

Ballroom Dance Shooter



A former dancer captures the drama

How did you go from dance to photography?

It was a matter of necessity. I'd been a competitive ballroom dancer for 12 years, but ended up working in retail after Hurricane Hugo in '89. I really wanted to get back to dance, so I borrowed a friend's point-and-shoot, went to a local studio, and asked to shoot one of their showcases. I sold the prints and decided to go back to dancing as a photographer, because there are a lot of opportunities in dance-sport. I just called up my friends, and everyone needed shots, so right off the bat I was busy.

What do you shoot with now?

A Canon EOS 5D Mark II with 24–70mm f/2.8, 70–200mm f/2.8,

and 50mm f/1.4 lenses. I carry a pair of Canon Speedlite 580EX IIs for small projects. If I have a big project, I'll carry a full remote studio—five Paul C. Buff White Lightning 1500s and a softbox.

Who are your clients? At first I did a lot of small showcases and competitions. Now, the bulk of my work is promotional material for ads, and art prints of dancers. I just finished a book about Argentine tango. My focus isn't to get shots that only dancers appreciate but something that everyone will like.

What's the difference? An art shot tells a story, so I try to get an emotional reaction from the couple, or I'll hide part of them in shadow or shoot at an unusual angle. If a shot is too centered or well lit, only the dancers will appreciate it.

Former competitive ballroom dancer Stephen Marino, 53, of Atlanta, GA, hung up his dancing shoes and picked up a camera. Check out a gallery of his work at PopPhoto.com/Marino and visit his site, www.decadancephotography.com.

What's your schedule like? During the week I have smaller projects: staff headshots or promotional materials for studios. Most weekends I'm at large events across the country, where I'll work with two or three other photographers. Some of the bigger competitions run four to six days. They're very exciting, very fast-paced. It's a long time to work—I've had photographers come in to dancesport and they can barely walk by the end of the event.

How do you shoot competitions?

The lighting in the hotel ballrooms isn't always that good. If I'm shooting action on the floor, I'll use a Speedlite on my camera. The exciting part happens away from the floor: I'll set up a few lights and get art shots of the dancers. But because the couples are competing, I have about 15 to 20 minutes to shoot. So they'll just start dancing, or I'll give them poses, or we'll work with a concept. I'll either use natural light or strobes to have the couple pop off the page and freeze the action—I usually light from the side or back.

What do you like best about your job?

Everything! I love every aspect of it—the traveling, the dancers that I meet. The biggest thrill is showing the clients the final product, and when they love the shot or when it makes them cry, that's huge.

What's the toughest part?

It's always a challenge to create the chemistry with clients, to get them into a comfort zone so you can take them out of it, make them do whatever you ask to get a fabulous shot. The basic lighting and shooting should be automatic—it's the emotional connection that's a challenge.

—Interview by Kathleen Davis