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FROM TOGETHER, A SPECIAL ADVERTISING FEATURE

First Dance Spectaculars

Dancing like the stars



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Choreographer John Cassese dances the foxtrot with partner Leah Calahan. (Harry Langdon)

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A couple's first dance is an opportunity to be creative and celebrate the beginning of a new life together — and it should be fun, exciting and unforgettable.

Unexpected songs, custom choreography, spins, lifts, dips and even costume changes are designed to wow the crowd and make the reception to follow a smash hit.

"We wanted to blow it out of the water," said Joe Campanella, who first-danced with bride Renee Piane-Campanella to a foxtrot-triple-time-swing-foxtrot medley at their Los Angeles wedding reception in 2005. "And we did." The Marina del Rey couple said they kept their dance lessons a secret for added impact.

For Sara and Scott Stewart of Woodland Hills, who married Jan. 8 also in Los Angeles, "It was the first time we were showcasing each other to our families and no one thought we were good dancers," said Sara, 38. "We wanted to make it special."

And they did, too, performing a foxtrot to Roberta Flack's "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face" and — just when the audience thought they were finished — Scott, 33, threw off his jacket and they burst into a sexy triple-time free-style swing to "The Way You Make Me Feel" by Michael Jackson.

Experts such as John Cassese, owner of The Dance Doctor Productions in Santa Monica, a longtime entertainment industry choreographer and instructor, and Harmony Walton, owner of the Bridal Bar, a bridal consultancy in West Hollywood, agree that "Dancing with the Stars" and other TV shows have influenced the trend of making first dances highly theatrical. "When couples see that people from all walks of life can dance, they know they can," Cassese said.

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Experts like Cassese believe that the first dance is as important as the ceremony. "It sets the tone for

the entire reception,” he said. “Today’s wedding guests expect to be entertained, so the first dance should be the kick-off to high gear excitement.”

Don’t worry if you have two left feet. “If you can walk, you can dance,” said Cassese, who choreographed first dances for the Loves and the Stewarts as well as for celebrities including Adam Sandler and wife Jacqueline Titone, U2 guitar player The Edge and wife Morleigh Steinberg, and “The Bachelorette’s” Trista Rehn and Ryan Sutter. “At first I teach them a few simple steps, and we build from there.” And after that, the possibilities are endless.

GET CREATIVE

Cassese recommends beginning with a romantic dance like a foxtrot and then breaking into a fast-paced sizzler. But there are plenty of combinations to choose from, including the foxtrot-hustle and salsa-swing-foxtrot.

Jennelle Wax, owner of Bella Ballroom Dance Studio in Newport Beach, recently choreographed a three-minute “dancing through the ages” medley featuring a waltz to Norah Jones’ “Come Away with Me,” a few steps to Michael Jackson’s “Thriller,” a disco hustle (with the finger point) to “Staying Alive,” moves from “Ice Ice Baby” by Vanilla Ice and a finale of spins and dips to “Yeah!” by Usher.

“Couples should be clear on what songs they want to use before they research a dance coach,” Walton recommended. Then let the instructor make suggestions on dance styles and choreography.

DRESS IT UP

“Consider how much moving you’ll be doing when you’re choosing your dress,” Walton said. Cassese tells his brides to have their tailors devise a way to “bustle up” the train. Walton also recommends that brides buy an inexpensive dress in a similar shape to the wedding dress to wear during the lessons. And to practice at least once or twice in your wedding shoes. “This helps break them in and eliminate dance floor surprises.”

Some brides have a special dress made for the first dance. April Love designed a strapless gown with a short feathered skirt for her dance ensemble. Cassese recalled a student who designed her bridal gown with two skirts. Midway through the first dance, her husband pulled off the long outer skirt, revealing a dance-worthy cocktail-length skirt underneath — to the crowd’s roar of amazement.

Damon and Monique Rachell of Newport Beach changed into fiery costumes — his a bull fighter-style outfit and hers a red Flamenco-style gown — for their sexy paso doble first dance at their 2010 wedding.

DANCE THERAPY

Couples often get more than just fancy footwork out of preparing for the big dance. “Dance lessons are a great stress reducer,” Cassese said, “because you have to focus on just one thing — the dance. It forces you to concentrate on each other.”






“It’s the best thing for a couple to do — the dance lessons brought us closer together,” Campanella said. “We experienced a different kind of bond with the lessons, which surprised us,” said Claire Benson, 31, who married Joey Sila, 29, Oct. 1. “It was cool because we got to be a team to accomplish a goal together,” she said. The Marina del Rey couple performed a fast-paced foxtrot to the Beatles’ “In My Life” at their destination wedding in Big Bear Lake.


“The dance lessons gave us some fun time out from the frenzy of wedding planning and put the romantic enjoyment back into our relationship,” said Rianna Loving Giammarco, who with husband, Giovanni Giammarco, wowed their guests with a “Dancing with the Stars”-caliber display of foxtrot spins and dips to Celine Dion’s “The Power of Love” at their May 24, 2003, wedding in Santa Monica.

Now living in Pacific Palisades with busy professional lives and two children, ages 5 and 1, the Giammarcos have returned to Cassese for weekly Saturday dance lessons. “It’s our ‘date night,’” Rianna explained. “Every Saturday, we enjoy a dance lesson and dinner out. It’s a wonderful way to break out of the domestic routine.”

— Barbara Beckley
Custom Publishing Writer

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