

Ballroom Dance Shoe Primer

By Amelia Buragas

You do not need ballroom dance shoes in order to dance and you are not required to purchase shoes to take BBDT classes. However, many of our members purchase ballroom shoes fairly early in their dance career because they are more comfortable and functional for dancing than street shoes.

Ballroom dance shoes have suede soles that allow the shoe both to grip the floor and turn easily. Rubber-soled shoes can be dangerous to dance in as they do not turn well and can injure the knees. If you will be wearing street shoes, a smooth-soled dress shoe is recommended. Jazz shoes or ballet slippers also make a good alternative to ballroom shoes.

It is important to remember that every style and brand of shoe fits slightly differently. Try on as many different shoes as possible to figure out which one works best for you.

There are three basic types of ballroom shoes:

Latin: For women these shoes typically are an open-toed sandal with a heel from 1 to 3 inches in height. The standard heel height is 2.5 inches, although right now it is very popular in the higher competition ranks to wear a 3-inch heel. (You need to have strong feet for a shoe this high!) Ladies -- it is generally recommended that if you purchase only one pair of shoes that you start with a latin sandal.

Shoe Fit: Shoes should be snug, not tight. Shoes that are too loose or too tight can cause blisters or other foot discomforts. For latin sandals, the women's toe should be as close as possible to the front of the shoe – you do not want to see much sole peeking out. Some ladies even prefer to have their toes slightly beyond the edge of the shoe so that they can feel the floor.

Men's latin shoes have what is called a Cuban heel that is 1.5 inches tall. Most leads only purchase latin shoes for competition purposes and you do not often see men wearing Cuban heels when out social dancing. They also do not work so well for standard.

Standard: These are also referred to as Court or Modern shoes. For the women standard shoes are closed-toe pumps. The heel is positioned more centrally under the foot than a latin sandal in order to facilitate backwards movement.

Men's standard shoes typically are an Oxford-style with a heel height comparable to regular dress shoes. Men, if you purchase only one pair of shoes you should purchase standard shoes. Again, shoes should be snug but not tight. Leather shoes may stretch slightly with use.

Practice: Practice shoes come in a variety of different styles. Women's practice shoes tend to look like a man's standard shoe with a higher heel (1.5 inches). You can also

purchase dance sneakers that have suede glued on the bottom.

Finally, here is some additional information about how to select and care for your shoes:

Heel Protectors: The heels on women's shoes are just hard plastic and quickly wear down when used. To prevent this, most women wear some type of heel protector – otherwise the heel on your shoe will need to be periodically replaced. Most shoe vendors sell plastic heel caps that slip over the heel on your shoe. These are inexpensive and also wear down with use. Another option is to purchase suede “stars” that can be taped around your shoe's heel. These will eventually wear down, but are the longest-lasting option. Men's shoes do not need any sort of extra protection.

Fabric: Men's shoes are universally black leather. Women's shoes come in a variety of colors and either satin or leather. The most popular color by far for social dancing is black. In competition, however, women tend to wear flesh colored shoes in order to extend the leg line. Some women also choose to dye their shoes the color of their competition dress (more popular for standard). It is highly recommended to use Scotch Guard or another fabric protector before wearing satin shoes as they are very difficult to clean once they become soiled.