



They say the most difficult step in learning to dance is the one you take to walk in the door of a dance studio. It certainly was for me. At a friend's invitation, I attended a practice party at the Eastwood Fred Astaire Dance Studio in Irondale, Alabama. As couples waltzed around a fully mirrored, dimly lit room, I sat by the wall hoping no one would notice me or, worse, ask me to dance.

But when the next song began, a young instructor made a beeline for me. "Can I have this dance?" she asked. "There's no need to be afraid," she said, leading me onto the floor. "This is a fox-trot. Take two steps forward, slow, slow, then two steps to the left, quick, quick. Oops! Remember, always lead with your left foot. That's it. Very good. Very, very good."

I signed up for 20 lessons. At first I thought I was hopeless, but my instructors assured me that they'd never met anyone, save a reluctant husband dragged there by his wife, who couldn't learn to dance. In time, they kept telling me, I would develop "feet memory," whereby I could do steps automatically, allowing me to concentrate on attitude and style. And they were right, even though I kept telling them my feet had Alzheimer's.



But it turned out that learning to dance was only a part of the package. My life was also acquiring a new rhythm off the floor. When I walked through the office, I did it in time with whatever musical selection was playing in my head. Co-workers took notice, especially when I went around corners and entered rooms. My posture became straighter, my shoulders broader. Because I was required to ask strangers to dance and often had to perform in front of the other students, I became more gregarious.

As I made friends with the other students, I found that they, too, were learning more than just how to dance. "When I started coming four years ago, I would cry before the practice parties. It was that difficult for me to be in a social setting," admits Brenda Jones, 41, who is anything but shy now. Since starting dance lessons, she has quit her job at a telephone company and bought a mansion that she rents out for weddings. She also married another student, Steve Johnson, a videographer.

For much of her life Brenda struggled with her weight. "I had been losing the same 30 pounds for years," she says. "I'm an emotional eater. But after three weeks of ballroom dancing, I noticed that my clothes fit differently. I didn't realize it, but I had dropped 18 pounds."

Most people don't think of dancing as exercise, but as Brenda's weight loss attests, it's quite a workout. Research by the department of human movement and recreation studies at the University of West Australia shows that a rumba can be as aerobically demanding as running, a tango can raise the heart rate higher than a game of squash, and a waltz can be as good for the cardiovascular system as an aggressive walk.

Researchers say a half-hour of moderate, sustained social dancing burns from 200 to 400 calories. It's no wonder then that Josie Gardiner, a Reebok master trainer who develops fitness programs and trains other instructors, uses dance as a workout. "It's the perfect way to get

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a low-impact form of cardiovascular exercise," she says. But the benefits aren't just physical. "Once people start to take control of their bodies and movements, they start to take control of their lives," she says. That was certainly true for Brenda Jones. "The dancing was so much more satisfying than candy," she says.

"The better I felt, the better I ate."

Deb Carpenter, 47, a child-welfare worker, benefited from dance's stress-reducing powers. "My job is very stressful," she says. "I was finding myself inappropriately yelling at people. I needed something to relieve my stress. I tried exercise programs but didn't stick with them. They bored me. But ballroom dancing doesn't seem like exercise."

Kimberly Richards, who manages the Eastwood Fred Astaire franchise, isn't surprised by these stories.

"Ninety percent of the people who come here don't come to learn to dance. The dancing sparks the interest, but they are here for something else," she says. "My job, and that of the instructors, is to pull out of them what it is they really want and how we can give it to them through dancing."

Richards helps a lot of students with their social skills. "I've taught several male students how to talk to a woman," she says. "That's not the reason they give for coming here, but a good teacher can pick up on it."

Some \$2,000 later, I figured it was time to unveil the new me in public. On a trip to New York, I called my friend Barbara and asked her to dinner. "And after-

ward," I said, "we're going dancing in the Rainbow Room." She didn't know what to say.

We danced in the famed Art Deco ballroom doing whatever the music dictated: the cha-cha, fox-trot, rumba. "I had no idea," Barbara said. Then came the most chal-

lenging of all ballroom dances: the tango. "Are you sure you can do this?" Barbara asked. I straightened my stance, turned my head to the left, narrowed my eyes, and glared. I remembered an instructor's advice to pretend I'd just smelled a bad odor. That's called attitude.

I thrust Barbara's body close to mine. Counting five, six, seven, eight, I led off: three long steps forward, two quick-quicks to the right, then a corte (a lunge). When doing my side steps, I was careful to "hide the zipper." According to one of my

instructors, "that's where you put your left leg over your right, as if you have to pee really bad." That's called style.

With our arms outstretched and cheeks together, we did a full promenade across the floor. We didn't have to worry about running into anybody; all the other dancers had cleared the floor. The spotlight was on us, and people were applauding. For one splendid moment in time I was Rudolph Valentino. Then I remembered something Richards told me. "Students who come to our studio grow, but they don't really change," she explained. "They find the someone who was always inside of them." **WV**

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