

LICENSED TO DANCE

As the competitive ballroom world returns to the floor, the mechanism around its operation has again started to turn. For amateur dancers this means registration and licensing but with which bodies do they need to register? **Alison Gallagher-Hughes** investigates.

The ballroom dancing landscape is a complex one, occupied by a variety of organisations managing different facets of the industry: teaching, medal syllabuses, event promotion, competition standards, league tables...a myriad of acronyms that for many, spells confusion.

You love to dance, you want to improve, you decide to enter a competition...that's when the fun starts. For many years, it was accepted practice that amateur dancers who competed in open competition within the UK applied for a licence from the British Dance Council (BDC).

The original purpose for this was to establish a level playing field, by identifying dance partnerships, ages and levels of ability for the application of BDC Rules. These are a set of standards, established over many years which are reviewed and published bi-annually. Most open competitions run in Great Britain are organised under BDC rules.

Registration is believed to date back to the 1950/60s when an earlier incarnation of the BDC, the Official Board of Ballroom Dance, created a system to identify couples and the grade in which they danced. By the late 1970s, the competitive environment had evolved. There were more grades, many segmented into age groups, to encourage wider participation. Amateur dance associations were established and for many years collected the BDC licence along with their annual fees as a supportive service to members. Around 2011, the BDC decided to undertake this directly.

Tony Clipstone, President of the English Amateur Dancers Association (EADA), said that the amateur licence was originally seen as a "a passport to dance anywhere" but felt that this was no longer the case.

"If you purchase a television licence it enables you to watch TV. The BBC do not dictate what you can and can't watch. The same cannot be said for the BDC, which dictates in which competitions you are allowed to compete. They deem some competitions as unlicensed. In doing so, the amateur license has become a restrictive method of control, the opposite of what was originally intended," he states

The creation of the Dance Promoters Association's (DPA) National League in 2012 led to a further registration requirement for those that wished to participate. The two appear to have been confused by many competitors, especially those who started competing on the domestic circuit over the last decade.

In 2019, EADA undertook research at an event where every competitor was asked to submit their BDC licence number. A third did not record any details, a third submitted their DPA registration and the remainder, a BDC licence number. A review of the National League around this time identified approximately 4,500 amateur competitors.

"If every UK based competitor paid for every licence and registration available, it would cost £85 per person, per year, on top of entrance fees," adds Clipstone.

Most event promoters do not request evidence of a competitor's BDC licence. It is considered too much of an administrative burden. An exception is the Blackpool Festival which requests applicants

to include their licence number (or that of their own country) to be included within the online application. It is requested again during on-site registration.

The amateur associations are also concerned about the management of information security and how licensing bodies are sharing and using people's data.

"We have serious concerns about how that data is being used and shared and have raised this with the BDC," states Clipstone. "Previous processes have been poorly administered and we have little confidence that legal requirements around GDPR are being applied."

So, what benefits do amateurs get from being licensed? Dancing Times put this question, along with others, to the BDC but did not receive a response. Requests for interview were also declined.

Ken Brown, an executive member of Dancesport Scotland, believes there are none. The amateur associations receive no direct funding from the BDC to support the development of dancers, he says.

"It is quite simply a matter of finance. The BDC sees itself as the governing body of ballroom dancing, which it is not. It is effectively a trade association made up of 30-35 teaching associations. Amateur dancers are not members, in the true sense, and receive no entitlement."

Brown says there are a number of tests that would need to be applied by Government's Sport and Recreation Committee to formally acknowledge a governing body.

"The amateur associations are recognised but there is not one governing body for all of dance in the UK. That is why our industry had no voice when it came to lobbying the Government for support during the pandemic," he adds.

Former BDC President Bryan Allen confirms that amateur fees are absorbed into wider income to "finance the Council, its rules and structure" but that the BDC gives back as part of its Investing in the Future initiative, awarding cash prizes to finalists of the Juvenile Ballroom and Latin events at the Nationals and Sequence Festival Juvenile Championship.

Amateurs who wish to compete abroad or in competitions affiliated to other organisations, may require additional licences. Although the BDC licence was intended as a 'passport' to confirm the validity of a dance partnership, its recognition depends on the organiser and country in which the competition is being held, admits Allen.

Back in 2010, as a member of the World Dance Council (WDC), the BDC resisted attempts by the International Dancesport Federation (now the WDSF) to run all competitions under its rules, the ramifications of which led to a fracture between the two 'world' dance organisations.

To provide competitive amateurs with a route to participate in competitions run by the WDSF, Dancesport England (soon to be renamed GBDanceSport) was formed in 2010. British competitors dancing in WDSF competitions now acquire membership of the DSE.

DSE President, Peter Maxwell, confirms: "WDSF requires all athletes and officials to be registered to ensure the quality and integrity of the athletes and officials concerned. To obtain WDSF licenses, athletes and officials must be members of the WDSF member body for their country. WDSF does not permit any restriction that stop athletes and officials participating in the activities of other international or national organisations."

The WDSF has a digitally enabled method of cross-checking the eligibility of amateur competitors when they compete. Each member association issues individuals with a card that can be scanned and allows results to be allocated to them.

A further organisation, the World Dance Organisation (WDO) was recently formed in 2019. To participate in its events, competitors need to be registered as a member.

“Registration for competitors is free for 2021,” advises its Chairman Arunas Bizokas “and will continue to be free in 2022.”

COVID lockdown and regulations saw competitions in the UK halted, and memberships, licences and registrations suspended. The machine was temporarily switched off but the wheels are now beginning to turn again.

In June, the BDC published a letter on its Facebook page, advising that all amateur competitors must be registered in accordance with ‘rule 17’, payable from 1 September. It triggered a response, in the form of an open letter from the President of the WDC Amateur League, Sammy Stopford, who deemed its resurrection, “ill-timed and wholly unjust” and “in direct opposition to the Freedom to Dance mantra accepted by our world of dance.” The BDC later clarified that foreign competitors did not require a BDC license to compete in the UK.

Any requirement for amateur licensing sits uncomfortably with some. Dancesport Scotland’s Brown, who is a qualified lawyer, believes that there are only two reasons why licences are required: permission to do something where another holds the rights to that property (as in copyright law) or on the grounds of safety to ensure competency to take part (as in F1 Racing).

“Neither apply to amateur dancers,” asserts Brown. “Safety measures are only required from event promoters to ensure that the premises and conditions are suitable for their stated purpose,” he says.

The debate will no doubt rumble on, but the need to understand the ‘requirements’ and expectations is essential in order to take to the floor.

Amateur Licence Costs

BDC - recommences September 2021, £20 per person

DPA National League registration – free (league currently suspended)

WDC international competitor registration - £45 per person

WDSF – membership through associated national organisation (DanceSport England) £20 per person

WDO – free