

# ballroom dancing times

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# Dancing Profile: The Fletchers

by

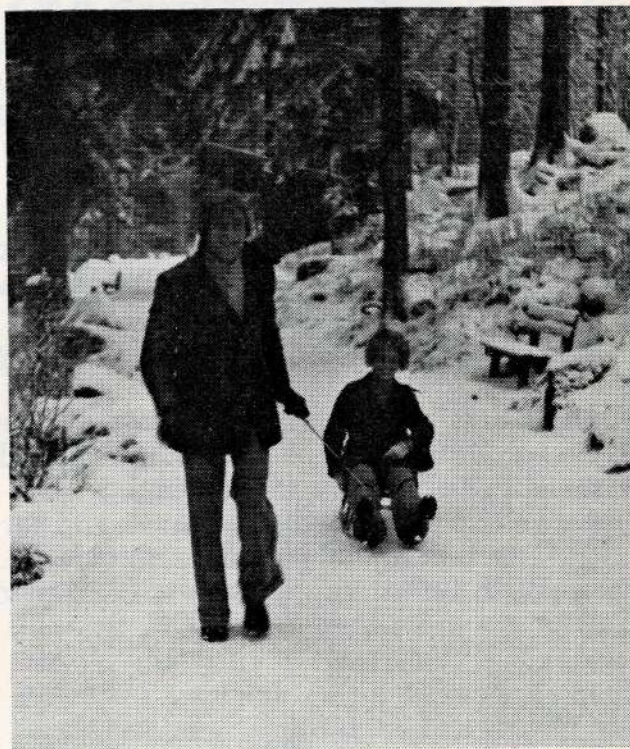
GRAHAM PERKINS

UNTIL SHE MET ALAN, HAZEL FLETCHER HAD always wanted to become a ballet teacher. She had been attending ballet classes from the age of six and by her mid-teens had taken her grade examinations and was working for "majors."

All that stopped her was, believe it or not, a pair of fish-net tights. As she was putting the tights on, they caught on a toe-nail, tearing it right off, and Hazel was consequently unable to take her exam. By the time the next examination date came along, Alan Fletcher had appeared on the scene and Hazel



*H.R.H. Princess Alexandra presenting the Fletchers with their Carl Alan Award earlier this year.*



*Alan and Hazel enjoying the sunshine and snow in the Black Forest during a visit to compete in Germany.*

had forgotten all about her ballet teaching ambitions.

Alan started ballroom dancing at about eight years of age. He attended Ken Bateman's beginners' classes at Slough and clearly remembers that he was still wearing short trousers when he took part in his first competition.

Once he got to secondary school he began to catch football fever, soon finding a place in the school team. With dancing classes on Saturday mornings and football matches in the afternoons, it was clear that something had to give.

Luckily, dancing triumphed and Alan continued to compete in junior competitions. Due to the vastly different rates at which children grow, he had a succession of partners. For a while, he also danced in Ken Bateman's junior formation team but, finding



that he could not keep up with both types of competition, decided to stick to the individual events.

This proved to be a wise decision, for he made the finals of most of the major events, including both the Ballroom and Latin Championships at Blackpool.

Alan's last partner as a junior was Gillian Tarling. When they became too old for the juniors, they competed together as adults, quickly graduating through the Novice and Pre-Champ grades to compete at Amateur level. After about nine months, however, they split up.

The partnerless Alan became more and more dispirited, and his father, getting tired of seeing him mope about the house, spoke to Bill Phillips, whose studio Alan and Gillian had used for practising. Bill's suggestion was a strange one—a complete beginner who had initially come to his studio only because her friend wanted to learn to dance. Her name was Hazel Simpson and Bill firmly believed that she had great potential.

When Alan and Hazel met it was a case of love at first sight. What is more, Alan only had to dance with Hazel once to realise that Bill Phillips was right—she did indeed have tremendous potential. And she says now that her ballet training really helped because, although Alan treated her as a non-



*Alan's employers are not only understanding about his requests for time off to compete but actively interested; here one of the directors of Courage's admires the World Championship trophy the Fletchers won in Sydney.*



*Champions in action—a dancing photograph that captures the charm and elegance of their style.*

dancer she was, of course, accustomed to listening to music and it helped her master groups and figures quickly. She is positive that it was an asset.

They started dancing together in 1965, intending to do their first competition a year later. In the event, they got on so well that in September of the same year they entered for the West of England Amateur Latin Championship at Minehead and took fifth place. Further success eluded them in the year that followed for they just failed to get into the last twelve in every major event. At last their luck changed and they started to make the semi-finals regularly, gradually working up the placings.

By this time they were engaged to be married. Originally they had planned to wait some time before the wedding but then Lady Luck decided to take a hand.

It all began with a competition in *Dance News* which offered a Mediterranean holiday as first prize. Somehow Hazel received two copies of the paper that week, so she filled in both entry forms, one in her own name and the other in Alan's.

He knew nothing at all about this so it came as quite a surprise to him when he received a letter telling him he had won a





*Champion at work; Alan takes stock of bottles in the brewery for whom he works*

holiday for two. Once he had recovered from the shock, he decided that instead of just having a holiday they should turn it into a honeymoon, and so, in 1968, they were married.

Hazel then gave up her job as a telephonist/receptionist to work at home, making dance dresses. In addition to producing all her own outfits, she also makes dresses for other people, and her customers include some of the top names in the business.

The following year the Fletchers expected to make a real impact at Blackpool and were terribly disappointed when they were placed twenty-first. Up till then they had been going to several coaches but for the next year they went to only one and in 1970 were placed fifth. 1971 saw them competing in the World's alongside the reigning Blackpool champions, Stan Shippey and Iris Kane. Then, in 1972, they won at Blackpool for the first time, taking all four dances.

Hazel had always vowed that she would never be one of those women who cry when they win Blackpool, but when the result was announced she almost flooded the Empire Ballroom.

In the same year the Fletchers won the World's Championship—but only after a nerve-racking adventure on the way. Traveling with Michael Barr and Vicky Green, they had a one-day stop-over in Singapore. Since their tickets were correctly marked they did not bother to confirm their onward passages. Imagine their horror, therefore, when on arrival at the airport, they found that their seats had been taken!

The aircraft was full and there were forty

people waiting on stand-by, but Alan and Michael were desperate. If they missed that plane they would lose their chance to compete in the World's. They created such a scene that they were at last allowed on to the plane—literally seconds before it took off.

Once they did get to Sydney, however, they received such wonderful hospitality that they were sorry to have to come home. Travel is one of the major rewards of being a top amateur, although it can also be a problem in terms of getting time off work. Fortunately, Alan's employers—he is a stocktaker for a brewery—are very understanding.

Back in England, the Fletchers have received a Carl Alan award and in May of this year notched their second victory at Blackpool. Sooner or later they intend to turn professional. When they do they are hardly likely to go short of work, for they have already been offered bookings for their first demonstration.



*After their first Blackpool win in 1972; they did it in no uncertain fashion, taking all four dances.*