

Winnipeg Free Press - PRINT EDITION

Let me give you a rumba for your money

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16/04/2010 1:00 AM | [Comments: 0](#)

I suspect, what with the Helena Guergis scandal in Ottawa and that Icelandic volcano causing chaos at the world's airports, a great many of you are champing at the bit to hear how my rumba lessons are going.

As you no doubt recall, twice a week for the past three months, I've been quick-stepping downtown to the Ted Motkya Dance Studio so that Anna Rudman, a gorgeous Russian-born dancer, can teach me to undulate in a strangely seductive manner.

Anna and I are one of six couples getting ready to duke it out in *Dancing With Celebrities*, in which local personalities are paired with serious dancers in a dancing contest.

The fourth annual ballroom showdown takes place May 1 at the Fairmont Winnipeg and, along with a chance to watch me sustain a crippling knee injury, it raises funds for the Society of Manitobans with Disabilities/Easter Seals.

With two weeks to go, Anna and I are putting the final touches on our routine via the technique of her pushing me around the dance floor the way you'd push an overloaded shopping cart in the parking lot at Safeway.

In the rumba, the legendary dance of love, sultry moves and smouldering facial expressions are meant to convey a sense of tension, a sense of passion, a sense of tenderness.

In my case, the scowl of intense concentration conveys the sense (a) I haven't gone to the bathroom for six years; and (b) I'm desperately trying to remember Grade 5 math. It's the same look of horror you see frozen on Kate Gosselin's waxy face every week on *Dancing With The Stars*.

Teaching me to sway my hips seductively and waggle my arms like Ralph Macchio in the "wax on, wax off" scene in *The Karate Kid* hasn't been easy for Anna. A highlight of our routine involves her grasping my finger while spinning like a NASA centrifuge so that her long hair whips around and -- WHAP -- slaps me in the face. Instead of hot rumba music, what you hear is: "Spin! WHAP! Ouch! Spin! WHAP! Ouch!"

Want proof? Check out the new video on our website in which Anna moves like a gazelle while I stagger around blindly with the *Free Press* dance-cam, a portable camera lashed to my head.

For those of you eager to place huge bets on the ballroom battle, here's a quick look at the competition:

1) Fiddling and singing star Sierra Noble -- Sierra and her partner, Yuriy Demchyshyn, are performing the paso dobles, which is Spanish for: "We are so much better than everyone else it isn't even funny."

They are scary good. They float around in a majestic symphony of lean, lithe, sultry limbs. Scariest of all? They don't even sweat!

Says Sierra: "We're feeling pretty good. We have some polishing to do. We have a surprise ending we won't show anyone until the big night."

2) Beloved children's entertainer Fred Penner -- Not only is Fred a super nice guy and a music icon; he's also a swell dancer. I really hate that about Fred, who will be doing a quick step medley with partner Jennifer West. Will the tap come back? Says Fred: "I did a lot of theatre in the 1970s so I've done a bit of tap and jazz, and movement is pretty natural to me."

3) Deputy mayor Justin Swandel -- I think it's fair to say Justin dances with all the style and grace we have come to expect from civic politicians. He and his Russian-born partner, Catrina Covaliov, are tackling the cha cha.

Says Justin: "I still get scared when I have to go out and talk to people. I'll be really scared when I have to dance in front of people. I'm hoping I don't faint."

4) Fairmont general manager Indu Brar -- Indu and partner Jedi Baker are doing the jive. It's like watching two Energizer Bunnies zip around the floor. If you were to look at their brilliant smiles without sunglasses, it would scorch your retinas.

Says Indu: "When I started, I was totally out of my comfort zone. But now I feel, as long as there's not a gazillion people staring at me, I'm OK."

5) "Dancing Gabe" Langlois -- What can I tell you? If you've been to a sporting event in Winnipeg, you've seen this legendary fan bust his trademark moves. Gabe and his two partners, Anahid Babaian and Stephanie Blandford, are unveiling The Evolution of Dancing Gabe.

Says Gabe: "I'm looking forward to the big night. It's the biggest night of my life!"

If you love watching ballroom dancing and train wrecks in the SAME show, there's still time to buy tickets and to place bets.

Just remember to wear safety glasses, because a ponytail to the eyeball really stings.

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Watch a dancing fool

You'd better quick step if you want seats for Dancing With Celebrities on May 1. Tickets are \$175. Call 975-3084 or visit the Society for Manitobans with Disabilities website.

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