

## IN SYNCH

## Strictly Ballroom

BY MIKE NORTON

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During most of the week, Ray Antel and Shirley Villeneuve are just like anyone else in Benzie County. Ray teaches at Frankfort High School and runs a bed and breakfast in Beulah, while Shirley styles hair at her beauty salon in Honor.

But once a week the two of them will slip off to some clubhouse, tent or community center where they'll indulge their true passion.

Dancing.

"We scan the papers almost every day, and if we see a band we like or a type of music we'd like to dance to, that's where we go," said Ray. "We travel pretty much across northern Michigan, and once in a while even downstate."

But Ray and Shirley don't put all those miles on the car just to bump around aimlessly on some dance floor. They're devotees of what can loosely be called "ballroom dancing"—the neglected art of dancing as partners. They might go somewhere to polka or fox-trot, but they might just as easily hang out in a rock 'n roll club. It's the movement that's important, not the genre.

"Ballroom dancing is probably an archaic term that doesn't really tell you much," said Ray. "What we do lends itself to a lot of different kinds of music. We've come to appreciate the fun of being completely in synch with a partner."

After a hiatus of several decades, interest in ballroom dancing has grown explosively in recent years, and it's a movement that embraces people of every age and walk of life. The United States Amateur

Ballroom Dancers

Association, which began in 1986 with 12 chapters, now boasts over 150 chapters and close to 30,000 members.

"It comes and goes in cycles," said 68-year-old Lawrence Sieradski of Petoskey, who's organizing a Northern Michigan chapter of the USABDA. "Back in the '50s when I was in college, there was lots of ballroom dancing. It sort of died out in the '60s and '70s and then came back in the '80s with the interest in swing dancing."

Sieradski is a retired businessman, but he's been dancing almost all his life. During college, in fact, he was an instructor for the popular Arthur Murray dance studios. Since his retirement in 1998 he's returned to his old habits — and he's discovered that he has a lot of company. When the USABDA held its first organizational meeting and dance at North Central Michigan College in April, "everybody from teenagers to octogenarians showed up."

Enthusiasm for ballroom dance has always been strongest among adults, but interest among other age groups has also been on the increase recently. One reason is the new media attention given to DanceSport, the competitive version of ballroom dancing, which has been recognized as an Olympic event.

"I think they see a lot of it on TV, and that's influenced them," said instructor Traci Trombley, who's been teaching ballroom dance at Traverse City's Dance Center for the past four years. "In the city clubs salsa is very popular, and it's finally starting to catch



Record-Eagle/Meegan M. Reid

**Bob Johnson of Maple City spins instructor Traci Trombley during their ballroom dancing lesson at the Dance Center.**

on here."

Trombley, 37, is a former competitive dancer who specialized in Latin dance. She found herself being approached increasingly by young people who are dissatisfied with the primitive "clutch and sway" technique most untutored teens have to revert to when the music suddenly slows down.

"I've had all kinds of high school kids who come to learn for their prom, and I've been getting a lot of bridal couples who want to be able to dance at their own weddings. They want to look graceful."

But ballroom techniques also work well for fast-paced music, as anyone who's watched a salsa or swing dance competition knows. Over 300 colleges now have competitive and social ballroom dance programs, and the USABDA is working to add programs at the high school and elemen-

tary level. The first National Primary, Middle, and High School DanceSport Championships were held in 1995.

With increased attention, the image of ballroom dancers has also seen some changes. The gowned and tuxedoed couples twirling their way across fancy ballrooms are being replaced, in many cases, by people in everyday clothes doing the rumba in gymnasiums and community centers.

Ray Antel, for instance, insists that he's much less interested in the elegant image of ballroom dance than in the sheer enjoyment of practicing steps with his partner and knowing that the two of them are thinking and moving in perfect synch. Like an athlete, he said, a good dancer depends on "muscle memory" — the ability to remember patterns of movement without consciously thinking about

them.

"That's what you learn, more than a specific dance style," he said. "You're learning turns and progressions and patterns of movement that can be used and transferred from one dance to another. But it's not about elegance; it's about having fun."

And Trombley tries to persuade her students that they don't really need to be at a ballroom-only venue to have a good time. That's why she tries to teach them as many steps as possible, from the rumba and cha-cha to the waltz and fox-trot right down to some basic swing steps.

"I don't like teaching somebody just one dance. When somebody comes to me and wants to learn swing, I ask them, 'What are you going to dance when they're not playing swing?'" she said. "But if you learn

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