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Up to 400 dancers compete in Lehi

DanceSport: Many use the event to qualify for August's Junior Olympics in Virginia

By Tom Wharton
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LEHI - As the difference between athletics and art continues to blur, it is easy to see why more than a few think dancing should be an Olympic sport.

Between 300 and 400 Utah competitors between the ages of 5 and 25 spent much of Saturday at Thanksgiving Point's Show Barn for the 10th annual Utah DanceSport Championships. Many were using the Amateur Athletic Union-sanctioned event to qualify for August's Junior Olympics in Virginia.

Spurred not only by the popularity of television's hit "Dancing With the Stars" but by the discipline that comes with often working up to five hours a day in a dance studio, well-coiffed young dancers competed for numerous different titles.

"Ballroom dancing teaches the social graces," said Alex Murillo, president of Utah County's Center Stage Performing Arts Studios, which organizes this event. "You can enjoy a function at an LDS Church or fit right in in Vienna. It gives you the self-esteem to go out there with the opposite sex."

It also might turn into a career.

Just ask Andrea Hale, a 27-year-old Sandy native who has been dancing since she was 2. She competed with ESPN sportscaster Kenny Mayne in this year's edition of "Dancing With the Stars" and is a former North American and U.S. National dance champion.

Hale has used her skills to perform all over the world and was scheduled to dance in an exhibition Saturday night at Thanksgiving Point while also serving as a judge. She said the popularity of "Dancing With the Stars" has been a pleasant surprise, though the interest in dance does not surprise her. So, as a woman professional dancer assigned to be on national television with a star with less dancing experience, was Hale tempted to lead?

"Most women like to lead and be in charge," she said with a smile.

Organizers, such as Jackie Fullmer of Logan, the national dance chair for the AAU, said dances such as jazz, ballroom, tap, traditional and ballroom unite arts and athletics, teaching students skills that they can use throughout their lives.



Kira Tymon and James Taylor perform a difficult move in a mambo dance as the judges in the background observe. (Al Hartmann/The Salt Lake Tribune)

Sport dance is the newest Junior Olympic Sport, joining the longtime U.S. sports galaxy six years ago.

Competitors and their parents seem to appreciate dancing, an activity that takes every bit as much practice, if not more, than more traditional youth sports such as soccer or basketball.

Mark Hamilton of Provo said his 12-year-old son Tynan started dancing when he was 4.

“He goes to school, goes to dance practice for four hours a day at the studio, does his homework and goes to bed,” said Hamilton.

Indeed, most of the competitors at Saturday’s event spent between three and five hours a day practicing.

“I get to travel and have fun with all my friends,” explained Tynan.

Eleven-year-old Basti Reed of Provo, who won one of the early events with partner Landon Anderson of Springville, said she enjoys learning new skills and techniques each day.

“I love dancing with the team, knowing everyone and competing as an individual,” said 18-year-old Kira Tymon of Pleasant Grove, who hopes to dance in college and perhaps as a professional.

That seemed to be the attitude of the poised dancers, with young women dressed in heels and colorful flowing robes and young men in black shined shoes and tuxedo shirts as they competed before judges in two-minute exhibitions of athletic dance talent.

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