

I have retired from the School of Modern Language Studies at University of New South Wales since 2005 and have planned my retirement in such a way that allows me to occupy my time so that I don't have to go back to what I used to do in my working life. Ballroom dancing has now become my main pre-occupation with periodical breaks for travels in between major championships.

My wife Magdalen and I took up social dancing quite accidentally. About 12 years ago, we strayed into the Mandarin Club in Sydney after a wedding banquet on our way to pick up our car. We walked into a ballroom and saw people dancing and before long we spotted my old friend, Chin, from university days who was the jockey playing the music. We were quite surprised to see him there because he was quite a successful IT businessman who had contracted Chinese technicians from China to manufacture personal computers here in Sydney. He told us that he had retired from his business to concentrate on dancing. At the time he was about 55.

I always considered Chin very bright, so I was intrigued by what he was doing and was wondering what dancing could have offered him in retirement. If you know Chin you'll know that he would go out of his way to help people. I was overwhelmed by his enthusiasm and knowledge of dancing. He taught us the basic steps and gradually introduced us to a few repertoire of sequence dancing.

Over the next two years I used social dancing to relief myself from the pressure of work. Then my health became an issue and deciding factor for me to choose dancing as a recreation because I was about 10-15 kg overweight for my height and my knees were not strong enough to support my weight so much so that on a couple of occasions I fell down the stairs quite without warning when my knees gave in. At the top level of Senior Lectureship, I was earning a good income but I was also paying a high price for the privilege as my health started to deteriorate. One Chinese colleague from the University of Sydney fell sick with Parkinson's Disease. It was not a pretty sight to behold. The warning bell struck loudly and I got the message. I was too young to retire then but already in my mind I thought I should do what Chin was doing in his retirement.

I don't know if you have an experience in dancing but it is quite challenging and extremely addictive. When you watch people of your own age dance well you want to emulate them so much so that you are prepared to practice certain steps over and over again. The frustrating part is when you think you know the steps and try to dance the steps with your partner the two bodies will not want to co-ordinate with each other. Soon I learn to take turns and lead when I go backward and follow my partner's lead when she moves backward. To add insult to injuries to one's ego, it is always the man who can't get it right.

We took up our dancing hobby at the right time of our lives. It was a time when our children had all finished their university education, found their jobs and were living away from home. As empty-nesters we thought we had better find our own recreation than to interfere with their lives. With that in mind, my wife and I started to join classes after work and was determined to learn to dance properly.

I don't know if you are familiar with social dancing. The venue is generally a big hall which can hold 150-200 people. When the disc jockey plays the music everyone gets on the floor to dance and you are nearly shoulder to shoulder from the next couple and only have elbow room to move about. It is more like walking than dancing as there is no room to stretch your body. Soon we realised that we had to get out of social dancing in order to improve the quality of our dancing.

It was about 10 years now since we have taken up competition dancing. We did not compete in the Latin style because we firmly believe that it is strictly about youth and vitality. To give you an idea of the Australian dance scene, dancers are grouped according to their age. Juveniles, Juniors, Youths, Adults, Masters 1 (Age 35+) Masters 2 (Age 50+) and Masters 3 (Age 60+) and Professionals. We dance the Masters 2 category and whenever the combined event is offered we compete with Masters 1 couples. We can compete in Masters 3 as well because I am 67 and Magdalen is 64 but we don't want to because this age category is not competitive.

Within each age category (except the Professionals which is only one level in 3 styles), there are 5 levels to progress to the top level and you need 5 wins to be elevated to the next level. It took us 3 years to be elevated to Level 5 in both styles and it was considered amazing for our age and we were both still working full-time.

Since 2006, a year after my retirement, we have become very competitive and have been finalists in major national championships in both the Standard style and the New Vogue style. The Standard style has 5 International dances: Waltz, Tango, Viennese Waltz, Foxtrot and Quickstep. The New Vogue style has 14 Australian dances: 4 Waltzes (Twilight Waltz, Swing Waltz, Lucille Waltz, Tracie Leigh Waltz); 3 Tangoes (Tango Terrific, La Bomba, Tangoette); 5 Foxtrots (Barclay Blues, Excelsior, Carousel, Charmaine, Merrilyn); 2 Marches (Gypsy Tap, Evening Three Steps). These New Vogue dances are different in nearly every competition when up to 5 are danced and 1 is chosen from each style. For the Standard style, the 5 dances stay the same.

In a major national championship stage in capital cities around Australia, dancers who are Level 3 and above can choose to dance in their age level or in a younger age category. As Masters 2 dancers we also get to dance with Masters 1 couples who are younger and fitter. In the South Pacific Championship staged in Sydney last October, we took part in the combined Masters 1 and 2 8-Dance event as well as the Open Standard and Open New Vogue events in our own age category. Out of 35 couples who danced the 8-Dance event we came 5th and in our own age category, Masters 2, we came 3rd in Open Standard and 4th in Open New Vogue out of about 40 couples.

There were 16 rounds of dancing because they had to break up the 8-dance event in 2 sections and each dance was 1 minute 30 seconds in duration. There were up to 5 dances in each round, so we danced about 7 minutes in each round, so stamina was the key to last the rounds. We started 10:15 am. and didn't finish the championship until 10:30 pm. and even though there was a 2 hour break between the day program and the evening program we needed to warm up our bodies in dance readiness before we stepped onto the floor. Of the three events that we competed we were thrilled by the fact that we had beaten couples three-quarters of our age. Even in Masters 2 in general, we gave away 12 years in handicap because most dancers in

Masters 2 were in their early 50s.

After the South Pacific Championship we flew to Hong Kong and then to Europe for a month's holiday, came back and prepared ourselves for the most prestigious championship of the year in Melbourne in December. Surprisingly we did very well. Out of 50 couples who competed at the Open Level, we came 2nd Place in the New Vogue style and 4th Place in the Standard style. You can see our performance on YouTube by entering Philip and Magdalen Lee. We had a few footages there. Alternatively, you can try the links below:

If you have problem opening these links, please copy and paste the addresses in blue.

Masters 2 Open New Vogue: link 1

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ivYQ8ZzAKLo>

Masters 2 Open Standard: link 2

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DX6PWYFLF0c>

Right now we are training for the Jupiter National Championship scheduled in Easter at Gold Coast, Queensland. It will be stretched over 2 days. On Saturday 7th April we will be dancing the Open New Vogue and the 8-Dance event. On Sunday 8th April we will be dancing the Standard style. We will be trying our best to continue on recent successes and hopefully we can keep our form from our last competition in Melbourne.

Our future plans? We want to get better and see ourselves improving however little in whatever style of dancing that we are doing. We cannot accept that we are not progressing forward or even going backward in our dancing career after expending so much effort and energy in it, let alone the money we've put into paying for dancing lessons.

My long term plan is to retire from competitive dancing in another 7 years at age 75.

Hopefully, we can win a national title in either style in Master 2 (age 50+ category) by then. If not, we shall just keep on dancing in our dance studio where there are dancers at different age categories striving to achieve excellence in dancing different styles. We want to keep young by staying in the company of young talented people because we can understand what they are doing. The other end of the spectrum is social dancing. We've been there before, albeit briefly, and we are glad that we got out after 2 years. There will be no going back to social dancing for us. In 12 years' time if I'm still able to move around the floor, I will do some dancing in our dance studio, have my weekly lessons and try to improve on my dancing in whatever capacity I am capable of.