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I'm a real bear of a dancer

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I did an extremely manly thing Thursday morning.

I bought new shoes. Not just any shoes. I bought dancing shoes. Ballroom dancing shoes.

It was a new experience for me. Over the years, as a typical Canadian guy, I've bought all kinds of shoes -- football shoes, basketball shoes, running shoes -- but dancing shoes are a little out of my comfort zone.

When I was growing up, owning a pair of dancing shoes would have caused older kids at my high school to hold you upside-down and stick your head in the toilet.

But that was then. On Thursday, Pete Larsen, the wholesale manager at Mallabar who sizes me up for an extra-large Santa suit every Christmas, helped me pick out these size 12 1/2 beauties.

I asked Pete whether he gets many middle-aged, six-foot-four, 288-pound guys coming in looking for professional-quality dancing footwear.

"No," is what he said before a brief pause, adding: "We don't do a lot of ballroom stuff, but we decided to carry it as soon as *Dancing With The Stars* came on TV. People look for ballroom shoes now; before that (show), no one did."

In a couple of hours, I'm going to give these spiffy new shoes their first trial run. I have to meet my dance partner, a beautiful Russian-born dancer named Anna Rudman, to put the finishing touches on our rumba routine.

It will be one of our final practices before we hit the floor May 1 for *Dancing With Celebrities*, in which local personalities are teamed up with actual dancers in a ballroom competition. Twice a week for the last three months, Anna has been struggling to transform me from a 288-pound sandbag into a 288-pound sandbag with expensive new shoes.

Like I said earlier, I'm a little out of my comfort zone. But that's OK. In fact, that's the point! *Dancing With Celebrities* raises funds for the Society for Manitobans with Disabilities/Easter Seals. As I stumbled through my first practice three months ago, Andrew Terhoch, the society's special events manager, explained being out of your comfort zone is an everyday thing for someone with a disability.

"We do this event to showcase our philosophy that, with the right support, anything is possible," Andrew said. "It's not always easy to step out in the world and try something new. To get out on the dance floor for the first time is more about how the music moves you than how you move to the music."

I'm pretty sure he said that to make me feel better, and it did. I think I understand what he meant.

I understand because learning to do the rumba is one of the hardest things I've ever tried. On a sliding scale of difficulty, it's somewhere between nuclear physics and NASCAR.

There's a video of Anna and me on the *Free Press* website. My buddy, Bob watched it and -- I'm sure this came from his heart -- said it was like watching a huge clumsy bear escape from a zoo, stumble on a beautiful young girl and, in super slow motion, attack her on a dance floor.

The other day, a little frustrated, I asked Margaret Motyka, co-owner of the dance studio, what my problem was. She flashed a brilliant smile and laughed: "You don't have a problem, Doug! Look at you, you're dancing!"

Whenever I go to a charity dinner, like last Saturday, every guy in the room will come up to me. And do you know what we talk about? Yes, we talk about the hockey playoffs. We're guys. What did you (bad word) expect?

On the other hand -- and I am not making this up -- EVERY SINGLE woman in the room will eagerly ask how my rumba lessons are coming along, and whether I'd mind showing them a couple of sultry ballroom moves. Seriously.

I think this is why *Dancing With The Stars* has become the top-rated show in the U.S., even waltzing past *American Idol*. It's also why I feel sympathy for Kate Gosselin, who got the boot from DWTS this week. Sure, she's annoying. Sure, she danced with all the grace of a cinder block. But hey, she gave it a shot.

There's a sign on the wall at the dance studio. It says: "You only live once, and if you dance, once is enough!" I've looked at that sign a lot in the last three months. It finally makes sense to me.

It's not just about dancing. It means you shouldn't be afraid to try something new. It means you should buy some new shoes and let the music move you.

Even if you're the only one who can hear it.

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