

*A slightly edited version of this story was published in Velocity Weekly on December 2, 2009 as "Sore calves and all, dancing's a ball."*

By Mariam Williams

My experience with ballroom dance began at the YMCA in July, when I stumbled upon a couple taking a private dance lesson there.

The twist of the couple's embrace, the angle of the man's body, and the slow dragging of the woman's foot across the floor triggered a memory from my last few days in college. I remembered four feet moving as two across the hardwood floor in the athletic center as my partner and I danced two minutes of a self-choreographed Argentine Tango to India.Aire's ballad "Ready for Love." The dance created an atmosphere so moving that at times our classmates were too enthralled to applaud.

I loved that dance, and yet after the final, I put my dance shoes away for seven years.

Back at the YMCA I interrupted the private lesson and asked the dance instructor for some information. He taught at Ballroom East, and when I learned that the studio was near my home, that group lessons were inexpensive and that no partner was necessary, I was ready to don the dance shoes again.

I finally made it to the studio in August for the second week of beginner-level East Coast Swing lessons. I had missed the first week, but I picked the moves up easily, and more importantly, I had a blast! When I returned home, I stretched out on my floor in a combination quad and hip flexor stretch, one leg bent behind me, the other straight out in front of me, my back flat on the floor. I smiled like happy babies do in their sleep and wondered why I ever stopped dancing.

In September, I wanted to take a sabbatical from dance lessons again. The dance of the month at Ballroom East was the waltz, a dance I had no real interest in learning. I returned to dance lessons because Patrick Swayze died, and Baby being lifted out of the corner and over Johnny's head seemed like a viable fantasy again, even though I know there's no waltz in "Dirty Dancing."

In my last column, two students said dance taught them patience. On my first night of the waltz, I knew why. When my feet didn't fall into step with the instructor's the way they did in swing, I realized I was two classes behind and that it was going to be a long hour.

Had a classmate not encouraged me to stick it out and keep trying, I wouldn't have returned the following week, and I wouldn't have been able to update my Facebook status to read, "I still hate the waltz but I faced my discomfort with the dance and fear of mistakes, let my partner lead, and actually had fun tonight dancing a dance I hate."

That was the night my calves cursed me for choosing an apartment on the third floor and the night the instructor said to the women, "Close your eyes and just follow your partner. If he messes up, you mess up right along with him."

The concept of the male lead – which is vital in ballroom dance – was a revelation for me. The man decides what step is next; the woman waits as he decides. "I'm a firm believer that the girl always has to follow the boy," the instructor said.

Before dancing with a strong lead after class one night, I asked what we would be doing. He told me not to worry about it and to just follow. I acquiesced, and I was

floating around the room, sometimes with my eyes closed, appreciating a few moments to be irresponsible for my next move and for any mistakes that went with it.

In October, I traded my ballroom heels for cross-trainers and headed to dance fitness at the downtown YMCA. I kicked to Michael Bublé, smacked my behind to “Low” like I was wearing a pair of Apple Bottom Jeans in class and did traditional aerobics to instrumental techno. I moved without a partner and was my own lead again. I left sweaty, breathless and once again content to have the experience of dance.