



Dance as Fitness Swing & Sway & Step into Shape

by Kim Childs

Fueled by the popularity of TV shows like *So You Think You Can Dance?* and *Dancing with the Stars*, dance is growing as a fitness choice all around the country. Health clubs are offering everything from hip hop to swing to salsa classes in an effort to meet people's desire for dance as an aerobic activity with attitude.

"There's that wanna-be dancer in everybody," says Kim Clements, group fitness director at the Mount Auburn Club in Watertown, Massachusetts. Clements says the fitness business follows cultural trends, noting that burning fat and looking thin were goals in the 1970s, while weight training and sculpted bodies were popular in the 80s. A growing awareness of the body/mind connection propelled yoga to popularity in the 90s, she says, and the need for self-expression and social interaction is drawing people onto the dance floor in the new millennium.

"The most important thing about

these dance classes is what I like to call the 'fun factor,'" Clements says. "You don't have to have studied for 100 years to enjoy that moment of being in your body and with others."

Clements, a trained dancer herself, cites the physical benefits of dance—a cardiovascular workout, strengthened

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core muscles, improved coordination, balance and greater flexibility—and says that dance classes find people using muscles they haven't used before.

Learning and memorizing steps is good exercise for the brain, too. A 2003 study in the *New England Journal of Medicine* found that dancing was asso-

ciated with a reduced risk of dementia among subjects over age 75. There's also the chance to fulfill a few fantasies in dance classes, where everyone's inner Fred Astaire or Ginger Rogers can come out to play.

"Look at yourselves—you look like a chorus line!" shouts Joe Bergantino to his students at the Mount Auburn Club during a Sunday afternoon Zoomba dance class in a mirrored studio. "Like we're on *Dancing with the Stars*."

For nearly 90 minutes, Bergantino leads these baby-boomers in dance steps taken from Lindy Hop, salsa, cha cha, swing, cumbia, rumba and samba replete with "Carmen Miranda arms" aloft. He also teaches country line dancing to the tune of "Achy Breaky Heart." Bergantino keeps the pace high and the impact low, telling the students often to lift their knees, since dancing in sneakers on hardwood floors can twist knees in unsafe ways.

Not all students are keeping up with Bergantino, a 62-year-old fitness professional who recently added dance to his repertoire, but their smiles seem to indicate that they aren't too concerned about missing steps. Geri Guardino is among those who hug the back row.

"There's obviously different levels of ability in this class, and I'm probably at the bottom," she says, "but I feel like I'm progressing and it's great fun."

Guardino's been a member of the club for seven years. She says that

while she works out and plays a lot of tennis, the traditional aerobics classes never appealed to her. She says that she sweats more in Bergantino's class than she does on the tennis court, and she's becoming a more confident dancer. "I can see that if I went to take a tango or rumba or partner dance class [now], I

would be better equipped,” Guardino says.

The motivation to become a better dancer is precisely what draws Brian Johnson to this class. Johnson says he’s already in good shape physically, but he wants to feel more comfortable at weddings and parties when it’s time to hit the dance floor.

“I was lifting weights in the next room and I saw that Joe was doing exactly what I needed to practice. So that’s how I got interested,” says Johnson, who comes as often as he can to improve his footwork.

Bergantino, who teaches the class at a few Boston-area fitness centers, says it’s actually drawing more men than women some days. “I have so many guys I can’t believe it,” he remarks. “I asked them [why] and they said they don’t feel intimidated, and now—especially where they see it on TV—their wives want them to learn to dance. You should see how good they are getting.”

For single people, dance-infused fitness classes offer social interaction and shared fun in an environment that’s healthier than a nightclub and less intimidating than a dance studio. Claudia Reider is a baby-boomer who recalls growing up with social dances. Today, she appreciates having a place to dance where she doesn’t need a partner.

“I love to move and dance my heart out,” says Reider, who takes a hip-hop flavored Body Jam class at the Mount Auburn Club. “It’s a totally non-threatening environment where you let it all hang out and have a good time. I feel so good and it’s a good workout.”

For men and women who prefer more freestyle dance, classes like DansKinetics® or Nia combine elements of yoga, martial arts and dance for a workout that encourages creative movement while getting the heart pumping and the muscles working. As with all forms of exercise, those with physical challenges should check with their doctor before stepping out.

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