

**ASK DIANE 5-23-08 “My Student Is Ready to Compete, but I Am Not!”**

*Diane Jarmolow is the founder and director Ballroom Dance Teachers College, the first comprehensive vocational training program for ballroom dance teachers in the country. She is the former owner of the Metronome Ballroom in San Francisco and is widely regarded as the nation’s foremost expert on ballroom dance teacher training. She has trained hundreds of dance teachers including United States and world champions. She consults regularly at ballrooms across the country and around the world on a variety of issues concerning teacher training and teacher support at all stages of a teacher’s professional career.*

*Ask Diane is a regular advice column in which Diane will offer solutions for common problems and challenges confronting ballroom dance teachers working in the industry today.*

*This month she responds to an anxious instructor whose insecurities may be preventing her student from achieving his goals.*

**Dear Diane,**

I have been a dance teacher for the past four years. I started dancing in my thirties after my divorce and fell in love with the ballroom world. I didn’t have any formal dance background but I enrolled in a teacher training program and was eventually hired as a staff instructor in a studio outside of Seattle.

One of my students has been with me since the beginning. He takes two private lessons a week and always attends our Friday night parties. He is kind and dedicated, and has been working very hard. We’ve gone all the way through the Bronze step lists for the American Style dances and are starting to work on Silver figures and continuity styling. Frankly, I have to take lessons now before my lessons with my student so that I will be sure I have something to teach him.

Now he wants to compete at the Seattle Star Ball this August!

Diane, I have never competed. I don’t know how to put together a routine. I don’t know what category to enter him in. I’m not registered with the NDCA. Most importantly, I don’t have a ball gown and I am terrified that the other dancers will think I am the student instead of the pro!

I am too embarrassed to tell my student about my fears, so I have been encouraging in a vague and non-committal way. I am afraid to lose him to another instructor. I don’t want to discourage my student’s ambitions, but I don’t want to humiliate myself at the Seattle Star Ball.

Please help!

Sincerely,

**Sleepless (aka Suzy) in Seattle**

**Dear Suzy,**

Don't worry Suzy; you won't be sleepless for long!

First, let me congratulate you for your steady work with your student. You must be doing something right if he has progressed to the Silver level and would like to set an even higher goal for himself. I'm sure he values his relationship with you and has learned a great deal.

Here are several options for you to consider.

It may be time for your student to move on to another instructor, one who focuses on competitive students. You can scramble before each of your student's lessons to learn a few more Silver figures to teach him—but you will do him a disservice. Every instructor has had the experience of a student who has outgrown the teacher's capacities. Unfortunately, most teachers are not gracious and giving enough to acknowledge the student's achievements and may cling to the student out of fear and insecurity.

That situation serves no one's interests. The teacher is defensive, the lessons stagnate, and the student ultimately leaves in frustration. He may even stop dancing altogether.

Option two: If it's not the level of dancing but the actual competition that is the problem, you might consider an experienced Pro-Am teacher to be you and your student's "competition coach"—to help you plan and practice routines and navigate the competition entry forms. This coach is bound to be a great resource for things like used ball gowns (she may even have one you can borrow!)

Another option would be to start at a smaller competition or an in-house showcase. These would be excellent practice for you and your student to build your confidence, and you wouldn't have the pressure of sharing the dance floor with the celebrities from Dancing with the Stars.

Finally, Suzy, I'd ask you to take a good luck at why you are so afraid of ballroom competitions. There are some dancers who are put off by the whole dazzling scene. These instructors can find a different professional focus for their teaching (working with kids, for example, or senior citizens.) The world needs many more of these types of instructors—and if you are one of them, I salute you.

If however, your aversion to competitions grows out of your own insecurities, then you need to determine why you are so afraid of this scene—because your fear is standing in the way of your student’s progress. My advice to you is to spend the next six months focusing on your dance development. Take yoga and ballet classes and carry yourself like a dancer throughout your day. Begin imagining that you are a dance champion yourself!

Most importantly, be sure you never sell either yourself or your students short.

Thank you so much for your question, Suzy. I wish you all the best.

Warm Regards,

Diane

*Diane Jarmolow welcomes your teaching questions. Feel free to contact her by email at [diane@teachballroomdancing.com](mailto:diane@teachballroomdancing.com). For more information about teacher training, support, and professional certification, visit Diane’s web site at [www.teachballroomdancing.com](http://www.teachballroomdancing.com)*