your feet). Many girls wear a skirt (at least knee-length, preferably mid-calf or longer) & blouse, though this is a casual look and tends to make you look less competitive. The main thing is that you can move easily. Remember your partner steps between your feet! (Advanced dancers wear custom made gowns, often with "wings", feathers, etc.)

**Accessories:** Nice, elegant jewelry – pearls, rhinestone pieces that attract attention.

#### Latin/Rhythm Dances

**Hair:** Neat & slicked back, tight ponytail/braid, bun or French twist. NO loose hair (wisps, strands, etc.) or any exotic styles!

**Makeup:** Stage makeup. Dramatic is a good adjective, as are bold, daring, and sexy. False eyelashes are a fantastic idea. Accentuate the eyes and lips.

**Dress:** Cocktail/party dress or two piece outfit. Shorter (very short is good, though be aware that showing your actual butt is not considered tasteful in the slightest) skirts with flare or fringe for spinning.. Avoid restrictive clothing. Also, black, while convenient and slimming, also tends to drown you (in a sea of other people wearing black), so consider wearing color, as in, a pink dress, etc. Pre-Bronze and Bronze level usually forbid costumes, so only store bought clothing, please.

**Accessories:** Sparkle on the floor! Large glittery earrings/bracelets/necklaces/rings are good. Get creative! Nude, flesh-tone, fishnet stockings can elongate your legs. Overall, be sexy and comfortable.

Note: Be aware that in general USADance competitions have very strict costume rules; in particular materials or decorations with light effects (metallic, glitter, rhinestones, sequins, beads, pearls...) are strictly forbidden for all syllabus levels. The rules can be found on the USADance website at the following address: <http://usadance.org/dancesport/forms-and-resources/rules-policies-and-bylaws/>

## Check List: What to Bring

---

- Bring your dance costume(s), accessories, make-up, hair stuff, jewelry
- Do not forget your ballroom shoes!

- Consider bringing juice, water, and snacks for later and also money for food.
- For two days competitions, bring a sleeping bag, change of clothes, all necessary toiletries and a pillow.
- Bring your teamjacket or sweatshirt to show your team spirit! It is also a good idea to bring your camera!

## **Selling It: The Character of the Dance**

---

Competitors are "on stage" from the second they set foot on the dance floor to the second they get off. That includes walking on, waiting for the music, and walking off the floor. The more experienced dancers will coach you on how to be effective in these areas. During the individual dances, there are characteristics and expressions you should be showing. Here's a short list:

**Overall** - Smile! This is supposed to be fun, remember? So look like you are enjoying yourself in all dances (except maybe in the rumba and tango where "fun" is not appropriate.)

**Swing/Jive** - Big, big smiles. Look like you're having the most fun you have ever had in your entire life.

**Cha-Cha** - Sensual & Flirtatious. Partners should be teasing each other. Game of now you have me, now you don't. (works for the Samba as well)

**Rumba** - Steamy and romantic. Gaze deep into each other's eyes. Show the lust!

**Waltz & Viennese Waltz** - Elegant and graceful. Float across the floor angelically.

**Foxtrot** - Smile and look pleased. Get a nice, relaxed, no problem look about yourself and feel the music. Look like you are taking a leisurely Sunday stroll in the park.

**Tango** - Serious and dramatic. You're tough, and you dare anyone in the place to say otherwise. Leaders, you partner is a prize trophy, show her off.

## **What Judges Look For: Interview of a Judge**

---

Now that you are at the comp, you are looking good, you know what dance is forthcoming and the steps associated, what does it take to succeed?

The following is by Dan Radler, L.I.S.T.D. Ballroom and Latin, and a Registered World Class Adjudicator. He is a former North American, United States, and Eastern U.S. Champion, as well as United States Ten-Dance Champion.

The criteria that a judge might choose to consider are actually too numerous to examine individually in the brief time allotted, since at least six couples are being judged simultaneously. Therefore, the judge must rely on the impression each couple makes relative to the others. The experienced judge, having seen and studied dancing at all levels, can quickly assess these factors collectively:

**Posture** - one of the most important aspects. Good posture makes you look elegant and exude confidence. It improves balance and control, and allows your partner to connect well to your body in the smooth dances. One's competition result is often directly proportional to one's postural correctness. "Persistent practice of postural principles promises perfection."

**Timing** - if a couple is not dancing on time with the music, no amount of proficiency in any other aspect can overcome this. The music is boss.

**Line** - by this we mean the length and stretch of the body from head to toe. Attractive and well executed lines, either curved or straight, enhance the shapes of the figures.

**Hold** - the correct and unaffected positioning of the body parts when in closed dancing position. For instance, the line of the man's arms should be unbroken from elbow to elbow. Also, there should be symmetry of the man's and woman's arms coming together to form a circle, which, although changing in size, should remain constant in shape so that the dancers remain in correct body position relative to each other. The silhouette of the couple should always be pleasing.

**Poise** - in smooth dancing, the stretch of the woman's body upwards and outwards and leftwards into the man's right arm to achieve balance and connection with his frame, as well as to project outward to the audience.

**Togetherness** - the melding of two people's body weights into one, so that leading and following appear effortless, and the dancers are totally in synchronization with each other.

**Musicality and Expression** - the basic characterization of the dance to the particular music being played and the choreographic adherence to musical phrasings and accents; also the use of light and shade to create interest value in response to these accents and phrases. For instance, in foxtrot, the stealing of time from one step to allow another to hover; or a quick speed of turn in an otherwise slow rumba; or the snap of a head to suddenly freeze and then melt into slowness in tango.

**Presentation** - Does the couple sell their dancing to the audience? Do they dance outwardly, with enthusiasm, exuding their joy of dancing and confidence in their performance? Or do they show strain and introversion?

**Power** - Energy is exciting to watch. I've noticed that, in a jive, it always seems to be the most energetic couple that wins this dance. But the energy must be controlled, not wild. For instance, powerful movement is an asset in waltz or foxtrot, but only if it is channeled into the correct swing of the body, and not just by taking big steps. The lilt of the music must be matched by the action of the body. In a waltz for instance, the dancers' body action must clearly show the influence of the one down beat and two up beats. So the release of power into the beginning of a figure must be controlled and sustained during the rise at the end of the figure.

**Foot and Leg Action** - the stroking of the feet across the floor in foxtrot to achieve smoothness and softness; the deliberate lifting and placing of the feet in tango to achieve a staccato action; the correct bending and straightening of the knees in rumba to create hip motion; the extension of the ankles and the pointing of the toes of the non-supporting foot to enhance the line of figure; the sequential use of the four joints (hip, knee, ankle, and toes) to achieve fullness of action and optimal power; the bending and straightening of knees and ankles in waltz to create rise and fall; the use of inside and outside edges of feet to create style and line -- all fall under this most important of categories.

**Shape** - Shape is the combination of turn and sway to create a look or a position. For instance, in Paso Doble, does the man create the visual appearance of maneuvering this cape? Does the lady simulate the billowing flow of the cape through space? In foxtrot, does the man use the appropriate shape on outside partner steps to enable body contact to be maintained?

**Lead and Follow** - Does the man lead with his whole body instead of just his arms? Does the lady follow effortlessly or does the man have to assist her?

**Floorcraft** - This refers not only to avoiding bumping into other couples, but the ability to continue dancing without pause when boxed in. It shows the command of the couple over their choreography and the ability of the man to choose and lead figures extrinsic to their usual work when the necessity presents itself.

**Intangibles** - such as how a couple "look" together, whether they "fit" emotionally, their neatness of appearance, costuming, the flow of their choreography, and basically whether they look like "dancers"; all have an affect on a judge's perception and therefore on his markings.

Different judges have different predilections in what they want to see, and weight these factors differently. One judge, for instance, might be especially interested in technique, while another wants to be moved by musicality and expression. While both factors are obviously important and need to be considered, it can result in couples getting widely disparate markings. Couples wondering what a judge saw to give them a particularly high or low mark should know that any one of the many factors listed in this article could be responsible. The use of a heel when a toe is warranted can just as easily hurt you in a judge's eyes as a meticulous closing of feet can help. Because the judge sees each couple for only a few seconds, anything that draws the attention, either positively or negatively, could very well be the deciding factor on how you are marked.

Competitors, please be assured that virtually no qualified adjudicator will mark you for any reason other than his or her honest evaluation of your performance. Most judges hold their own opinions highly, and try to do a conscientious job. Anyway, no one judge can make or break you. The use of panel of these experts usually insures that the end result is the correct and equitable one.

## Final Thoughts

---

Each of you will take away something different from competitions. Much of this guideline will matter little to you as you step back onto the dance floor for your first call back, or see that first bright ribbon in your hand, but hopefully what you have read here will have helped you to achieve that moment.

And if you don't get called back, don't get discouraged. Sometimes there are no answers. Just go out, compete and have fun!

It's understandable that this all might be somewhat overwhelming. However, rest assured that there will always be experienced dancers around you, more than willing to help you with hair & make-up, last minute instruction and reassurance.

If you are worried that you might not have what it takes to become an accomplished ballroom dancer, consider this quote:

*"Can't act. Slightly bald. Can dance a little."*

*-Anonymous studio verdict on Fred Astaire's original screen test, 1933.*