

AMERICAN *Dancer*

SPECIAL OLYMPICS

First Ever Ballroom Special Olympics Event

STAY UPDATED

2009 Nationals in Baltimore

DANCING WITH THE STARS

Season 7 Line-up Announced

OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF USA DANCE

NATIONAL ELECTIONS: VOTE NOW



SEAN ASEFORA & DIANA THEILE

ALLEN CLEMENS & NITAYA LEWIS



A *Quest* for the By Vivian Hans GOLD

A dream, a desire and a need collided, creating a partnership that gave individuals with disabilities a chance to take ballroom dance lessons compete in the first Special Olympics Ballroom Dance Competition in the USA.

Steve Hinkle of Easter Seals Arc had a dream to see individuals with disabilities learn to ballroom dance. Vivian Hans of Fort Wayne DanceSport #2046 had a desire to hold a competition for local amateur dancers. Special Olympics Indiana President Michael Furnish wanted to see more Special Olympics activity in Fort Wayne, Indiana. This mighty trio went to work to create the greatest event of its kind: the nation's first Special Olympics Ballroom Dance Competition.

Easter Seals Arc put out the call to its members interested in learning to ballroom dance and possibly compete in the Special Olympics. Fort Wayne DanceSport

started looking for Unified Sports Dance Partners for the new Special Olympics dancers, and plans were started for holding a competition in Fort Wayne, Indiana. USA Dance approved this event as a pilot program and part of the sanctioned ballroom dance competition of the local chapter. Special Olympics Indiana approved this as a pilot program for Special Olympics and authorized the use of its name, in addition to completing background checks and training the volunteers and coaches involved in this new venture.

Fifty individuals with disabilities decided to give this program a try, committing to train in ballroom dancing with the goal of participating in the Special Olympics competition. Group lesson schedules were set up by the end of September, and the minute the new dancers walked into the studio's door, they were ready to dance.

Some dancers took to it right away; others dropped

out for one reason or another. But the news spread through the community of individuals with disabilities, and calls came in from Wells and Elkhart counties to see if anyone could participate in the upcoming competition. A father-and-daughter couple from Wells County and a dancer from Elkhart found a Unified Sports Dance Partner and started training to be a part of this event. Eventually 26 dance couples were ready and waiting for the big day.

On July 5, all 26 couples waited at the door for their warm-up dance time on the big competition floor. The

first dance the dancers took their bows, threw kisses to their family and friends and rushed off the floor so their friends could dance next.

After 16 more heats, medals and ribbon were awarded to all the dancers, who then took the dance floor, and Michael Furnish closed the games and declared the 2009 Special Olympics Dance Season open. All the dancers received a standing ovation and the entire crowd of spectators rushed the floor to congratulate all the dancers.

No one was more proud of this outstanding group



DAVID COLE & SUE KEIFFER

STACY DAVIS & JODI FANCES



excitement lit the faces and voices of the entire crowd. Family and friends came along with these dancers, not wanting to miss a single moment of this day. Silence fell as they entered the competition expo, and one dancer said it all with this whisper: "I cannot believe this is really happening. I am going to dance today."

They did more than dance. One Special Olympics tradition is an Opening Ceremony, and these first Special Olympics ballroom dancers were treated to a fabulous display.

With oaths taken, the ballroom dance torch lit, and all the dancers individually introduced, the first Special Olympics Ballroom Dance Competition Games were declared open. The judges took their places and the first dancers were called to the floor, their numbers barely audible over the cheering of spectators. At the end of the

than the three people watching the most wonderful part of this entire event: the joy and love shared by dancers with family and friends. Where in the crowd were those individuals with disabilities? No one could tell — they were all just ballroom dancers celebrating after a very successful competition. A dream comes true for Steve, Michael and Vivian, who just could not stop smiling at the crowd.

Special Olympics officially added ballroom dancing to its list of sports in Indiana for 2009 and named Vivian Hans the Sports Director of Ballroom Dancing for Indiana Special Olympics. If you are interested in adding Special Olympics Ballroom Dancing to your area, contact dancenews2@verizon.net and Vivian can get you started. ■

PHOTOS BY DAVID SPENCER

Photo Highlight



PHOTOS BY DAVID SPENCER