

Athlete, studio blazing trail for Paralympic dance in US



BLOOMFIELD TOWNSHIP, Mich. (AP) — A few years ago, Cheryl Angelelli retired from Paralympic swimming and sought to fill a competitive void in her life. Around the same time, a social media call came out from a Detroit-area dance studio looking for students interested in Para Dance — ballroom dance for those with an impairment affecting their lower limbs

She replied to owners of the Fred Astaire Dance Studio in Bloomfield Township and, with the help of trained instructors, quickly took to the sport — winning second place last year with her partner, Tamerlan Gadirov, at an international competition in Germany. She and the studio owner created free monthly dance classes and now prepare for the first organized U.S. training for Para Dance instruction — with the aim of building a national pipeline as advocates hope to get it included in the 2028 Paralympics in Los Angeles.



In this Wednesday, May 23, 2018, photo, dance instructors dance with wheelchair-bound students at the Fred Astaire Dance Studio, in Bloomfield Township, Mich. The Detroit-area dance studio is blazing the trail for wheelchair ballroom dancing in the U.S., with the help of a retired Paralympic swimming world champion-turned-dancer, Cheryl Angelelli, and her dance partner, Tamerlan Gadirov. The pair say the training should help build a national pipeline of instructors as advocates hope to make Para Dance an official sport in the 2028 Paralympics in Los Angeles. (AP Photo/Carlos Osorio)

“I knew as soon as I started wheelchair ballroom dancing, my goal was always to compete at the ... international Paralympic level,” said Angelelli, 49, a Paralympic swimming world champion whose day job is in marketing for Detroit Medical Center’s Rehabilitation Institute of Michigan. “Once I got started in this sport, I started reaching out to the people ... in Para Dance asking what I needed to do.”

Angelelli and Gadirov, who came to the studio from Azerbaijan, will help lead dance demonstrations and techniques at the training scheduled for June 23-24, which is drawing a couple dozen instructors from across the U.S. Beyond skill-building, the goal is to spread awareness of a sport far more popular in Europe and Asia.

“The more that we can get people trained here in the United States, I think it’s really going to open up opportunities and possibilities for more people to get involved in the sport,” she said.

The effort isn’t without challenges: Para Dance programs in many other countries are funded by their own Paralympic organizations. That’s not the case in the U.S., which led Angelelli and Gadirov to seek funding from sponsors. An already expensive sport is made more so by the fact

that there is no U.S.-made wheelchair for ballroom dancing — Angelelli had one designed by a company she had worked with.

Angelelli, who was paralyzed from the chest down three decades ago after a diving accident, also worked to secure a grant from the Rehabilitation Institute of Michigan Foundation so students don't have to pay for the monthly Dance Mobility program at the studio. That's crucial, she said, in a country where the vast majority of people with disabilities are unemployed.

Another challenge, which Angelelli and the studio hope to tackle with the training, is the low supply of instructors in the U.S. Her first went back to his home country and another moved on to another studio.

“I was devastated ... because I just know from experience that there's a lack of professionally trained teachers that know how to work with dancers with disabilities,” she said. “I thought my dancing career was only going to be eight months.”

Dance studio co-owner Evan Mountain acted quickly by hiring Gadirov and helping him immigrate. He has since been joined by another Para Dance-trained instructor from the Ukraine. Mountain said the growing roster of students, teachers and training sessions are helping to turn the area into a national “epicenter of wheelchair ballroom dancing.”

Camila Rodrigues, World Para Dance Sport manager, said in an email the Michigan training helps “attract more athletes and get more people to see how amazing” it is.

“It would be a dream for us to see the sport in the LA 2028 Paralympic Games,” she said. “But for that to happen we need to grow in the United States and we see the upcoming Para dance sport course in Michigan as an important step for the development of our sport.”

After a recent Dance Mobility class, the floor cleared save for Angelelli and Gadirov, who remained to demonstrate the showcase that garnered them the silver in Germany: A routine modeled after the famous “(I've Had) The Time of My Life” scene from the movie “Dirty Dancing.” The performance was heart-pumping and tugging — especially when Gadirov lifted Angelelli in her wheelchair and spun her. The students cheered — as audiences and even judges have done when the pair performs what Angelelli calls “our signature routine.”

“What girl doesn't want to be ‘Baby’ and be lifted?” she asked beforehand.

Importantly, nothing about it conjured images of disability, only possibility.

“It is breaking down barriers,” Mountain said. “For them to get out there and show so many people what they can do. ... It doesn't matter if you're in a wheelchair, or if you're an amputee or whatever it is. You can still get out there and dance and perform and have that creative outlet.”

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