

COMBINING TWO PASSIONS

BY AMANDA BENTLEY & JENN WEBSTER
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It took a pandemic for this Alberta rider to challenge herself to take up a new art form. Little did she know, combining the two art forms of dance and riding proved to be more similar than one would think.



In a time when we all moved to a virtual world of endless possibilities, rider Amanda Bentley (Calgary, AB) never thought she'd be able to keep up with her two passions of riding and ball room dancing, let alone combine them. But thanks to the global pandemic, she had to start looking beyond the impossible to find some happiness, hope, and something to look forward to – in the most unlikely of places.

COVID-19 came on like a freight train in March 2020 and as we all know, was successful in isolating families and friends. It forced people to open up to alternative ideas and out-of-the-box methods for coping with the new way of life.

“Like many, I'm a mom of two young children and this new normal was a bit much to take at times,” says Bentley. “So I found myself getting creative in terms of having ‘Mom time-outs’ or finding some outlets to help reset myself.”

She relays that in the beginning of adjusting to life with Covid, even her beloved barn was limited to capacity and she was not able to see her horses for weeks on end.

“My creative outlets had to expand and they did into a world of beauty, awareness and connection that ultimately collided my two worlds. Both hold a special place in my heart. It has been a year this April since I started my online dance journey of expression and self-discovery.”

Bentley says she has always enjoyed watching the television show, *Dancing with the Stars* and dreamed about dancing on a grand stage looking beautiful in a stunning outfit with a professional dancer – but like many, she figured it was impossible.

“One day on Instagram, I saw on that my favourite professional dancer Gleb Savchenko, was teaching a online Zoom class, direct from Los Angeles, CA. So I decided to sign up and found the courage to put myself out there – or should I say on screen in front of a handsome celebrity dancer that I admire...” she laughed.

“I mean, after all ‘...He wouldn't really see me, would he?’ I said to myself. I figured the class would be full of regular LA students and I would fade in background. He came on screen and was super nice and friendly. He even made a point of talking to this Canadian horse girl.”

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on the US version of *Dancing with the Stars* (and also on the United Kingdom, Australian, and Russian versions of the show,) to name a few of his credentials.

“I asked Gleb if he thought his class would be okay for a beginner like me and he said ‘Absolutely!’ and to follow along the best I could, but the main thing was to have fun.”

Before having her children, Bentley was a full-time riding instructor and Savchenko's concept is something she agrees with whole-heartedly. She was always preaching the same to her riding students.

“Much like many people when they have a wonderful first lesson – no matter the sport – I was hooked and couldn't wait for the next one,” she says.

In contrast to the fast-paced world of Hollywood life and watching him on television, Bentley says Savchenko's online students get to observe him in a very real, down-to-earth manner.

“We see that he has the purest of hearts, while highlighting the passion he has for dance and teaching it to his eager online students. Many of whom who are dancing in their living rooms and kitchens.”

Savchenko is a busy man and a dedicated father to his two daughters Olivia (10) and Zlata (3). He doesn't have to teach the online group of personalized zoom lessons, but he loves to and has told the group on more than one occasion that he admires the dedication, and effort they put into their online lessons.

“He absolutely loves to see how we are improving and progressing,” Bentley relays.

As her online lessons continued a few days per week in 2020, Bentley noticed other online dancers were joining in from around the world. They lived in Dubai, the United Kingdom, Florida, Chicago, Toronto, etc. Together, the group worked on Rumba, Jive, Pasodoble, Cha Cha Cha, and Samba arrangements.

“Our online group has developed into a loyal, close-knit group of dancers who regularly stay in touch throughout the week even in between our classes! We all have a common bond of dance and are all very appreciative to have Gleb as our instructor. He has an incredible ability to be able to see us through a small screen and still be able to correct the slightest of details with us as well as lift us up when we are struggling.



Bentley says that dancing has made her more conditioned and the body awareness she's gained and knowing how to engage her muscles when needed, has helped with overall strength and posture in her riding.

He has helped us in many ways that go beyond just dancing and for that, we are forever grateful,” Bentley admits.

She explains that for her, dance – much like riding – takes her away from the stresses of the world and forces her to focus on being in the moment. Be present.

“Riding has always reminded me of dancing as in both there is a partnership, connection, body awareness, and teamwork,” she says. “If one component is off, then the feel is different and just not right. The more I continued with my online lessons I realized that both my passions are both different, but also very similar.”

Bentley believes she has always had a good sense of body awareness and would often try and explain the concept to her students when she was teaching riding lessons, pre-covid.

“I always described how some movements with our horses and are like a dance. However I can honestly say my level of body awareness for movement has grown so much through Gleb’s teaching, that it has me looking at our beautiful equine friends in a new light.”

There’s also a new level of fitness that Bentley is taking from her dance classes that is proving beneficial to her riding time. Savchenko has done fitness classes for his group and they include a lot of squats, lunges, planks, hip engagement exercises and core work. However, Bentley circles back to the body awareness and engagement she’s learned in her dance classes as being the biggest benefit to her riding.

“Tightening your core muscles properly to maintain balance, lifting your shoulders up, back and down to help with

posture – we have to hold posture a lot in dance, so I find it’s strengthened me and made me more flexible. It’s helped me to hold a backbend or a press-line pose and not become exhausted,” she states.

“It’s definitely helped my endurance which helps with riding, because then I can work harder if my horse and I are struggling to achieve something. And also having the strength and flexibility I get from dance can help with my overall fitness so I don’t get sore from riding,” Bentley explains.

She says that dance has additionally helped her with ankle and foot flexibility. Riders are constantly having to point their toes, drop their heels or engage their legs.

“I think it all starts with our feet. In my opinion, I find that stronger and more flexible ankles can help with how we are able to keep our feet in our stirrups. Or equally, if we lose our stirrup with ankle/foot strength and flexibility we are more likely to find our stirrups quicker.”

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“I find that without even having to think about it, I’m able to use my body properly when I’m on my horse – if that makes sense,” she tells. She believes that anyone with a higher level of body awareness and fitness will likely be more centred and balanced – even if trying riding for the first time.

“Recently, my long time riding coach and mentor was getting me to work on teaching my three-year-old mare to move her hips, separate from the front end of her body. She

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was struggling with it, trying her heart out no doubt but it was hard for her, as this is a new move that she has never done before,” Bentley mentions.

While working their way through it, Bentley reflected back to a few days earlier when she was taking an online lesson.

“Gleb was teaching us part of a rumba routine and taking us through us a few different steps. He was teaching us to move, rotate our hips, and engage our bodies – and I realized, this was also what I was trying to do with my young mare.”

All of a sudden Bentley became aware that everything she was trying to accomplish in the rumba were smaller moves, but with a big effect they could give off a mood evoking look in dance. They could also help with the functionality and willingness of moving and guiding her horse.

“It definitely was a small, challenging movement much like it was for my young horse. I thought I had rotated my hips as much as I could, but no! My Russian instructor corrected me and I’ve learned they can rotate way more than I thought they can,” she says.

DRAWING PARALLELS

With a background in a multitude of disciplines, Bentley is regularly surprised to discover the parallels between dancing and riding. Particular moves like a spin or sliding stop in reining, for instance, can be compared to several moves in dance.

“The spin or stop – which involves the rider to focus and engage connection and rhythm with the horse – requires trust in the partnership,” she begins. “To complete the maneuvers, balance and trust is needed to successfully execute proper timing of rotation in a spin, or a fast dramatic sliding stop. Equally can be said for dance and the confident connection needed to either glide across the dance floor in an elegant waltz, or to march your way through an intense and dramatic pasodoble. The synchronicity and beauty of a perfectly timed side or half-pass can be compared to a weight ball change.”

A ball change is a dance move that consists of two steps: a partial weight transfer on the ball of a foot, followed by a step on the other foot.

Working the flag or demonstrating cutting moves on a horse can be compared to Cuban breaks. Cuban breaks are short, sharp syncopated steps diagonally to the side, alternating from one side to the other.

“Independent hip movement in our horses can be related to a lock step. The possibility of parallel movements is uncanny and I find fun to compare,” she says.

IT ONLY TOOK A LOCKDOWN

Bentley says her online lessons with Savchenko have enriched her life and the lives of the other online students he teaches. Had it not been for the pandemic, she may have never come across the chance to expand her artistic outlet.



“We are privileged to have the opportunity to learn from the best and have the best want to wholeheartedly teach us,” she states. “Not only has Gleb and our online group given me a sense of purpose and belonging, but he has enhanced my love and passion for my horses and opened my mind to endless possibilities in the realm and artistry of dance and riding.”

Whether it’s dancing or horses, finding the right coach and mentor for yourself can be the most uplifting feeling – and the difference in taking your skills to the next level. Bentley concludes, “People like Gleb have that special talent to push, motivate and inspire in ways others cannot. We are forever grateful for what he has taught us, for his time, his effort and the fact he has helped many people on their journey of self-discovery through dance.” *WHR*

Gleb Savchenko is a multi award-winning, international professional dancer and has been a long-standing pro dancer on the US version of Dancing with the Stars (and also on the United Kingdom, Australian, and Russian versions of the show,) to name a few of his credentials.

