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RENO'S NEWS AND ENTERTAINMENT  
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## ART OF THE STATE

BY MARK EARNEST



The Reno Latin Dance Fest usually features professional dancers, but a new amateur competition has been added this year.  
COURTESY/JOSE DE LA TORRE, RENO LATIN DANCE FEST

## New moves

### Salsa Bachata Amateur Cup

**For the past 11 years, the Reno Latin Dance Fest** has been a highlight for fans of the style. Now, for 2020, it has added a new angle.

The festival has always featured dance classes and workshops, showcases, parties and competitions for the pro dancers who attend. This year, though, there will be the Salsa Bachata Amateur Cup, in which dancers who don't regularly make a living from their art can earn part of a \$5,000 prize pool. The new competition was formed as part of the festival's ongoing mission to create a welcoming environment to all types of Latin dancers.

"One of the things that's challenging in the dance world is to create opportunities for amateurs to have a stepping stone into more of a professional career, or just to get good feedback from the pros as a dancer," said William "BB" Flanders, who co-produces and co-hosts the festival with Rikik "Kiki" Rutledge.

Flanders added that while there are often jazz and ballet competitions for amateurs, it's not common for Latin dance. The Amateur Cup features solo, couple and team divisions in Salsa and Bachata styles, and is coordinated by Jennifer Silvas, who has experience with jazz and ballet competitions.

In the couples division, there is a significant way this competition is different from others in the dance world. Flanders explained that in most competitions there are "leads" and "follows," and they are along gender lines—as in men lead, women follow. Flanders said the Reno Latin Dance competition erases that distinction.

"We were like, 'OK, we need to remove that. It's old school,'" Flanders said. "It's been a big challenge for us to figure out

how to redefine this and still keep some of the traditions alive. We don't want to blow it up entirely, so we came up with a compromise, which is there is no switching between lead and follow."

It also means that same-sex couples can compete, something for which Flanders has already received positive feedback.

"We have people from the LGBTQ community that are very excited, because it's the first time they can compete on the same playing field," he said. "In the past, you had to create a completely separate division for a female lead or male follow, which seems silly to me. We've basically got rid of the whole gender thing, and you are being judged solely on how you dance."

For this first year, Flanders said that there are only a handful of amateurs from Reno-Tahoe competing, which is something that he expected for this first go-round.

"I have a feeling more people from here will jump on it next year," he said. "The idea of competing in the Salsa and Bachata world is brand new, and there are a lot of fears involved in competing, so I think more people will just be watching this year to see how it goes."

BB and Kiki not only run the festival, but also their own dance company and a long-running Latin dance night for all levels at the Peppermill's Edge club. Flanders said that Reno should be proud that its Latin dance scene is growing and that the Dance Fest is considered one of the top five in the U.S.

"When I started in Reno [14 years ago], there was just one other class and no place to go social dancing," he said. "So, it's been very exciting for us to see the progress and to be able to hand the baton over to other instructors: 'OK, now it's your turn to help keep this going.'" □

The Salsa Bachata Amateur Cup takes place throughout the Reno Latin Dance Fest, which runs Jan. 9-12 at Silver Legacy and Circus Circus. Go to [renolatindancefest.com](http://renolatindancefest.com) for schedules, prices and more details.