

How We Did It in DanceSport

There is no doubt that this year filled with the COVID-19 pandemic has created a lot of challenges for a majority of people. However for the sports society and athletes, it became a “life or death” question. The cancelled Olympic games along with several other major championship competitions led athletes to a state of needing to “hibernate” -- not quitting, but surviving; finding motivation to continue, but without any exact information about a new beginning.



I have been going through this situation together with DanceSport athletes. During winter 2020 and the early spring we had a very intensive preparation for the national championship, but it was sadly cancelled just a few days before the championships were set to start. The dancers felt stress while preparing, then they felt a relief that they would have more time to prepare, and suddenly faced a lockdown in the whole country when everything was forced to close down until summer. In June, the dancers were allowed to return to the dance floor and start moving together with their partners. Some felt the break was a nice opportunity to rest from the stress of sports and the other things going on in the world. Yet, a large majority of dancers felt out of touch in not having the possibility to dance and to practice with their partners—to them it felt like torture and it raised the question

of whether they could continue dancing at all after the lockdown. Some dancers lost their motivation, inspiration and willingness to dance. The first challenge was to survive the lockdown and the second was to get the dancers back on the floor to find their passions again and willingness to prepare and fight for the best results in the upcoming national championship.

From the perspective of a sports psychiatrist, it is important to acknowledge how the pandemic has led to some serious consequences regarding athletes’ attitudes towards their future plans and goals in sport with everything unravelling and hard to predict what lies ahead. Dancers’s routine livelihoods that included camps, competitions abroad and training with foreign teachers became essentially impossible; regular travel and competitions were gone. What once entailed having a whole year planned out in advance suddenly changed to planning one day at a time in the face of an evolving pandemic situation. The unpredictability and uncertainty seemed to lead to dancers having more negativity and loss of meaning in their lives.

I want to share with you all how we managed during this extreme situation and how we are still dealing with it presently.

During the first lockdown, the most important thing was to proceed with consultations in the same way as we did before the lockdown with the only difference being via online video conferencing. In the beginning of lockdown, it was a big challenge because dancers didn’t want to talk and resisted switching the “live” conversations into a “video” one; hence, I tried to stay connected with dancers only through text messages in the first couple weeks. When we finally agreed on video meetings with both dance partners, it was clear that the majority of them looked depressed - had a bad mood, lack of motivation to do sports at home, or any motivation about the future. They didn’t see any purpose in everything they were doing before the lockdown. It seemed especially hard for the males who may be more emotional and sensitive. The men looked sad and hopeless as they didn’t engage in any virtual lessons arranged by dance coaches. The dancers who were more disciplined and focused, predominantly the ladies, continued dancing alone and doing sports at home, even having video lessons with teachers. My role was to listen to their thoughts, give them a chance to verbally express their anger, fear and lack of motivation—allow them to speak loudly about quitting dancing because they felt that “it does not make sense anymore”. I was supportive, and I gave them emotional space to acknowledge the situation as

they felt it. Eventually they started feeling better and during May a hope appeared that they will soon be able to get back on a dance floor and continue dancing.

The second part - return to a pseudo-normal life.

In the middle of June, dancers started gathering to have dance lessons again. Very slowly they were coming back physically and mentally as well. They were happy that they could dance again and be with their friends and dance partners. Their physical bodies lost good form after a 3 month quarantine layoff, but emotionally they felt a relief because it gave hope that sooner or later everything will come back to normal.

Despite a return to daily practice in dancers' lives, there was still the unpredictable situation of competitions and travelling. Multiple international competitions remained cancelled, but the National championship would be arranged in October. This became the most important goal for all dancers and motivated them to continue training and preparing.

My work with the dancers switched back to in-person consultations weekly. With high aspirations to vie for a spot on the podium at the National championship, I helped them navigate a very clear plan of training with regular psychological sessions that focused on stress management, emotional awareness, and self-confidence.

Participation in the National championship gave dancers motivation and a feeling that soon everything will return to normal, but they still had a fear of getting sick from COVID-19. Dancers were very careful in using all safety recommendations, and a lot of psychological work with dancers helped them to reduce the anxiety connected with COVID-19 and concentrate on the preparation and dancing quality. With all the efforts from the team of teachers and coaches for maintaining the safety regulations and measures (e.g., disinfection, wearing masks, keeping distance, and limiting the number of people in the dance hall), fortunately there were no COVID-19 cases in their dance club.

The National championship was very successful as couples achieved their goals of reaching the National podium. Dancers have started to prepare for the next championship which will be arranged in Spring 2021. Now in our country we have a second lockdown, but this time professional sports are allowed to proceed with training. Dancers feel happy about having the possibility to grow as dancers and I am satisfied that my regular work with them helps them in staying balanced, focused and motivated.

In conclusion, I want to highlight a few things:

1. The importance of constant and regular psychological work despite the circumstances. We used to prepare athletes and help them to maintain their mental health while seeking their peak performance. However, now we also must help them to stay in sport and wait together with them for a new beginning.
2. Giving clear guidelines and recommendations to athletes are essential in this sensitive period of COVID-19 pandemic, and also providing a mental space and ability to contain their anxiety, fears, and feelings of uncertainty. We must be emotionally available for the athletes.
3. Teamwork is extremely important during this period of pandemic. Teachers, coaches, doctors, sport mental health specialists and family members of athletes should continue to work together. Only then it is possible to proceed in a similar way as athletes did before the pandemic.



Dr. Brigita Stenger, MD