

BU Ballroom Dance Team

Ballroom Dance Competition Guidelines (Everything you need to know about competitions)

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 comps. The purpose of this guideline is to provide the information necessary for you to fully appreciate and understand what's happening on the floor.

1. Competition Confusion: Categories & Divisions
2. Narrowing Down the Field: Heats, Rounds, Finals
3. Team Events and Fun Dances
4. Dressing for Success: Personal Presentation
5. Selling It: The Character of the Dance
6. Controlled Chaos: What to Expect When You Arrive at a Comp.
7. They See All: What Judges Look For
8. Final Thoughts

Competition Confusion: Categories & Divisions [\[back to top\]](#)

There are numerous dances in ballroom. Before you can perfect all the steps, it is important to know which dance you are dancing. Here's how it all breaks down.

There are two styles of Ballroom Dance: American and International. Both styles have a progression system, (Bronze, Silver, Gold) and an organized syllabus (list of steps). Although each has a recognizable style, they have numerous similarities. The International style is known to be faster and more competitive. At competitions, the International style is often highlighted over the more social American style, but both usually have an equal number of competitors.

The 4 Categories:

American Rhythm - Swing, Cha-Cha, Rhumba, Bolero, Mambo, (Hustle, Merengue, Samba)

*Note: Dances in parenthesis are not common. If they are included it is only in "fun" dances.
Predominately it is only Cha-Cha, Rhumba, Swing

American Smooth - Waltz, Foxtrot, Tango, Viennese Waltz

*Note American Viennese Waltz is very rare at a competition. Usually only in the Open Level.

International Latin - Jive, Cha-Cha, Rhumba, Samba, Paso Doble

*Note: Paso Doble is not common in syllabus levels.

International Standard - Waltz, Foxtrot, Tango, Quickstep, Viennese Waltz

The competitions are divided into sections by experience.

Newcomer (Bronze syllabus): those who have been dancing for a semester or less.

Beginner (Bronze syllabus): those who have been competing for less than one year.

Intermediate (Silver syllabus): those with a whole year of experience.

Advanced (Gold syllabus): those with 2 years of experience.

Open (no syllabus): Also referred to as Pre-Championship or the highest amateur level, Championship.
Characterized by open choreography.

*Note: Many couples do not wait to move up to the next level. Many of you who just began dancing may be dancing silver by the end of the year!

Narrowing Down the Field: Heats, Rounds, Finals [\[back to top\]](#)

-Bring all your stuff in two bags: one for your clothes and one for all your accessories.

-Consider bringing juice, water, and snacks for later.

-Once you get to the comp, 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 denoted by letters, with everyone on a team wearing the same letter.

- Each event will begin with a given group of competitors. If the group is large enough, the event may be divided into several preliminary rounds, called heats. It is important to remember the number of your heat so you will know when to return to the dance floor.
- 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.
- 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.
- A typical callback would sound like: "WE would now like to announce the callbacks for the semi-final round of Beginner Cha-Cha. The judges have re-called the following 12 couples: Couples 122, 134, 146, 152, 166, 178, 179, 180, 187, 191, 210, 211. Judges please call back 6 from 12. May we have a Cha-Cha please."
- 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 comp. Finalists are rewarded with ribbons.

Team Events and Fun Dances [\[back to top\]](#)

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.

Dressing for Success: Personal Presentation [\[back to top\]](#)

What you wear, of course, is not as important as how you dance. However, certain things are expected and required. Ultimately it's up to you but note that some dances just don't look the same without the right clothes. Here's the fashion report:

-For Newcomers, Beginners and Intermediates, the expectations are not that great. Full-out costumes are not necessary and are often not allowed. What follows are guidelines for those levels:

Men:

Standard/Smooth Dances:

Hair: Long hair should be tied back, looking neat. Go for a slicker, more refined look. Looking for a clean-cut appearance.

Shirt: White dress shirt & tie, or even better, tuxedo shirt & black bow tie. (Advanced and up wear tuxedo tails especially made for dancing.)

Pants: Black dress slacks or tux pants.

Accessories: Black vest or buttoned sweater perpetuates the formal look.

Latin/Rhythm Dances:

Hair: Loose hair is okay, but cannot be in your eyes. Refined look is fine.

Shirt: Dark-colored (preferably black) shirt. Dress shirt or club shirt will suffice. (Advanced and up wear black, usually long sleeved, that catches the eye.)

Pants: Again, black dress slacks. (A narrow cut is complimentary to the dances.)

Accessories: Belts with shiny accents attract attention to hips.

*Note: Avoid wearing watched, long chains, or large rings that may catch your partner unintentionally.

Women:

Standard/Smooth Dances:

Hair: Long hair should be put up neatly – bun, French braid or twist, etc. Use lots of gel and bobby pins.

Makeup: As if on stage, wear more than usual, especially on eyes on lips.

Dress: More formal. Want something that is around ankle length but not touching the floor and flows. Many wear a skirt & blouse. The Club has 6 skirts to lend out. Main thing is that you can move easily. Remember your partner steps between your feet! (Advanced dancers wear winged gowns with huge, feathered skirts.)

Accessories: Nice, elegant jewelry – pearls or pearl-like glittery earrings. Sparkles can attract the eye as well.

Latin/Rhythm:

Hair: Neat & slicked back, tight ponytail, bun or French twist, long braid okay too.

Makeup: Theatrical. Go nuts! Put on way more than usual, then add some. Go bright, festive-like. False eyelashes are common.

Dress: Cocktail/party dress or two piece. Shorter skirts with flare or fringe for spinning. Sequins and stones are encouraged. Avoid restrictive clothing. Also, black drowns you out; so wear something bright. If you chose something revealing great, but please invest in "dance pants" for modesty. Trust us! (Advanced costumes are very revealing.)

Accessories: Sparkle on the floor! Large glittery earring are good if they will stay on. Bracelets, watches and rings are not recommended. Get creative! Nude or flesh-tone nylons can elongate your legs. Do not wear control top. Overall, be sexy and comfortable.

Shoes:

Ballroom dance shoes are a serious investment, with both men's and women's shoes in the \$100 range. Although not required, they do severely enhance your ability on the dance floor. Our recommendation: Wait until you are absolutely sure that ballroom is for you before spending the money.

-Regular shoes: The best dancing shoes for men are flat, non-rubber soled dress shoes. Rubber soles are too sticky and seriously restrict your movement. Ladies should wear heels, as long as they are flexible and stay on the foot while dancing.

-Dance shoes: Both men and women's ballroom shoes have gray or black suede soles, for easy traction and slide. Shoes for Standard and Smooth are different than shoes for Latin and Rhythm.

Latin shoes for men have a heel. If planning on purchasing one pair of shoes for now and you do all styles, get the Standard shoes. It's a lot easier to do Latin in Standard shoes than Standard in Latin shoes.

Ladies' Standard/Smooth: Closed-toe pump. Look for white satin, which can be dyed to match dress or left as is Tan is also very popular.

Ladies' Latin/Rhythm: Open toe sandal. Tan/skin tone most popular, elongates leg. Silver recommended over black.

If you plan on buying just one pair for now and do not compete in just Standard/Smooth, then buy the Latin/Rhythm shoes. The reasoning behind this is that it is too difficult and painful to do Latin or Rhythm in a closed toe shoe. Dancing Standard or Smooth in a Latin shoe is perfectly acceptable.

Where to buy shoes: Patterson's, 181 Massachusetts Avenue, Boston – down the street from Tower Records. Along with shoes, you may want to consider purchasing a shoe brush, used to remove the dust that collects on the suede sole. People at Patterson's can answer any questions regarding the fitting of the shoe.

Selling It: The Character of the Dance [\[back to top\]](#)

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, your partner is a prize trophy, show her off.

Controlled Chaos: What to Expect When You Arrive At a Comp [\[back to top\]](#)

-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.

-Hurry up and wait mentality. Very few schedules hold to form, with some running hours behind.

-Once there, the Team Coordinator registers the team and gives out numbers to the competitors.

-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 BU couples, directing the judges' attention.

-After all the dancing and awards, comps finish up close to 11:00pm or midnight.

-Overall, it is a VERY long day, so get a lot of sleep the night before.

They See All: What Judges Look For [\[back to top\]](#)

-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? Well, if anyone knows it is one of the most commonly featured judges at collegiate comps. Here is his take.

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 [\[back to top\]](#)

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 feel that first shiny ribbon in your hand, but hopefully what you have read here will have helped you 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.

KEEP DANCING!!!

- Written and revised over many years by the many faithful.
(Special thanks to Eric Umali, Marcus Musante and Tanya Dennison)