# Between Sport and Leisure: Competitive Senior Ballroom Dancing as Serious Leisure

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**Abstract:** The article examines the motivations, attitudes, and practices of senior ballroom dancing (dancers over 30 years of age). The paper is based on qualitative research (interviews and participant observation) conducted in one Warsaw dancing club and presents senior ballroom dancing as serious leisure as conceptualized by Robert Stebbins, that is, a pursuit of leisure activity that involves long-term commitment and substantial investment in one's development (and thus, significant personal effort) that creates a distinct social world and a strong identification with the chosen activity. Dancing as a serious leisure activity falls somewhere in the middle of the sport-leisure continuum, and senior ballroom dancing is analyzed as a liminal case between these two, oscillating between recreation and competitive approach. The article investigates the process of professionalization of leisure, showing what place dance and competitions occupy in the lives of senior dancers.

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Ballroom dancing is still a rarely interrogated subject, especially in comparison to other sports/artistic occupations (e.g., musicians, ballet dancers). Upon reviewing the literature, I have found only a handful of publications focused primarily on ballroom dancing. Some deal with the history of dance and its evolution from its folk origins into international style (Malnig 1992; Cresswell 2006). Julie Malnig (1992) shows how competitive ballroom dance underwent a process of ennoblement and class elevation—from lower-class origins to salons. She noted that dances such as tango, cha-cha, rumba, and samba were popular among poor people in the less-developed part of the world and were adapted for Western culture through a substantial shift in their manner of execution. It was done mainly by substituting technical excellence (incorporation of ballet technique: elongated lines, straight posture, advanced foot technique) for their emotional and sexual elements. As Joanna Bosse (2007) noted, ballroom dance has been "whitened," deprived of elements evoking its "colored" origins, desexualized, and civilized (Elias 2000)—it constitutes a more "civilized" manifestation of the romanticized dream about exoticism (cf. the case of orientalism [Said 1977]). Juliet McMains (2009:304) scrutinized the differences between original Latin dances and their Westernized European counterparts in terms of technique and expression and concluded that

> [t]he ballroom forms tend to be characterized by a straight spine, movement that is produced through complete transfer of weight from foot to foot, poses and body shapes in which the entire body is extended, extreme toneness throughout the body, foot positions that are clearly articulated, and the prevalence of predetermined steps. Latin American versions of rumba, samba, and salsa utilize a more dynamic and flexible spine, weight shifts propelled by core body movement

often resulting in weight suspended between the feet, flexed knees, and a lower center of gravity, centrality of polyrhythms over body lines, and improvisation closely linked to musical structures.

The subjects that have got a lot of interest among ballroom researchers are also whether ballroom dancing is sport or art (Picart 2006; Marion 2008; Byczkowska-Owczarek 2019) and gender roles in ballroom (Marion 2008; Leib and Bulman 2009; Bosse 2015; Richardson 2016; Harman 2019). On the one hand, researchers noted problems feminist women have with accommodating the rule that men lead and women follow in ballroom dancing, which goes against the major cultural tendency in developed countries such as the USA. On the other hand, they point out that dancing men are frequently accused of effeminacy and ostracized. Some researchers also analyzed the influence of TV programs, such as *Dancing with the Stars*, on the perception and popularity of ballroom dancing, as well as its consequences for dancers (McMains 2010; Marion 2016). Another stream of academic reflection on dancing is the sociology of the body, which focuses on embodiment processes and the meaning of the body for dancers. Dominika Byczkowska (2012), for example, analyzed a dancer's body as their primary tool that can be sharpened (by training) and polished (by aesthetic work).

To the best of my knowledge, the majority of studies to date have focused on social dancing (Cressey 1932; Nieminen 1998; Bosse 2015; Stevens-Ratchford 2016; Olsson and Heikkinen 2019), some on amateur and professional competitive dancers (Penny 1999; McMains 2006; Marion 2008; 2012; Byczkowska 2012), but only two on pro-am dancers (McMains 2006; Ericksen 2011), and, as far as I know, none on senior competitive ballroom dancers. My aim in this article is to bridge this gap by

reflecting on the experiences and perceptions of Polish senior dancers (over 30 years old). The paper is based on qualitative research (interviews and participant observation) conducted in one Warsaw dancing club, and my goal is to present senior ballroom dancing as a serious leisure, that is, a pursuit of leisure activity that involves a long-term commitment, substantial investment in one's development, and thus, significant personal effort, and that creates a distinct social world and a strong identification with the chosen activity (Stebbins 2009). Senior ballroom dancers provide a liminal case between sport and leisure, they oscillate between a highly competitive and a recreational approach toward dancing, and thus, they constitute an interesting case for investigation—they stand between social and professional dancers, who are usually the object of dance research. In this article, I frame senior ballroom dance as serious leisure and investigate the process of professionalization of leisure, showing what place dance occupies in the lives of senior dancers.

A salient motive for taking up the subject was the fact that for many years, I had been a competitive ballroom dancer, participating in more than 200 competitions, both in Poland (including the Polish Championships) and abroad (including the Blackpool Dance Festival and the United Kingdom Open Championships). I obtained the highest S class in Latin dance and trained in one of Warsaw's dance clubs, where I regularly met senior couples, so I had the opportunity to observe them and interact with them.

## (Senior) Ballroom Dancing

Ballroom dancing is "a type of dancing where two people use special steps and movements to do dances" (Cambridge Dictionary 2023a). To be more specific, it is a form of partner dancing connoted with a set of codified, internationally-recognized dances such as Standard dances (slow waltz, tango, Viennese waltz, slow fox, quickstep) and Latin-American dances (cha-cha, samba, rumba, pasodoble, jive), called International Standard and Latin, respectively, to differentiate them from their US counterparts, American Smooth and Rhythm. Ballroom dancing may also include such popular dances as salsa, mambo, Argentinian tango, and the like. However, this article deals only with dancers performing a set of competitive dances internationally approved and codified by the World Dance Council (WDC) and similar organizations. Ballroom dancing can be divided into social dancing and competition ballroom (frequently called DanceSport). The former is casual and occasional dancing performed by non-specialist dancers primarily for entertainment and to interact/socialize with other people. The latter is a 'presentational' form of dancing "focusing on rehearsed, pre-choreographed routines…[that] include extraordinary choreographic virtuosity, as defined by a high degree of physical control over all muscle groups and a concern for visual line and stylized expression" (Bosse 2015:26). This division, however, is too broad and there are many liminal cases. This article deals with one of them—senior dancers—the in-between category, as they compete in competitions yet are not professionals. They dance socially, but their engagement frequently exceeds that of typical social dancers.

Competitive ballroom dancers are divided into amateurs and professionals (PTT 2023). Professionals are those who do dancing as their occupation—they teach, do showcases, et cetera. Amateurs are those who compete in their age and skill level cate-

gories, from beginners to the world level (many top amateur couples present a higher skill level than many professionals). Senior ballroom dancers are amateur dancers over 30 years old divided by age into several categories who compete in their age categories at competitions. There are four senior categories so far in Poland: Senior I (30-39 y.o.), Senior II (40-49 y.o.), Senior III (50-59 y.o.), and Senior IV (60+ y.o.). Amateur couples climb the ladder of dance classes, from Class H, through G, F, E, D, C, B, and A, until they reach the highest possible class—class S. Formally, they are not allowed to make a material profit from dancing, which distinguishes them from professional couples. Amateur couples are divided into age categories (specified by sport ballroom dance regulations), some of which are senior categories.

Senior ballroom dancing operates under the same rules as amateur ballroom dancing as a whole and is governed by the specific regulations of the Polish Association of Ballroom Dancing (PTT). Senior dancers are members of dance clubs and compete in national and international ballroom dance tournaments alongside other amateur dancers and professional ones. They dance and score points in the Polish Grand Prix series (GP Senior Dance Open), just like younger couples. The number of senior dancers in Poland has been growing vigorously over the last decade, from circa 50 couples in 2011-2012 to more than 250 in 2022. The number of tournaments for these categories is also increasing, as is the number of competing couples from an increasing number of dancing clubs and cities in Poland (see: Table 1). The only major exception from this tendency was the years 2020 and 2021, in which, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of competing couples and tournaments decreased—it significantly increased in 2022.

**Table 1. Senior Ballroom Dancers in Poland (2011-2022)**

|  | couples | clubs | cities | competitions |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **2011** | 62 | 24 | 15 | 8 |
| **2012** | 40 | 19 | 17 | 9 |
| **2013** | 89 | 32 | 26 | 10 |
| **2014** | 93 | 32 | 28 | 11 |
| **2015** | 105 | 49 | 36 | 17 |
| **2016** | 117 | 52 | 34 | 37 |
| **2017** | 146 | 64 | 43 | 42 |
| **2018** | 162 | 62 | 41 | 40 |
| **2019** | 252 | 81 | 48 | 52 |
| **2020** | 148 | 58 | 42 | 24 |
| **2021** | 216 | 67 | 41 | 31 |
| **2022** | 270 | 85 | 58 | 49 |

*Source: Self-elaboration based on archive rankings from Seniordance. pl (2011-2014) and taniec.pl (2015-2022).*

**Figure 1. Senior Ballroom Dancers in Poland (2011-2022)**
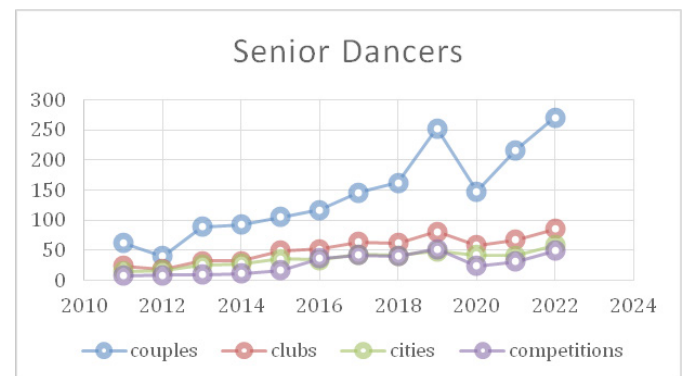


*Source: Self-elaboration based on archive rankings from Seniordance. pl (2011-2014) and taniec.pl (2015-2022).*

Originally, pairs competed in one senior category, but now (from 2021) there are four of them. Initial-

ly, there were a dozen or so pairs competing; now, there are more than 250 classified in the Grand Prix Senior Dance Open series alone. Since 2010, there has also been the prestigious Professor Marian Wieczysty Cup tournament for senior couples in Nowy Targ, which is the equivalent of the tournament of the same name for younger couples, organized in Cracow since 1974 (the oldest tournament in Poland). Since then, the level of pairs has also noticeably improved, as emphasized by the interviewees themselves.

> It's no longer enough to dress well, it's no longer enough to train once a week...it's changing a bit because people are getting better at dancing. If two years ago or earlier it still looked like a very social dance, now the level is getting higher and higher...with people getting more involved and with the focus on development. [Interview_1]

Importantly, the perception of dance in general and the practice of this activity by older people has also changed, reflecting societal and cultural changes (see: Jacyno 2007). As one dancer said in a casual conversation, "20 years ago, they told me I was too old, and now they tell me to train." People's attitudes to life have changed, and there is a growing recognition that it is possible and necessary to do 'something for yourself.' "People are more and more aware that in their 30s or 40s or 50s, they have their needs and can still demand a lot from life" (Interview_5). Previously, doing something at this age outside of work and taking care of the family caused a negative reaction from others, including questioning the family competencies of such a person, "especially for a woman, what kind of mother are you, not at all with your husband, what is that supposed to be at all" (Interview_5).

## *Dancing with the Stars* Effect

The interviewees unanimously state the influence of the TV show *Dancing with the Stars* on the popularization of dance. In the past, dancing was often regarded as something unmanly (cf. Richardson 2016; Jakubowska and Byczkowska-Owczarek 2018), and "someone who dances like that was looked down on a bit, well, maybe he can't do anything else" (Interview_7). On an ad hoc basis, the program caused "a surge of applicants [dancers], so that people started looking for dance schools and learning" (Interview_1). Dance became fashionable, and although the period of peak interest in it had passed, it was more important to change the social reception of dance.

> People...stopped being ashamed, stopped being afraid, started to go to some courses, started to do something in that direction, and I think that's how it happened, dancing became "disenchanted" [normalized], it became something that you can go to a course, you can dance, that it's not like it's actually only for anonymous people. [Interview_5]

The program drew attention to dance as an alternative form of activity to others and showed that it could be something interesting and worth doing, also for people over 30 (after all, not all the stars of the program were people under that age). In a way, it promotes active aging, the attitude emphasizing that people, "as they grow older" can "lead productive lives in society and the economy" and "can make flexible choices on the way they spend time over life—in learning, in work, in leisure, and in caregiving" (OECD 1998:84).

Dance began to be perceived positively and associated with an activity accessible to people of all ages.

None of the interviewees encountered a negative reaction to their dancing. They sometimes state that *Dancing with the Stars* has somewhat distorted the image of ballroom dancing, as everything seems easy on screen and the stars reach, in the layman's opinion, a high level of performance in a short time. That is what they see as the reason why interest in dancing has declined somewhat in relation to when the program started. People were discouraged by the seemingly slow rate of their progress. That is why one dancer stated that *Dancing with the Stars* has not led to the growth of the tournament community but has only provided an influx of couples into courses. However, it seems that more people starting to learn to dance means potentially more people finding that they want to take it up more seriously.

The program was part of a whole trend of changes in morals and lifestyles in recent years, a process of continuous expansion of leisure culture (Jacyno 2007). The development of the community was not so much the result of the program's broadcast itself as of the changes taking place in society itself, of which the program was merely a manifestation. Life becomes a trajectory determined, to a greater extent than happened in previous centuries, by individual projects and plans. The individuals impose discipline on themselves, while the importance of external repression declines. There has been an emancipation from traditional lifestyles and a pluralization of lifestyles. The category of choice has become something that many people believe in and act as if it is something taken for granted and universally practiced. That also raises the issue of responsibility. In an individualized society, everyone feels responsible for themselves, and identity becomes a reflexive project. To a greater extent than in the past, individuals create themselves and set goals and ways of achieving them (Giddens 1991). It is this

change that has been crucial to the development of the senior community in Polish ballroom dancing. Dancers broke away from traditional age-assigned roles, from an 'ethic of renunciation' and pessimism in favor of new 'responsibilities,' such as being happy, full of life and dynamic, smiling, optimistic, healthy, and enjoying goods, pleasure, and freedom.

## Methodology

Participants in the research were a group of ballroom dancers in the senior category training in one of Warsaw's dance clubs. Nine individual in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the dancers between June 2010 and May 2011. The interviews took place before or after the interviewees' training sessions in the dance hall or places in its immediate vicinity. One interview was conducted with a married couple. I defined the eligible participants according to the criterion of participation in dance tournaments, which I considered to be distinctive, separating dance couples of the senior category from people dancing in a casual rather than serious manner. I interviewed all competitive senior dancers (except for one couple with whom I could not arrange a meeting). All interviews were recorded (informed consent was obtained) and transcribed. All data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach.

The study group consisted of four women and five men aged between 30 and 55. Thus, they fell into the Senior I, II, and III categories. The interviewees have been dancing for four to about 15 years. They all lived in Warsaw and worked mostly as independent workers (businessmen, a dentist, creative managers, and a lawyer). Some do not have children, while others have children at least in their teens. The majority started their 'dance adventure' in high school

or college. One person started taking her first dance steps already in primary school, and two only after college. Some people enrolled in dance classes under the influence of their experiences with weddings, while for others, it was a choice prompted, on the one hand, by the desire to spend their free time on an organized form of activity and, on the other, by the lack of alternatives to dance in their place of residence (most interviewees come from outside Warsaw). The first period of dance activity was often followed by a break due to entering adult life or injuries. Problems with finding a partner also appeared to be a reason for the temporary cessation of dancing. The exceptions are younger people (around 30 years of age), who have been dancing continuously since they started. Returning to dancing was often not a planned strategy: "I never thought I would ever go back to it, I just finished my studies, my adult life started, work, family, and that was it" (Interview_2). In some cases, it was the result of a desire to "do something for myself" or a form of preventive health care, the effect of reflecting on one's lifestyle and its consequences. Years later, there was a certain sentiment and a desire to try to return to something that one once started doing and that gave pleasure.

In addition to the central part of the research, my knowledge was enriched by unstructured interviews and casual conversations with the senior dancers inside and outside the dance studio conducted between 2010 and 2021. I was in occasional contact with some of the dancers throughout that period on the occasion of meetings at tournaments, mutual friends, or weddings.

The auxiliary method of data collection was participant observation during my dance training (covert), during which senior dancers were present at the same dancehall, and the national tournament for senior couples (overt). Observations were recorded in an observation diary (Atkinson and Hammersley 2007).

The website www.seniordance.pl, which has been in existence since 2010, and the forum that is a part of it (active until 2017 when the senior dance movement became an integral part of the Polish Dance Association scheme), were valuable sources of information about senior dancers in Poland.

A facultative method of data gathering was autoethnography, an approach that seeks to describe and systematically analyze the researcher's personal experience as a member of the studied group to obtain more accurate and reliable data (Anderson 2006; Wall 2008). In this method, a researcher is both the subject and the object of the research that enables exploration of the nuances of the internal world of the interviewees. This research did not apply autoethnography as a fully analytical method but as a tool to reach more 'insider' comprehension of participants' experiences by comparing it with my everyday dancing practices.

## Serious Leisure

The senior ballroom dancers' social world can be described by the sociology of leisure perspective introduced by Robert Stebbins (2009), which focuses on the 'more pleasurable' side of an individual's life. Stebbins distinguishes three kinds of leisure activities.

1. Casual leisure, which consists of relatively short-lived pleasurable activities that require little or no special training, such as relaxation (e.g., sitting, walking, or napping), passive leisure activ-

ities (e.g., watching TV, reading books, listening to music), active leisure activities (e.g., games of chance and socializing), and social conversation and sensual stimulation (e.g., sex, eating, drinking [Stebbins 2001]);

2. Project-based leisure, which embraces one-shot, short-term, or infrequent, moderately complex activities that may presuppose planning, effort, and sometimes some skills and knowledge, but do not provide for major development (e.g., music concerts, art festivals, sporting events, religious and national holidays); and

3. Serious leisure, which is a "systematic pursuit of an…activity that is sufficiently substantial and interesting for the participant to find a career there in the acquisition and expression of its special skills and knowledge" (Stebbins 1992:3) and is an optional leisure activity that people want to engage in for their satisfaction and fulfillment and in which they commit their skills and resources to succeed in it (Stebbins 2009:764). Stebbins divided serious leisure into amateurs (have professional counterparts in art, science, sport or entertainment), hobbyists (have no professional counterparts, e.g., collectors, do-it-yourselfers, participants in non-competitive activities based on certain principles, such as fishing, sports players, and enthusiasts of the "progressive arts" [Stebbins 2001]), and volunteers who "offer uncoerced, altruistic help either formally or informally with no or, at most, token pay and done for the benefit of both other people (beyond the volunteer's family) and the volunteer" (Stebbins 2009:765).

As senior dancers have their professional counterparts in the form of sport ballroom dancers, they fall into the amateur category of serious leisure. Here,

I would like to show that senior competitive ballroom dancing is a serious leisure, but I also used this theory to structure and organize my results. According to Stebbins (2009:765-766), serious leisure is characterized by (1) only occasional need for full professionalization (such as becoming a certified guide); (2) investment in one's development, finding a career in the serious leisure role; (3) significant personal effort requiring specific knowledge, training, experience, or skills; (4) durable benefits such as self-improvement, sense of fulfillment, self-expression, regeneration, boosting self-image; (5) a unique ethos and distinct social world in which participants develop their interests; (6) strong identification with their chosen activity.

**Rare Need for Full Professionalization**

The first characteristic of serious leisure is the rare need for full professionalization in the sense of receiving certificates or professional eligibility. In the case of dance, professionalization would involve becoming a ballroom dance instructor (or if it would be possible taking into account dancers' age, becoming professional dancers), which only one interviewee did. The decision was driven by an immediate financial need combined with a high demand for dance services. However, that did not become a full-time profession for this person. Among the i terviewees, there was no desire or need to formally professionalize their hobby, which constitutes the boundary of serious leisure or leisure at all.

**Investment in One's Development**

Although it was not discussed in detail with the interviewees, it must be stated that dancing is not a cheap hobby. To some extent, commitment can be measured by the amount of money spent per

month. Interviewees have to pay a monthly membership fee at a dance club (about 300 PLN [all prices are from 2022]) or a fee for participation in group classes (varies depending on the trainer, the price of the room rental, etc.). In addition, there are fees for individual lessons with an instructor (depending on the coach, between 100-150 PLN per person per hour) and/or the cost of renting a room to train on their own. Costs related to dancewear should also be added. Dancing shoes are something essential and are often already owned by some people at the dance course level. The cost of such shoes varies between 300 and 500 PLN, depending on the company producing the shoes and the sex of the dancer (women's shoes are generally more expensive). It should be remembered that some couples (three out of five interviewed) dance in two dancing styles (Standard and Latin), which doubles the cost associated with outfits and shoes. Professional dancewear is also a considerable one-off expense. Sewing a tailcoat for a standard style costs at least several hundred zlotys and most often more than a thousand; women's dresses or gowns can be even more expensive. In women's partner suits, as well as in men's outfits for the Latin American style, sequins pasted on the material to make it visually more attractive are an additional cost. The costumes of couples at a lower level (H-D classes) are characterized by more modest and, therefore, cheaper costumes, which is set by the relevant regulations. Travel to tournaments (petrol, entrance tickets, etc.), which are also held abroad, is a significant expense. In the case of self-employed people (4 people), the opportunity cost of practicing the hobby can also be added in. Summing up all the expenses, it can be approximated that the average costs oscillate between 500 and 1500 PLN per month, depending on the intensity of training (excluding the cost of outfits and shoes, which once bought can serve for a longer

period), but in practice, the upper limit of expenses may be much higher. Despite all these costs, senior dancing is still much cheaper than its alternative, pro-am dancing, where the senior dancer has to pay for every training session as for a private lesson because one is dancing as one's teacher's partner.

**Significant Personal Effort**

Interviewees are "aware of the professional standards" of dance, and "all they have accomplished seems mediocre by comparison" (Stebbins 1992:8). One interviewee admits that "the level is still so... low, that it still takes a long time for me to be satisfied, for it all to look so impressive to my eye" (Interview_1). Another interviewee, on the other hand, stated that "here [at the dance hall], when I come, I am kind of an outsider, who kind of came in through a side entrance..." (Interview_4). These dancers are aware of their shortcomings often because they started training at a late age: "you have to train technically, we haven't danced since we were kids, so this technique is, unfortunately, missing" (Interview_4). This awareness, combined with ambition, gives them the motivation to put in significant personal effort, that is, train regularly, gain knowledge and experience, and develop specific skills.

The interviewees train on average four to five times a week, and their training encompasses various forms. These include: (a) group classes, during which general issues are discussed and practiced by the whole group under the supervision of a coach (8 people); (b) individual lessons taken by a couple or one person from a couple with professional, sports-oriented coaches (7 people); (c) individual work, including the practical implementation of the coach's comments into specific elements of choreog-

raphy (8 people); and (d) practice sessions involving performing to music (4 people). Interviewees dance from approximately six to about 15 hours per week, not counting travel time to the dance hall. The intensity of training depends on workload and tournaments, before which the interviewees generally try to put in more effort. All those efforts are channeled into progressing in the quality of dance, but also in the class hierarchy (from preparatory classes to S class in both styles separately). In other words, in making a leisure career, that is, a "patterned series of adjustments made by the individual…[which] is typically considered in terms of movement up or down between positions differentiated by their rank in some formal or informal hierarchy of prestige" (Becker 1952:470 as cited in Stebbins 1970:32).

**Long-Term Benefits**

Dance was identified by the interviewees as a source of many long-term benefits. The first noted by most interviewees is staying healthy and fit and feeling great about it, reinforced by comparison with friends of a similar age. "I feel young and fit, and there are a lot of friends my age who feel such mums and complain so much" (Interview_5) or: "female friends my age complain that they have sciatica, they have back pain, they don't have the strength, yes, I don't have any pain, I'm full of strength, and I train... whereas they don't, they are making themselves into grandmothers, bent and gnarled, and waiting for retirement... lack of movement, monotonousness, and grayness of life" (Interview_2). Dancing gives the dancers a sense of fulfillment in a role that is different from their daily family or work role, allows them to feel young and confident, and gives them a sense of greater resilience in the face of stress and a "joie de vivre" that "emanates outwards" (Interview_7) and that other people can pick

up on. That makes dancers admired, for example, at tournaments, but also in the workplace. Dancing provides more "self-confidence, such physical confidence, such awareness of one's body, of how one looks, for example, I have no problems with public speaking" (Interview_6).

According to the interviewees, dance develops a sense of one's corporeality and helps to improve body language, thus making messages transmitted through the body more legible. It helps to express oneself and one's emotions, thus serving the purpose of opening up to people, as it is generally intended (cf. Byczkowska 2012:224-272). The fact of presenting movement to other people enhances the process of self-discovery. It helps to define one's identity related to gendered roles: "dance teaches men masculinity and women femininity, and it also emphasizes, as it were, this masculine and feminine element" (Interview_6). The clear gender division of roles is a distinctive feature of ballroom dancing, as becoming a ballroom dancer is primarily "about becoming gendered" (Bosse 2015:95). This characteristic of dance helps some interviewees to feel more fully female or male in a world that blurs such divisions. It offers clear gender models with leading males and following females who differ in body language, attire, expressions, and dancing roles.

Serious leisure is undertaken to make life more attractive; it is an activity that makes life positive and cleanses it of the negative. Interviewees likened its effect to ridding the body of "toxins" in a manner that did not have adverse side effects (as opposed to, for example, through aggression). Interviewees often emphasize that in addition to their physical health, their mental health is very important to them. Dancing allows them to get away from work, from all their everyday problems, thus giving them

a feeling of freedom and psychological comfort. It is a defense against being fully involved in only one sphere of life. Dancers place themselves in opposition to people who devote themselves only to work and do not engage in any additional activities. Dancing gives the person a certain psychological advantage, the feeling that one is doing something different, something for oneself, which allows one to build a certain 'healthy' distance from the problems present in other areas of life. It allows one to detach oneself from other activities, as one has to concentrate on training, to forget about other things that are part of the 'gray reality.' Dancing allows dancers to build their separate worlds, qualitatively different from the external ones. The dance hall becomes a world of possibilities, freedom, and self-realization. It seems that the world outside of dance and the world of dance are disconnected sets: "actually, they are two different worlds, dance for me and everything else, there is no connection on any level" (Interview_2). When one is in the dance hall, there is only training; when one goes to a tournament, other things are put aside, so that dance becomes a kind of sphere of the sacred.

**Unique Ethos, Distinct Social World**

Social worlds produce broadly defined "groups" that have "shared commitments to certain activities, sharing resources of many kinds to achieve their goals, and building shared ideologies about how to go about their business" (Clarke 1991:131 as cited in Kacperczyk 2016:32). The social world takes place in specific temporal and spatial locations and has "its own ways of acting, talking, and thinking. It has its own vocabulary, its own activities and interests, its own conception of what is significant in life, and—to a certain extent—its own scheme of life" (Cressey 1932:31). Social worlds

shape the basis of collective actions by generating the shared perspectives and worldviews and are cultural areas whose boundaries are defined "by the limits of effective communication" (Shibutani 1955:566). In any social world, there are special norms of behavior, a set of values, a particular ladder of prestige, and distinctive career lines. The social world, then, is a planned order that serves as a stage on which each participant seeks to carve out a career and maintain and elevate their status (Shibutani 1955:567). It also creates and maintains specific group ethos.

It is difficult to say how unique the ethos, "the manners, customs, and institutions that embody the characteristic spirit of a culture" (McCrae 2009:208) and "the fundamental character or spirit of a culture [that] connects individuals to a group... expresses a particular group's values and ideology in a way that creates an emotional connection" (Kezar 2007:13), of senior dancers is, as they 'inherit' many habits, behaviors, and beliefs from dancers in the sports category. They share their primary activity: dancing and their social world is centered around the dancing club in which they train on an everyday basis and competitions that are opportunities to meet people and achieve the primary goal of competitive dancing: outcompete other couples and reach the highest possible dancing class. In the dance hall, they are not distinguished by anything special (except perhaps their age). Their costumes often do not differ from those of younger dancers (e.g., black tight turtlenecks and specially sewn training skirts made with elastic, stretchy fabrics), they wear the same kind of footwear, warm up, clean dirt off the soles of their shoes with a wire brush. They train in front of mirrors while working on their own. At tournaments, they go out on the dance floor holding hands, bow to the audience af-

ter the dance, and warm up before the tournament at a so-called "dance floor rehearsal." In general, that is the ethos of the ballroom dancer. In this paper, I have no room to thoroughly discuss all the details of senior dancers' ethos—more information about younger ballroom dancers with whom senior dancers share many qualities in that regard can be found in Dominika Byczkowska's (2012) book *Ciało w tańcu* [*Body in Dance*]. The 'earlier-born' dancers (the term used by the interviewees themselves) have created their social world, which, however, manifests itself mainly at tournaments and in the sphere of indirect contact. Most often, they do not maintain a close relationship with younger dancers: "It's hard for me to expect people who are 20 years younger than me to want to have a close relationship with me, or for me to become close with them, [as] I don't have much in common with them" (Interview_2). However, interviewees found it hard to form close relationships even with older dancers in the club. Making closer contact with them in the dance hall is hampered by the different training times. Rarely do older couples, dependent on work, family, and other commitments, meet in the training room. One interviewee also stated that an additional impediment to forming close bonds is that there is less openness to contact with people who are different regardless of their age (Interview_2). She mentions that everyone has their life, their personal world, and different experiences. Another interviewee notes that "everyone thinks about themselves, that's how I think every couple thinks about themselves...every couple works for themselves" (Interview_1). Due to the limited time available for training, dancers want to make the most of every minute in the training room; hence, there is little opportunity to deepen relationships with other dancers. The sphere of integration becomes mainly tournaments.

For the interviewees, work and dance are separate spheres of experience. Four interviewees work full-time in large corporations, three are freelancers, and one runs his business. For those working full-time, work and dance do not overlap either temporally or spatially; where work ends, dance begins. Sometimes, when there is an opportunity, they may rearrange their work schedule so that they can be at the group classes, which have a fixed time of day: "What can be moved is moved" (Interview_3). It is, therefore, typical to switch shifts at work and reschedule whatever else they can. The interviewees schedule their training together, often trying to schedule it in such a way that there is time for various forms of training during the week (e.g., time for individual lessons, group activities, or practices). Freelancers are able to shape their working day with more freedom and, therefore, have more flexibility. Work is 'integrated' into training, but for some interviewees, it is also an important constraint, as income in their occupation depends on the amount of work and time they invest, setting limits on time for dancing. Work has to come first, as it is what finances dance, but dance is also a highly valued sphere of life that defines time disposition strategies.

**Strong Identification with Chosen Activity**

Everything that has already been written indicates that senior ballroom dancers identify with the norms and patterns of behavior adopted in ballroom dancing in general. Dance has become part of dancers' identity, which Zbigniew Bokszański (1989:12 [trans. MF]) defined as "the set of perceptions, judgments, and beliefs that the individual constructs about oneself." Dance became one possible definition of the self. The interviewees had permanently internalized the values that this type

of activity entails. The study showed a proportional relationship between the level of identification with the values typical of senior dancers and the amount of experience in dance. To some extent, the interviewees feel they are members of the "dance family" (the interviewees' term), manifesting behaviors and ways of valuing and thinking that are characteristic of it. For example, they take a holiday to go to a training camp instead of a sunny beach, or they prefer to come to training rather than go to the cinema. That does not always entail a strong declaration of being a dancer, as the interviewees define themselves more by what they do than by who they are or what they want to be called. Dancing itself becomes dominant rather than defining themselves as 'dancers.'

All this demonstrates that, in the case of the described group, dancing can be considered a serious leisure. It requires regular expenditures, and investment of time, effort, and commitment, which provide long-term benefits to the interviewees. Senior ballroom dancers may not have a completely separate ethos from younger dancers, but they have created a distinct social world, different from other dancers (e.g., salsa, tango, jazz), so it can be concluded that they are characterized by a specific ethos of the ballroom dancer. However, the question of the social specificity of this milieu still requires further research.

## Between Sport and Leisure

The category of serious leisure is itself a kind of oxymoron, as it combines seemingly contradictory categories. Can something that is a leisure activity be something serious, or should it not rather be just for rest and recreation? Like the concept itself, dance as an activity is stretched on an axis whose poles are,

on the one hand, that which is serious (sport[1]) and, on the other, that which is intrinsically non-serious (leisure).

**Sport**

Sport constitutes "a game, competition, or activity needing physical effort and skill that is played or done according to rules, for enjoyment and/or as a job" (Cambridge Dictionary 2023b). The case of senior ballroom dancers is exemplary for sport as it requires a lot of physical stamina, sophisticated technical and presentational skills, and following rules of the genre and style. Yet, the most significant element making senior dancing a sport is competition. The distinguishing feature of the competitive approach to dance is ambition, which manifests itself in a constant desire to improve, make progress, and make certain demands on one's dance skills (cf. Byczkowska-Owczarek 2019). People with this approach change coaches and/or dance clubs, motivated by their perception that the instruction they were receiving was at too 'low' a level. They want to develop their dance skills systematically, to gradually improve the quality of their dancing, and not just learn new choreographic elements, as happens in strictly commercial courses. They prefer to model themselves on better dancers, to "reach that level a little bit" (Interview_6) to the best of their ability rather than dance just for casual pleasure.

An important turning point in the interviewees' dance careers was the start of competing at national ballroom dance tournaments. The decision to take the first steps on the tournament floor was motivated, among other things, by a desire to test

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[1] I realize that sport can be a leisure. Here, I reference to the frequently used expression in ballroom dancing, "DanceSport."

oneself, to see how the couple's dance presented itself against others. Sometimes this was a consequence of encouragement from the coach, other couples who had already competed, or a feeling that the couple's dance represented a certain value, "fit to show." The latter was helped by events such as shows and internal tournaments organized by the dancing club to create an opportunity for couples to display their skills in a friendly environment and to identify the best couples in the club. The sense of positive reception of the dance by others (audience, judges) increased 'belief in one's dance,' in one's skills. It often became an incentive to cross the boundary between dancing only 'for oneself' and dancing at tournaments, that is, by definition, dancing in front of others and, ultimately, for others.

> When you train for yourself, you don't really care, it's important to be comfortable, to have interesting choreography, and, at a tournament, you have to make sure that the audience watching, the judges, that they like it... so it's something completely different, smiling while dancing, playing, catching the contact with the audience. [Interview_6]

So the decision to compete in a tournament fuels the process of professionalizing the approach to dance: "When you learn something, then you feel like presenting it somewhere" (Interview_3). For the interviewees, the tournament is an important experience, it makes them realize how much effort is required "to dance five choreographies without a break" (Interview_6), and it shows how much room there still is for improvement. In turn, this awareness motivates them to train even more intensively, to concentrate more on improving specific elements to present them again in front of the audience and the judges.

Tournaments often have a significant impact on the interviewees' plans:

> When there is a tournament, Mark [name changed] has a spurt, he just gets tense, then we can be every day [in the dance hall], for example, for the last two weeks before the tournament. And after the tournament, suddenly Mark cannot come, or he goes away somewhere and it turns out that, for example, two weeks after the tournament we do not dance. [Interview_2]

The tournament calendar determines the intensity of training. For others, tournaments motivate them to take a few extra individual lessons to improve their performance of specific choreographies so they can dance to the music without any mistakes or interruptions.

The interviewees travel to tournaments with varying frequency. One pair has just started competing, three travel irregularly (due to injury, lack of sufficient time, or long distance to the tournament venue from Warsaw), while one travels regularly. A certain limitation in taking part in tournaments is the irregular calendar of events. Sometimes, there are no 'interesting' tournaments for a few months. Other times, there are two tournaments held simultaneously on one weekend. Couples cope with the scarcity of local tournaments by traveling to foreign events organized, for example, in Germany, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Austria, or the UK. Some foreign competitions are almost a permanent fixture in the tournament calendar of some couples.

In the narratives of the interviewed dancers, the theme of the professional nature of the tournaments often appears. Of course, they are supposed to provide pleasure and joy, to be a time pleasantly spent,

but they are first and foremost an arena in which competition (also with oneself) takes place. Interviewees' narrations indicate that some couples do not go to tournaments when they do not feel prepared. They sometimes select tournaments in such situations, based on an analysis of the entry lists (often published in advance on the Internet), making their appearance at a given tournament conditional on the presence at the tournament of couples they consider "much better" than themselves or only couples they "win against." That shows the extent to which a positive result at a tournament matters to many couples since they are willing to not go to a tournament if they feel they have no chance of placing satisfactorily at it.

Tournaments play a salient role in the professionalization of leisure, which is why participation in them became a criterion for me in selecting the interviewees. Marion (2008) distinguished four main aims of competitions for younger dancers, which are (1) spectacle (performing), (2) festival (rest and socializing), (3) reunion (meeting friends from other parts of the country/world), and (4) party (break from training routine, vacations). Except for the last function, the same is true for senior dancers. Aside from performing, tournaments are an opportunity to meet and socialize with other active dancers. Yet, there is also one more function of competitions specific to senior dancers. Namely, these events motivate the dancers, change their attitude to a more committed one, and, as the interviewees put it, "draw you in." As one interviewee expressed it, "It gets you going. Once you start competing, you start training, and once you train, you go [to competitions]." Another said, "When it was the first time, then somehow you might want to go again" (Interview_1). Tournaments are special events, separate from the activities of everyday life; they are an opportunity, among other things, to dress elegantly, to feel like a man or a woman, to put yourself in a situation where 'everyone wants to look at you.'

## Leisure

In analyzing a more recreational approach to dance, the concept of play, as defined by Johan Huizinga (1980), is useful. According to him, play: (1) is a voluntary activity, practiced in leisure time without compulsion, not being a task or duty; (2) is not "ordinary," "proper" life and is not particularly "taken seriously"; (3) has a disinterested character, is situated "outside and above the necessities and seriousness of everyday life" (Huizinga 1980:26) and performed solely for the satisfaction that is contained in its very performance, it is an intermezzo of everyday life; (4) is a self-contained activity, distinct and limited in time and space; and (5) contains an element of tension, in which the player's abilities are put to the test: their physical strength, stamina, cunning, courage, endurance, and, at the same time, their spiritual powers, because despite their strenuous desire to win, they must keep within the limits allowed by the rules of the game in question. Dancing fits very well with the properties given, as previously shown.

Some dancers in the senior categories clearly notice the 'less serious,' ludic nature of tournaments. They indicate that the competition never takes a 'pathological,' in terms of competitiveness, form. Some interviewees indicate that they enjoy the mere fact of dancing at a tournament and find satisfaction in proving to themselves that they can dance five dances in a row to the music without interruption. The tournament resembles a running marathon, where what counts is finishing it and having fun,

and the aim is to win against oneself. In a sense, everyone is a winner.

This form of leisure is a valuable asset for its participants and is vigorously defended by them precisely as a ludic activity. Dancing is not done "for the sake of it, to kill yourself to win, although everyone would rather be on the podium than next to it, but I think to approach it with a distance"; it is done "for pleasure, not for some kind of feat" (Interview_7). According to some of the interviewed dancers, dance is supposed to become a land of calm, an oasis, an island in the turbulent sea of everyday life, a place where negative emotions associated with sporting competition will never pass.

However, as Johan Huizinga (1980:197) reminds us, with "the increasing systematization and regimentation of sport, something of the pure play-quality is inevitably lost." Its purely ludic content begins to disappear somewhat over time, and there is no longer any spontaneity and carefreeness in it. That process certainly also takes place, to some extent, among senior dancers. As one interviewee put it, "I think that those who train so hard, dance in tournaments, [often] don't want to dance at parties, and they don't enjoy dancing so much anymore" (Interview_4). This sentence is all the more significant as it comes from a dancer who stopped going to dance parties because he felt "saturated" and had less time and energy to enjoy dancing and derive pleasure from it.

## Conclusion: The Place of Dance in Senior Lives

Senior dancers are extremely active people, dividing their time between home duties, work, and training. That also makes them people who can manage their time skillfully. They feel "younger on the inside," and dancing gives them "more inner optimism" (Interview_5). They see themselves as more satisfied with life and more open and confident than their peers. They do not complain about their life but enjoy it, preferring activity over passivity. They define themselves in and through action. As this paper shows, they are involved in serious leisure. Their dancing activity has all the qualities specified by Stebbins: they invest money, time, and energy in their development, acquire long-term benefits from their activity, and have a unique ethos and strong identification with the chosen activity. As a conclusion of that paper, I would like to specify what place dancing has in their lives.

To define the place of dance in the interviewees' lives, one of the statements made by the dancer seems most relevant.

Certainly, on the list of our priorities in life, it's not number one and this also needs to be made clear to ourselves; we won't sacrifice work for dance, we won't sacrifice family or marriage for dance, et cetera. But, as a hobby, it is a really fantastic thing, we get a lot of pleasure from it, satisfaction from our small successes, [and] it also builds us up, gives us strength for other areas of life, in a way, so it is very important for us, but it is definitely not a priority. Maybe if it was, our lives would be completely different, probably professional dancers would find it the most important, [for them,] dance is the most important [activity] in life. For me, it is not the most important, but it is very important. [Interview_6]

It would not be inaccurate to say that because the interviewees started tournament dancing relatively late in life, dance in their lives represents a certain added value. The most important thing is work, or

possibly family, which were chronologically earlier and which have relatively permanently defined the whole biographical context of the interviewees, into which dance has found its place. It constitutes a sphere of their lives independent of others.

The senior dance community has only been developing in Poland for a decade or so. Attitudes to dance are changing, thanks, in part, to programs such as *Dancing with the Stars*, which normalize dance. Dancers in the 'older' categories are recruited from different backgrounds, come from different parts of Poland, have different attitudes to life and different experiences, and are finally physically different, but they are united by their love for dancing. The development of the community is also due to the changing attitudes of older people, who are beginning to expect more and more from life. They are finding that work and family are not all there is to occupy themselves with, they want to do something for themselves, for their pleasure, relaxation, and satisfaction. They dance despite all possible adversities: they have less time because of their many commitments, it is more difficult for them to find a partner than it is for younger people, and, finally, they have a body that is less able to withstand the rigors of extensive training. They can distance themselves from the problems of everyday life because they have a space that provides them with a break from the drudgery of everyday responsibilities.

Dancing as an activity is part of a whole series of changes that are making wellness, that is, a healthy lifestyle, fashionable, and senior groups are increasingly seen as recipients of health-promoting campaigns encouraging physical activity. Life has ceased to be limited to the spaces of home and work and has also begun to move into dance halls. These changes can be expected to continue, as shown by the example of Western countries, and the senior community in Poland is already benefiting from them.

The dance represents serious leisure for the interviewees. Senior dancers do not aim to formally professionalize their activity, they put significant personal effort into improving their level, and they also experience the long-term benefits of dance. They have distinct social world and dancer ethos, and they identify strongly with their hobby.

The attitudes of the dancers can be successfully placed on the sport-leisure axis. The majority of the interviewed dancers are closer to the 'competitive' part of the axis, which is certainly not the norm, as couples taking dance much less seriously can be seen at tournaments. Based on my research, it should, therefore, be concluded that couples have differing attitudes toward their participation in dance. On the one hand, there are couples whose ambition is to win the Polish Championship, compete at the World Championships, and constantly develop like the dancers from younger categories. On the other hand, some couples have just started going to tournaments, treating them as a form of leisure and dancing only as a pleasant activity after work, often practicing only once or twice a week, without much ambition or professional equipment in the form of costumes or specialized shoes. What can be seen, however, is the gradual, increasing professionalization of senior dance and the evolution of the approach toward sports dancing. Couples are presenting a higher and higher level of performance, there are more and more of them, from an increasing number of clubs and cities in Poland. This trend is bound to keep growing—senior dance will become increasingly professionalized, becoming more and more of a serious leisure activity.

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