



Kelly Casanova

West Coast Swing!

The Emperor Has No Clothes

All African Americans should lead; all Caucasians should follow. Muslims and Jews should lead; Buddhists, Christians and Catholics should follow. Rich people should lead; poor people should follow. Men should lead; women should follow. Minors should lead; adults should follow. Homosexuals should lead; heterosexuals should follow (but transgender can lead or follow). Physically challenged people should lead, able-bodied people should follow. How ridiculous does all this sound? For some reason, the swing community in general seems to feel that race, religion, and physical ability should have no bearing on whether a person leads or follows in a contest, but the powers that be deem it completely acceptable to dictate that only men can lead and women can follow in all WSDC/NASDE sanctioned Jack & Jill competitions. I have for many years been completely stymied by this kind of logic, and for years have lobbied to change the status quo.

I have participated in swing conventions in one way or another for over 20 years. At my first event I accepted the fact that men were expected to compete as leaders and women were expected to compete as followers. As time passed, however, I have grown to question the wisdom of these limitations. Perhaps this is because I learned to dance West Coast Swing in The Bay Area and my instructor referred to students simply as "Leaders" and "Followers" and most of the better dancers and all the instructors knew both parts. As I continued to grow as a dancer and became more educated in the technical and social benefits of learning both parts, I grew increasingly puzzled and then eventually frustrated by the national status quo on this issue. One fact that I did learn early on was that the person signing the checks got to choose the rules for his/her competition. That fact was the inspiration for me in 1999 to start my own convention, "Swing Break". Since years of challenging the norm by requesting gender-neutral contests had fallen on deaf ears, the only solution I could come up with was to host my own event with my own rules.

At the request of my beloved mentors, Jack Carey and Annie Hirsch, I changed the name of my contests from "Jack & Jills" to "Luck of the Draw". Many newer dancers do not know that Jack Carey was the inventor of the original "Jack & Jill" contest: Men's names go in one bucket, women's names go in another bucket and names chosen from each bucket dance together as a couple with the man leading and the woman following. So I ran my "Luck of the Draw" competitions and in the Novice division the oldest woman in the contest lead the youngest woman and they won the contest. In the Advanced contest, a woman leader and a woman follower placed third. In the Professional division several pros competed in non-traditional roles and I think John Lindo and Ramiro Gonzales gave the most entertaining and

memorable performance of the weekend. I thought it was an over-all success, after all, I don't know of any other event put on by any individual that had over 800 attendees the first year. Unfortunately, there were so many obstacles behind the scenes regarding my "controversial" competitions that the emotional stress prohibited me from continuing my event past my initial two-year contract with the hotel.

I received many hate e-mails both prior to my event and post event. Prior to the event, numerous people communicated to me that they were going to tell all their friends not to come. I had people accuse me of the most atrocious things in the name of their religious and "family values" beliefs. My motives, morals, and spiritual beliefs were discussed on RAD by people who didn't know me personally or make any attempt to have a legitimate conversation with me regarding the relevant issues. The end result was that my contests were relatively small because many people (mostly men) told me that although they would attend the event, they were going to boycott the competitions because they didn't feel comfortable dancing with another man. I did not, and still do not, understand that logic. There are many men that I don't feel comfortable dancing with myself, yet if I were to draw them in a contest, I would be a good sport and dance as well as I could and be as pleasant as possible to them. One man actually called me to yell, "how dare" I "force" him to dance with another man because dancing was, as he stated, "a sexual thing" and he "was not sexually attracted to other men". He wanted me to allow him to get another draw if he drew a man because he felt he would be "handicapped" in the contest dancing with another man. I replied that if sexual attraction was a requirement for a partner then I should be able to redraw should I get paired up with him, because I was not sexually attracted to him. For some reason he thought that was a ridiculous request and, "not at all the same thing." Really? The ironic thing was that no man entered any contest as a follower in any of the amateur divisions of Novice, Intermediate, Advanced/Masters.

The interesting thing to me about all this is that the Swing community already has precedence for this type of situation. It is a well-known fact by people who have been active in competitions that "you will most likely draw the person you least want to dance with". I have seen former spouses in the middle of a difficult divorce draw each other on more than one occasion; I've seen people who were involved in a challenging lawsuit draw one another, and I have seen former dance partners whose split was painful draw one another over and over again. And how many times have we all witnessed an exceptionally tall contestant paired with an exceptionally petite partner? In the vast majority of these instances all the contestants made the best of a difficult situation, and danced as well and as respectfully as possible. This is exactly the point of all Jack & Jills-that contestants dance as best they can with whomever they draw. Why then, should gender even be an issue?

The good news for me was that a little bit of progress was made in the community regarding same gender couples in competition as a result of all the controversy surrounding my event. It is now somewhat generally accepted at many events that same gender couples may compete in the Strictly Swing and Cabaret divisions. The logic there is that contestants get to "choose" their partners so no one is "forced" to dance with someone they are uncomfortable with. Given that rationale, I wonder why events prohibit same gender couples in the Classic and Showcase divisions. Once again, the logic here doesn't "jive".

I am extremely proud of the fact that my local club, tngsdc, holds monthly "Luck of the Draw" contests. Although I am also proud that my daughter won one month as a leader, I'm even

more proud of the fact that she garnered a great deal of support from all the other leaders (men) in the contest. Very cool, very progressive, very Bay Area. I am also proud of the fact that I influenced a California promoter to allow me to compete in Pro-Ams with all my students. It is a win-win for everyone. The promoter gets more competition fees from me and my students; both my male and female students get to showcase their lead and follow skills dancing with their own teacher instead of someone they barely know who never even taught them; my students get more competition experience per event, and we get to model swing dancing without relying on a sexual context, which is very appealing to parents with young children who are interested in the dance.

I see only positive results from encouraging ALL my students to learn both lead and follow roles as soon as they feel grounded in their traditional role basics. Men and women who both lead and follow learn to have more empathy and compassion for their partners. Women who know how to lead can now dance all night long where in the past the ratio of men to women would normally dictate that many women would sit out most of the evening. Men who can follow can directly "steal" moves and advanced techniques from some of the more experienced leaders making both themselves and their subsequent followers happier. Men and women alike get to stretch themselves in skills of leading and following in a relationship and perhaps discover skills and preferences they didn't even know they had. In the traditional role of male lead, female follow, many men only get acquainted with women, and many women only get to know men. This breeds a sense of competition for partners, which is not always healthy to a good, friendly social environment. When everyone knows both parts, men develop more friendships with other men and women with other women. Win-win for everyone as far as I can tell.

On a more personal note, I taught my daughter to lead at the same time I taught her to follow. I was told by "older and wiser dancers" that I would ruin her as a follower if I let her lead. I think most people who have seen her dance would say that hasn't proven to be true. I love dancing with her, but prefer to follow her as I think she is the better leader and I am more comfortable when I follow. This dynamic started when she was a teenager and I think it gave her a sense of confidence to be in charge of "us" instead of being in a subservient position as my daughter. I think this experience contributed to a more positive mother-daughter relationship over what many people experience as a difficult time for parents and their teens. In all honestly, she is my favorite person to dance with. I feel sorry for anyone who doesn't have the opportunity I have had to enjoy dancing with someone they genuinely care about simply because they happen to be of the same gender.

The only negative side effect I've ever experienced is the judgment of ignorant people as to a person's sexual orientation. It has been my experience that if a person has a strong sense of themselves and a healthy ego, they are not threatened by a stranger's ignorance. When I am confronted with such situations I see them as opportunities for educating people-which, after all, is my chosen profession. Such a situation arose at a Boogie by the Bay convention. I was dancing with a very proficient female leader named Debbie Welty when we were interrupted on the dance floor by an older gentleman who stopped us and said, "You girls don't need to dance with each other, I'll dance with you." Since I was following I looked at Debbie to answer first. She said, "Actually, we enjoy dancing with one another, but thanks anyway." The man then turned to me and said, "Oh, are you gay?" Not wanting to respond to his rudeness and ignorance in a shaming way, nor wanting to validate the question as legitimate, I looked first at him and then at Debbie and replied, "I don't know. Debbie am I gay?" Debbie responded with a straight face, "Gee Kelly, we've never discussed it, I don't

know either." The man, looking extremely confused, walked off the floor scratching his head. I thought that was about as positive an exchange as I could hope for. At least we invited him to question his assumptions instead of alienating him with anger.

To this day, I still don't understand the intense opposition to gender bias free contests in the West Coast Swing community. Why is it acceptable for two guys to wrestle (an arguably more intimate physical relationship than swing dancing) without calling their sexual orientation into question, but not acceptable for two men to dance with one another? Why should a person's sexual orientation be called into question over a dance role? Are there some people so unsure of their own sexuality that they think they can be influenced to change sexual orientation because of whom they dance with and whether they choose to lead or follow? I just don't get it. If you can explain it to me, in a civil and constructive way, please feel free to contact me and present your position. I am truly interested in why there is so much intense opposition to gender free bias Jack & Jill competitions. If, on the other hand, you feel the way I do, perhaps you might like to take a moment to let the powers that be in your local communities know how you feel. Promoters want to please their dancers, so if enough of us ask for a change then the possibility for change exists. If NASDE and WSDC does not wish to make the change, then perhaps it is time for local clubs and individual event promoters to form a gender-neutral organization that supports such change.

On a side note...I find it interesting that the Lindy community is far more enlightened and sophisticated in the area of competition than us "Westies". Gender-neutral dance contests are the norm in that community, and judging there is based on dance ability and definitely not on over-the-top entertainment value. Maybe it is time we look back at our mother dance for some guidance on this issue!

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