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The Last Page: Saturday Afternoon Fever

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saturday afternoon fever

By Robert Gillespie



FRED FIELD

The fans are stamping, clapping, hollering, whooping it up this Saturday afternoon in October in Harvard's Lowell Hall. The high-ceilinged room looks like a pint-sized basketball court. Team banners hang over balcony railings: the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Tufts and Boston University are here, three of 15 schools, including Colby, that have brought 150 couples to the hardwood floor for the ninth annual Harvard Beginners Competition in ballroom dancing.

The Colby ballroom dance team is about to take its first step.

Through a hallway door, 16 couples from 15 schools flow down the aisle to the floor, some smiling, some with flourishes and flounces, some intent despite the emcee's encouragement to look happy and have fun. "Hey Baby" from the movie *Dirty Dancing* blasts out, and all 16 couples suddenly whirl about the floor in the first of five heats of the swing—a.k.a. the jitterbug or lindy hop.

So many different moves, like diagrammed plays unfolding on the field; so many shapes and sizes—tall, tiny, rail thin, burly. A Harvard dancer sports dreadlocks, and a woman dancer flutters glitzy fake eyelashes. Most women wear ball gowns. The Harvard men, in white shirts and black bow ties, look like ritzy waiters.

Abruptly the music stops. Entrants in the five heats dance to the same couple of minutes of music while the judges—veteran dancers from Harvard and other area schools who stroll the perimeter of the floor—check out the couples they'll "call back" for the next round.

"Did you see us? We did our first one!" Aimée Jack '04 exclaims as she pops into a seat in the balcony. "I feel like the country mouse coming to visit her city cousins."

Peter Brush '03 leans forward in the seat beside Jack. "I don't think I've been that nervous in a long, long time. I could feel my heart pounding," he says, fist thumping his chest. As the emcee reads out the numbers of the couples who have made the cut for the next round, Brush and his partner, Carolyn Hunt '05, suddenly shout and leap up. They're called back.

"I've wanted to do this all my life," said Jack, after the competition. She is responsible for moving the ballroom dance club to competitive status this year. The dozen or so members of the competition team practice at Colby from 6 to 8 on Sunday night and then team-teach social dancing from 8 to 9:30.

Brush signed up for the club at the activities fair in the fall because he was interested in swing

dancing. Swing, Jack will tell you, is the gateway to ballroom dancing for most of them.

Emily Carreiro '03 and Loren Sanborn '04 knew swing before partnering this year, and Carolyn Hunt learned the West Coast lindy hop in her home state of Oregon. But Ryan Hollett '05, Jack's partner, had never danced before this year. "He's a soccer player and pole vaulter, so he picked it up quick," Jack said.

Dancers of course don't wear the equipment of football players, but that doesn't mean ballroom is an inexpensive sport. With only a \$500 budget, the Colby group is strapped by registration fees and travel costs (they car-pooled to Boston). Dancing shoes aren't cheap, and gowns can be \$3,000-4,000 for the four or five competitions in a year. But not for the Colby team. "This gives us a chance to recycle all of our old prom dresses," Jack said.

Though some college ballroom clubs spend \$300 a week for a coach, the Colby group went to the Web and found Justin Stebbins, a 2002 Bates graduate now teaching at Got 2 Dance in Westbrook. Stebbins, who donates several hours a week to Colby, smiled like a proud parent as a Colby couple came off the floor. "Good job," he told them.

Later in the afternoon, all four Colby couples competed in the foxtrot. Afterward Jack wondered aloud: how did they look?

The answer: they looked intent. Even though the moves of the dance may not be fixed in the muscle memory yet, the judges called back Jack and Hollett three times.

And on the ride home to Waterville, everyone was pleased with the team's performance. "It's neat that for this generation it's an option for recreational activity," Jack said. "It's great because it's a lifelong sport. And it's really social. It's great to meet new people."