

Tips for Strictly Swing & Jack & Jill Competitions

The “Jack & Jill” or “Strictly Swing” Contests offer dancers the opportunity to put their social dance skills on the floor –most often in a in a group, called a heat. The basic differences between the two are simple and straightforward. In a Jack & Jill, you do not select your partner or your music. They are selected for you “on the contest floor.” In a Strictly Swing Contest, you select your partner, but the music is selected for you “on the contest floor.” Both of these contests promote “choreography on the fly,” good social dancing skills and proper lead, follow & frame technique.

Dancers are encouraged to dance to the character, timing and hits of the music, rather than execute lengthy patterns “practiced” for presentation. Patterns that look like a routine, and obviously don’t fit the music, are generally scored lower than creative, impromptu

patterns that emphasize the music or lyrics. Couples are also judged on their “teamwork”— the ability to dance together. Finalists are selected in a variety of ways, so the contest rules are usually the best source for these details.

When I first began competing, I had no idea how much I didn’t know. Many of us who began competing did not have coaches or “sponsors” to explain the competition process or protocol. We had to learn as we danced, and sometimes learning the hard way. In order to encourage new dancers to explore the challenge of competition without the fear of the unknown, following is my compilation of “Things You Should Know and Remember” for new and experienced competitors. – *Jeanne DeGeyter*

THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW & REMEMBER

Selecting a Partner for a Strictly Swing

1. Select a partner with a similar dance style and skill level as yourself.
2. Partners should agree on degree of commitment (time, money, contest, etc)
3. Select someone with whom you have already danced and enjoy his or her company.
4. Agree on which competition and category.
5. Be aware of differences and similarities in communication styles.

Eligibility, Rules and Registration

1. Be sure to read the rules for the specific event, contest and category to determine your eligibility to compete in the category. If you have any questions, always contact your coach, club rep, or the event coordinator.
2. Always read the rules for dance restrictions, such as: lifts, drops, apart dancing, looking at the judges, costumes, etc.
3. Determine the registration requirements: forms, cost, deadline, etc.

Practicing for a Strictly Swing or Jack & Jill

1. Work on the feel and connection of your partnership primarily by social dancing.
2. Practice time should focus on improving the lead and follow of your existing dance skills and patterns. Focus on proper execution of your basic framework and footwork—not patterns.
3. You may want to add a new pattern or step variation to your dance menu, but unless you “burn” it into your muscle memory on the social floor, chances are likely you won’t remember it. If other partners on the social floor don’t “get it” on the dance floor, chances
4. Focus on clean execution of all moves. If it doesn’t work every time in practice or on the social floor, be safe and don’t use it on the competition floor.
5. If possible, find a coach to help you focus on areas of improvement. Another dancer can also help by pointing out areas that may not “look” right.

Clothing

1. Costumes are usually not allowed in Strictly Swings or Jack and Jills. Costumes are generally defined as attire, which cannot be bought “off the rack,” but is custom-designed.
2. Matching attire is encouraged. Try to color-coordinate your appearance with your partner. Personal tip for the Jack and Jill Leaders: select solid colors for upper and lower. You have less chance of “clashing” with your partner, who may choose a flashy style.
3. If possible, take the time to review options and physically compare outfits.
4. Wear clothing that makes you “feel” your best and is comfortable.
5. Make sure your clothes are “danceable.” Avoid the embarrassment of: the falling tube top, pants that “ride” up the legs or fall off the hips, zippers that won’t stay locked, or pants so long that your heel or your partner’s heel gets caught.
6. Men should pin or clip their ties down to their shirts.

Jewelry & Accessories

1. The safest rule is NOT to wear watches, bracelets or rings, which protrude and can catch clothing or harm your partner.
2. If you wear earrings, make sure they won’t fly off during a spin.
3. Decorative belts should be secured to not fly off. Don’t wear belts that can hit your partner.
4. In West Coast Swing, hats are not generally acceptable attire on the competition floor, unless it is part of a costume

Hair

1. Hair should never be distracting to you, your partner, the judges or the audience.
2. It’s best to keep hair off the face and out of the eyes to avoid missed connections.
3. Ladies with long hair, make sure your hair does not become a weapon during spins.
4. Make sure clips, hair bands, bobby pins, etc, are secure, so not to distract you.

Dancer's meeting

1. Most competitions hold dancer's meetings on a specific day and time—check the schedule ahead of time.
2. Some dancer meetings are mandatory, requiring the attendance of at least one partner.
3. The purpose of the dancer meetings include some or all of the following:
 - a. Roll call
 - b. Draw for dance order
 - c. Late sign-ups
 - d. Review of rules and an opportunity to ask questions
 - e. Notification of late changes
 - f. Answer competitor questions
4. This might be your first impression to other dancers. Arrive on time and be courteous.
5. If you have a special question, rather than general, go immediately to the meeting coordinator after the meeting is concluded.
6. If travel arrangements prevent your attendance from the dancer's meeting, contact the event director immediately to make other arrangements.

Floor Tryouts

1. A pre-scheduled "Floor Tryout" time period is usually available for all competitors (most often in the morning, but check the schedule or ask).
2. Infrequently, Strictly Swing competitors may not have the same opportunity as routine competitors.
3. ALWAYS dance on the floor before your competition to check floor speed, consistency and other conditions. If there is no scheduled time, you can "tryout" the floor during general dancing.

Prior to Competition time

1. Position your numbers in a non-obstructive position. Men, usually on the back or just below the waist (on back). Ladies, usually below waist (on back).
2. Meet your partner 20-30 minutes ahead of the scheduled competition time, ready to dance.
3. Dance together just a song or two to warm-up and stretch as needed.
4. Arrive to the "staging area" as designated at least 5 minutes prior to start time (with your partner)
5. Don't "practice." What you don't have now won't happen.
6. Display good sportsmanship – wish the other competitors Good Luck.

Introduction and Entrance

1. Know your number, in case names are not called.
2. Locate and pay attention to the floor coordinator.
3. If a dance order or Heat order was set at the dancer's meeting, know yours.
4. You are being watched and evaluated from the moment you walk on to the floor.
5. "Escort" the lady onto the floor, with her on your audience-side arm.
6. When dancing in Heats, line up in the order you were called to the floor, facing the audience.
7. If not in a heat, bow toward (acknowledge) the judges.
8. Chins up for your intro bow. Place your feet in third position (or together) for the bow.
9. Find a place on the floor when instructed. Without intruding on another couple, dance as near to your "support" audience as possible.
10. Start in closed position, with the open side to the audience

Dancing

1. ALWAYS start on beat.
2. If possible, be the first mover (on beat).
3. "Feel" the beat and rhythm in your movement BEFORE stepping.
4. If possible avoid the basic starter step—add a slight variation to it.
5. Start with a push basic and underarm, while developing the feel for the music.
6. Listen for breaks, hits or instrumentals, but don't try to overemphasize every single one.
7. Smile and enjoy the Dance, or at least give it 100% of your effort!
8. Vary your facial expressions—don't glue one on!
9. Don't dance patterns for the sake of the pattern. Don't create long amalgamations that restrict the ability to interpret the music. Dance shorter patterns that leave room for musical interpretation.
10. Be aware of other couples on the floor. Penalties may be assessed when couples collide.
11. Do not "move around the floor" so much as to distract other dancers.
12. Strictly swing is social dancing—dance with your partner, not the audience or judges.
13. Do not lip-synch the MUSIC, and do not sing.
14. Do not talk to your partner, other dancers, judges or spectators while dancing.
15. Do not count (out loud).
16. Do not try to attract the attention of a judge.
17. Don't out-dance your partner. Balance the partnership.
18. Look at your partner more often than you would on the social floor. DON'T look Down!!
19. If an "oops" happens, don't draw attention to it—smile bigger. You might be judged positively on recovery OR the "oops" might not even be noticed.
20. Time will be up before you know it, so make every step count.
21. Good clean basics danced TO the music WITH your partner will beat the "pattern monster" that has marginal execution

Ending and Exit

1. If the music fades, finish dancing the pattern and create an effective "ending."
2. Don't just stop dancing—finish dancing.
3. Always bow to (acknowledge) the audience. Leaders present the follower first, and then bow.
4. Followers acknowledge the leader.
5. Bows should be more traditional (heads down, chin lowered).
6. Many judges continue their evaluation of you until you leave the floor.
7. Withhold all negative looks, comments or gestures while on the floor

Assuming the role of Partner, Performer and Competitor

1. Provide supportive and encouraging comments for your partner before and after the performance.
2. Whether in costume or wearing a number on your back, many extra eyes are on you, watching your every move.
3. Immediately after competing, many eyes are on you, your actions and your words.
4. Whether you are happy with your performance or ecstatic, graciously accept congratulations and recognitions from other dancers.
5. Restrict critical comments toward other dancers, judges or your partner.

Awards

1. Be aware of the time awards will be announced and be in the ballroom.
2. As awards are announced, stand by your partner, or be aware of where he/she is.
3. When possible, walk on the floor together.
4. Accept awards graciously, whether first or last.
5. Congratulate the other competitors before leaving the floor.
6. When congratulated, say "Thank you."
7. Pictures are usually taken, so wear whatever makes a good picture, and be prepared for a quick snapshot. Understand how to line-up and help the photograph.