

Texas Ballroom students swing to become world champions

Bryan Bowling squeezed his eyes shut as judges bellowed into a squeaking microphone the fifth, fourth and third place winners at the international country dance competition.

He held his breath as his coach and country dancing partner, Sherry Reynolds, cupped his hand in hers. The title of the World Championships: United Country Western Dance Council was at stake this January.

Then, through the ear-shattering screams, shakes from his teammates and expressions of congratulations, he heard it: Bowling was the world champion in country partner dancing in the pro-amateur category, bringing home the title for Texas Ballroom at the University of Texas.

Mouth agape, Bowling slowly walked to the podium in Phoenix, Arizona and accepted his first place award.

"I wasn't expecting anything ... when we got there," Bowling said. "Through some miracle, I had the best day of my life."

Bowling is a physics and economics senior who served as a captain in 2023 of the competitive country dancing team for Texas Ballroom, a student-run partner dancing organization. As a senior, he now assists the captain and new members while still competing. Throughout his four years at UT, he has competed around the country in front of judges who critique his technique, ability to lead and chemistry with his partner.

The world country competition consists of couples of the same skill level and teams pairing pros with amateurs. Bowling said he walked onto the floor with six other pro-amateur teams who competed with different routines to "Hard Not to Love it" by Steve Moalker at the same time as he and Reynolds.

He said the judges watch for dancers who catch their eye and perform with the best technique.

"I had to work really hard to try to be a great dancer with not a lot of experience," Bowling said.

Bowling said he continued to practice his dancing daily for nearly two years while he battled losses to other teammates in competitions. He would critique himself in the mirror as he practiced his ballroom hold, outstretching his arms in an L-shape as his competition routines pranced through his mind.

"(Competing) takes a lot of sacrifice," Bowling said. "I need to make sure my partner feels good and it's a hard journey, because no one really knows what to do."

Reynolds, a volunteer partner dance coach at UT since 1996, said her hands shook nervously as she watched one of Bowling's decorated, 30-year-old competitors take the floor at the world competition.

Her heart raced as the competitor earned the highest scores from the judges. When this competitor's second place award was announced, Reynolds said she felt flabbergasted.

"This guy had a really strong reputation for dancing, and so I was not expecting very much (for us), even though I felt like Bryan did a really good job," Reynolds said. "I (thought) 'Oh my gosh, if he got second, we definitely got sixth!'"

When Reynolds heard Bowling's win blasted from the cheap speakers on the floor, she felt her eyes well with tears.

"Hard work, every once in a while, pays off," Reynolds said. "It was a wonderful experience, and I was so happy I could help him achieve that."

Bowling's couples dance partner and girlfriend, Paris Apolinar, said she received countless texts from Bowling when he won the competition. She peered from her phone at a livestream of the competition and screamed alone in her room in Austin when Bowling was named champion.

"I knew he was going to win," Apolinar, nutritional science junior, said. "After years worth of practice, he was very confident and they looked so good."

Bowling said the most important part of his tireless practicing was the kind and determined mentorship he received from Reynolds.

"She's a lot better than I am, and she has a wealth of knowledge," Bowling said. "She just gives us her time and energy because she loves it. So, we have to respond by working (hard) for her."

When Reynolds turned 40, she said she was in a creative rut after playing classical guitar throughout her life. So, she began taking studio classes and attending ballroom dancing competitions.

"(Dancing) was a late life gift to me," said Reynolds, who saw UT students dancing more than 30 years ago, learned from them and became their teacher. "It shows that even when you're a 40-year-old that there are still things in life to be discovered. There's always an opportunity for things to turn out wonderfully, and they certainly have for me."

Now, three decades after seeing her first performance, she spends multiple days a week in the studio with students from Texas Ballroom, perfecting their footwork, rhythm and musicality, and then traveling with them to compete.

She thought to herself that her life would feel complete if she had the chance to dance with one young student, and she said Bowling helped give that to her.

Reynolds has coached hundreds of students through Texas Ballroom and has produced 17 world champions, Bowling included.

"The irony is, now I'm their coach and I help them dance beautifully," Reynolds said. "What brings me the most joy is the relationships I have the opportunity to establish with younger people. Bryan is a joy to work with, and I'm sure I will know him for the rest of his life."

Because of Reynolds' work with Texas Ballroom, Bowling said he's taken up a mentorship role in his last semester at UT. Now, he stands in the corner of the studio, carefully assessing a new couple's technique, preparing them to compete at Worlds.

"My entire goal was to help other people find their passions and to help other people go to competitions and socialize," Bowling said. "Ballroom dancing ... is very physically intimate in a platonic way."

Apolinar said she felt she experienced Bowling's mentorship because of Reynolds when she joined Texas Ballroom in late 2022. She said watching his respect to his partners and precision when teaching drew her to him, leading her to ask him to be dance partners at a loud house party that spring.

"Everyone (at Texas Ballroom) is so respectful, and that's how I felt with Bryan," Apolinar said. "He was teaching me how to do all these different techniques, so we started doing some more advanced dancing for fun."

When he graduates, Bowling said he plans on entering investment banking, but still wants to find his relaxation through dance. He said without the help of Reynolds, he wouldn't have the love he has for dance and the confidence to perform in front of people.

"I've been given these gifts, so I want to help others have an outlet to express themselves," Bowling said. "It's my passion."