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OPINIONS & COMMENTARY

Stepping out of the ophthalmic role

by Maxine Lipner Contributing Editor

For Omar F. Almallah, MD, life's a ballroom and there's very little he'd rather do than dance.

Bedecked in their finest, Omar F. Almallah, MD, and his wife of 21 years, Cheryl, glide toe-to-toe across the room filled with eager onlookers. The two are moving in closing harmony, buoyed by a ballroom beat. The Almallahs are competing in the upper echelon of ballroom dancing, where they are ranked fifth in the nation.



Omar F. Almallah, MD, professional ballroom dancer

A cataract and refractive surgeon from Tom's River, N.J., Almallah does not spend all his time on the dance floor. In the mornings, this Gene Kelly-esque practitioner is usually in the operating room; it is only in the afternoons that he and Cheryl truly step out.



The Almallahs met while doing the "hustle" during the disco-crazed 1970s. However, while they continued to enjoy social dancing, it wasn't until about 9 years ago, when they took a few professional ballroom lessons aboard a cruise ship, that they actually began to take the sport seriously. "We took lessons and 6 months after we started, we began competing," Almallah said. "We thought we had gotten

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good and then we went to one of those competitions where you saw the really good people dance, and it was disheartening." By then it was too late - they were hooked.

Initially, the two competed in the Prechampionship Division and just 2 years after beginning, they captured the national title. From there, they moved into the more competitive Open Category, where they slowly crawled up the ranks. Here they were judged for a set of five dances - the waltz, the tango, the Viennese waltz, the foxtrot, and the quick-step, each usually done in succession for about 2 minutes.



Of the five dances, the foxtrot became their favorite. "If you observe it, it looks like you're basically not doing anything, just gliding on the floor, but it's what they call the 'dancer's dance,'" Almallah said. "High-quality dancers recognize another high-quality dancer by how well they dance the foxtrot - it's the one that requires the greatest amount of skill and precision."

In competition, in addition to showmanship, there is definite strategy involved, with many elements to juggle. "You have two human bodies that have to swing in space in synchrony to each other and in time to the music," he said. "On top of that, you have competitors all around you doing the same thing, so, you have to think several steps ahead." For example, if the Almallahs are about to do a variation of steps into a corner and another couple is already there, they have to consider their next moves carefully to avoid an unseemly collision.

Almallah sees a carryover between ballroom dancing and his other passion - ocular surgery. "Believe it or not, the ballroom dancing has made my surgery so much better and more efficient," he said. "The best dancers are the ones that can create a movement with the least amount of wasted energy and movement." Almallah has applied these techniques to his surgery. "I'm always looking to create the least amount of disturbance in the eye," he said. "It has made me so efficient that I typically do like 25 or 30 cases and I'm done by 2 o'clock." Indeed, people come from all over the country to observe his technique. Also, thanks to the discipline of dancing, Almallah finds he is able to remain more relaxed during surgery.

After completing 30 cases however, Almallah finds it nice to be able to get out on the dance floor and do some physical activity in the afternoon. "It's a discipline like eye surgery, but it's totally different - you have music playing, you have the floor, and you have your partner, and it's really a great way to release energy."

For other practitioners who are interested in diversifying their activities, Almallah recommends perseverance. "You need coaching and, of course, after the glamour of it wears off, a lot of people want to quit, but that's what makes the difference in people who can achieve things at a high level - they don't quit," he said. "I was 32 years old before I ever took my first dance lesson, and so a lot of people said it was too late - but we kind of fooled them all."

The only question now is whether they can continue to do so through 2008, when ballroom dancing becomes an Olympic sport.

Contact Information

Almallah: 732-349-5622, fax 732-349-5625,
foxtrot@bellatlantic.net



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