



Stepping Out

The same-sex ballroom and Latin dance scene

Marianka Swain reports on the European Championships

Marking the tenth anniversary of the European Same-Sex Dance Association (ESSDA), this year's Berlin-based European Championships felt particularly special, says Germany's Caroline Privou, who with partner Petra Zimmerman successfully defended her ballroom title. Caroline notes that holding the event outside of a multi-sport event like Eurogames proves that ESSDA has accomplished its founding aim of taking competitive same-sex dance into the future.

Indeed, the combined efforts of ESSDA and local organisers pinkballroom resulted in "a state-of-the-art event that set a record in participating dancers" – in contrast to the recent turbulent Miami Outgames. Caroline praises pinkballroom's publishing of advance information, which "made planning very easy", and the "flawless" competition taking place in front of a huge crowd, "encouraging dancers to give their best".

The UK's Sergio Brilhante, who won men's Latin with Michael Litke, says it was one of their favourite European Championships so far – "not only because of our result, which was a dream come true, but because of the work put in by a great organising team. The venue, Gretel Bergmann Halle, had good facilities, a proper dance floor was

laid down and the light fittings created a beautiful atmosphere. Germany certainly knows how to do it!

"The party was a great opportunity to socialise with our fellow competitors and spectators. It feels wonderful to be part of a community, making so many new friends." Litke also loved the exhibition celebrating ten years of ESSDA, "showing powerful moments from warm-up through to the intimacy, power and beauty of couples on the floor, as well as the public, officials and adjudicators. Dancing is such an ephemeral art that having those moments captured in time is precious, so a big thanks to all the photographers."

The anniversary was also marked by a commemorative reception and the awarding of a one-off grand slam title. The winners of the latter, hotly contested over four international competitions, were Sergio and Michael in men's Latin, Caroline and Petra in women's ballroom,

France and the UK's Axel Zischka and Thorsten Dreyer in men's ballroom, and – sharing the women's Latin title – Germany's Ute Graffenberger and Marina Hüls, and Finland's Piia Korpi and Santra Rinne.

As this final competition used a closed valuation, Ute was "really surprised when the Finnish girls were called for second place and we realised we'd won the European Championships – just one point ahead!" Only slightly marring the experience was the committee's eagerness to keep to the timetable, meaning no breaks in between dances and short award ceremonies, but the grand slam titles were presented at the ball "a bit more extensively and personally – that was a really nice gesture".

The reaction from family, friends, trainers and companions was "crazy – it's great to see them so proud and happy. It was an unforgettable event for us, and we're happy that other members of our dance club were successful as well. This

will be a great motivation (or will increase expectations?) for the German Championship 2018!"

Holding the competition over three days meant there was time for ten dance and showdance. In the individual showdance event, Kerstin Kallman, one of the organisers, was impressed by two couples competing for the first time – Germany's "dynamic" Mark Harps and Kai Vetter, and the UK's Mary Matthews and Carley Haslam "presenting a moving history" – but the experience of fellow Brits Bradley and Sören Stauffer-Kruse, also known as The Sugar Dandies, won out.

Among the six teams in showdance was – for the first time – a group with wheelchair dancers, and "all fought for the title with excellent performances. Everyone was so different!" They ranged from "Twelve Freddie Mercurys dancing to Queen" to the "very soulful" Pink Dancers and "perfectly synchronised" Swinging Sisters. In the end, pinkballroom's Revue En Rose group narrowly clinched victory with their topical, Europe-themed piece – complete with Brexit heartbreak.

ESSDA's Trix Macleod recalls "tears of both joy and sadness" from those watching, "especially Team GB". Another memorable moment for her was the new Queer and Fun event, which "proved to be exactly what it said on the tin – such fun! It really captured the attention of the audience with some new couplings and interesting dances not shown elsewhere, such as the polka." Proof that ESSDA isn't just celebrating its past, but looking to the future. ■

Ute Graffenberger and Marina Hüls.

