

# Michael Mead

## A Serendipitous Path to the ‘*Bash*’

For Michael Mead, a four time undefeated World Smooth Champion with his partner and wife Toni Redpath, the path to dance success might have remained hidden if it weren't for a few turning points that can only be described as serendipitous. Driven to seek a fulfilling source of income, he turned away from two practical career paths to take the first steps in a dance career. While searching for a new venue for his dance, he traveled across an ocean and found himself in the last place he ever wanted to be after leaving London. Finally, after interacting with multiple dance and business partners over the years, two of those partners were so closely attuned to his personality and goals that they became close friends and eventually business partners. Ultimately, they joined him as co-organizers of the San Diego Ballroom Beach Bash.

The first step of Michael Mead's journey to dance success began with his unlikely position as an Articled Clerk for a firm of Chartered Accountants. Like the dancer that he was destined to become, Michael was already on the move, traveling from one company to another as he performed audits. The role was steady. He was good at it. He was unfulfilled.

“No one likes the auditor,” Michael stated.

Michael decided to try to seek a position that enabled him to earn a living while at the same time allowing him to enjoy his work. He found a job as an assistant to an advertising photographer in London. This position appealed to his creative side and was a more satisfying career choice, although he had to wait tables to supplement his photography income. There was a downside to this new career path due to the fierce competition. Ultimately, Michael found success in the world of photography to be less about skills and more about schmoozing account executives in advertising agencies. Luckily for Michael, he had already taken the first steps in his dance career by joining an Arthur Murray Dance Studio training class. It was a pleasant complement to the creative aspect of his photography career, and true relief came when the dance studio offered Michael a job as a dance instructor after six months of training. He turned to forge a path in ballroom dance.



Michael taught for awhile, honing his skills as he taught others, but he decided to expand his horizons beyond the familiar territory of London. With several options open in several countries, including Australia and areas of the North American continent, he moved to Canada, where he worked for six months as a dance teacher. Unfortunately, he was not able to acquire the full work permit he desired. Unable to pursue a career in the northernmost portion of the North American continent, he traveled south with friends, staying for a while in California, USA.

While there he was referred to a studio in Long Beach which was looking for staff and decided to give the Golden State a chance after all. It was an unlikely and almost awkward chain of events in the beginning, but the change of venue proved to be yet another step in the serendipitous path.

Michael taught for a while, then opened *Londance* studio in Orange County (with Pat Banks). Michael enjoyed running his studio and was ‘quite happy’ teaching his students. Although he participated in some relatively small local or area dance competitions on occasion, his focus



remained on teaching. The transition from primarily teaching and dancing with his students to becoming a competitive professional dancer, the step that ultimately led him to give up his role as a studio owner for a focused competitive career, was another pivotal moment in Michael's path to dance stardom.

Michael noticed that a fellow instructor was consistently lauded as the best male dancer in the studio. Michael was less than thrilled at the feeling (justified, he says) of being number two. In his pro-active fashion, he decided to do something about the situation and sought ways to improve his dancing skills. Michael turned to legendary dancers Brian and Christie MacDonald. They told him that if he wanted their help, he would have to compete. The concept, tried and true to this day, is that competition training focuses your attention, keeping you accountable through the judges and coaches. Michael dedicated his time and energy to his new path, but found the journey to be a bit rocky.

In his early professional competition days, Michael felt nervous at every competition. It was not unusual for him to be physically ill moments prior to the event, sometimes feeling ill even as he walked up the pathway to enter the competition grounds. It did not matter how well prepared he thought he was: The nervousness remained a constant companion. A turning point arrived at last.

Michael's turning point occurred during a competition when one fellow competitor consistently banged into him. Distracted by a growing irritation he forgot to be nervous and danced better

than he had danced prior to that moment. He placed higher than the aggressive competitor who had sparked his brief moment of pique. With that, Michael realized nerves did not have to play a role in his competing and he began to enjoy the competition experience.

“I forgot to be nervous,” he said.



Michael Mead and Toni Redpath  
Photo by Mary Tweeddale

Running a studio while maintaining the gruelling pace of a dedicated dance competitor proved to be an overwhelming task. He sold the studio in 1989 and turned his focus to the competitive side of his dance career. As a full-time competitor, Michael was able to maintain focus on his dancing while alleviating a portion of the responsibility required in running a studio. He continued to grow as a dancer and worked with a few different partners over the course of several years. Interestingly, each of his partners was a National Champion at some point, either before or after dancing with Michael. He eventually partnered with Toni Redpath, a professional dancer from Australia who ‘had a good background in 10 Dance, in Latin, and in ballroom.’ Toni’s background in Australian style of dancing worked well with the direction they decided to take their dance partnership.

In Michael’s own words:

*“It was serendipitous that we were at that level of technical proficiency when we met.”*

Partnership dancing improves when there is a good relationship between the partners. Michael stated it is possible to do a good job technically and to do a good job of expressing oneself, but when one’s partner is technically good and there is a positive emotional relationship, it is easier. The combination of Michael’s and Toni’s backgrounds plus their personalities worked well for their dance as well as for their personal lives. This time, Michael had a partner who won a National title with

*“It was quite nice of her,”* he said.



him

# First Steps to the Ballroom Beach Bash

## A Business Model Combined with a Sense of Empathy for Students

Michael uses the experiences from his early years to create a model for his roles as a coach and as a business owner. In both roles, his goal is to make the dancing experience fun, profitable and informative for students and competitors. He empathizes with students and remembers the times in his own history when on occasion he tried to do what a coach asked and felt he was ‘failing miserably at it.’ The experience of being on a different communication channel as the coach hired to make him better was frustrating rather than fun. With this in mind, Michael feels it is his responsibility to communicate effectively and on a level that is appropriate for individual students.

“Students should feel like they’ve done something better at the end of the lesson,” he said. “At least they should have paths they can take to improve rather than beat themselves up for not doing something well.”

### Four key points Michael makes for the takeaways a student should have after a lesson:

1. Michael wants his students to feel they’ve learned something at the end of the lesson
2. They should have something they can apply in their dance
3. They should have had a good time.
4. They should feel that their money was well spent.

“I like to help people get better,” he said, adding that he wants students to be comfortable learning technique.

“Technique makes things easier, not harder.”

## Building a Foundation Based on The Whole Dance Journey

Michael’s early years in photography have come into play in his role as a competition organizer. Among the many duties of running a competition, Michael takes charge of both the technical side and the graphic arts displayed on the Ballroom Beach Bash website. On the graphics side, although entirely self-taught in editing and modifying photos, Michael nonetheless creates unique and often



humorous banners and ads that reach out from the computer screen and entice a viewer to see what else the website holds.

The technical side of the Ballroom Beach Bash benefits from Michael's informal expertise as much as the artistic side. Michael creates the online entry forms and works to make the system easy to navigate. As wife and partner Toni Redpath stated, "If it has a cord, it's Michael's job."

## Bringing Personal and Professional History Into the Role of Competition Organizer

Michael Mead's path to the owner of a popular dance competition took time and included a few side journeys. He earned a living auditing companies, trained at a dance studio while working in a photography studio, and even waited tables to make ends meet. When he turned to dance as a full time career, he became involved in competitions through multiple roles.

- He was a studio owner.
- He was a pro-am competitor.
- He was a professional competitor.
- He is a judge for dance competitions.



Never a passive attendee, Michael has been fully aware of the positive and negative sides of ballroom dance competitions. He knows what he liked in the competitions he attended. He knows what he did not like in the competitions he attended. He wanted to make a change. He asked himself what he could bring to the equation to make a difference.

As Michael stated, "If you're going to have an opinion about it, it's not a bad idea to step up and put yourself in the position."

Focusing on the philosophy that a 'positive solution' yields a 'positive outcome' Michael and his co-organizers Toni Redpath and Jonathan Roberts rolled up their sleeves, put on their thinking caps, and jumped into the back side of competitions. Luckily for the three pros, they have the same sense of humor. This allowed them to brand the competition in a way that turns a good competition filled with a high level of dancing into a fun event with a laid back atmosphere. The low-key atmosphere gives dancers the freedom to improve their dancing while feeling less stress during the competition. In some cases, dancers may find that they've improved after a few rounds at the Beach Bash, simply because they

relaxed and allowed themselves to enjoy the experience as opposed to the tension that normally accompanies a high-level competition.



There is no doubt that the business model makes the Ballroom Beach Bash different from any other dance competition as of early 2018. Michael described competition business models as one of three basic types.

- ❖ The stripped down competition, where organizers put very little monetary commitment into the event. This is usually a local or area competition, often between schools in a single delegation. (Think branded or franchised schools.)
- ❖ The highest level, with high level sponsors who contribute to the competition and create a highly formal atmosphere. .
- ❖ The competitions that focus on the best of both worlds. Competitions like the San Diego Ballroom Beach Bash focus their budgets in a manner that creates a specific atmosphere. The Ballroom Beach Bash utilizes lights, decorations, and staging to create a relaxed yet professional atmosphere.

Another key difference for the Ballroom Beach Bash involves the treatment of the competition judges.

"Our judges are paid top dollar and worked less hard."

Michael, Toni, and Jonathan want everyone to have a good time. They want their competitors to come back and their competitors want to come back. Everyone is welcomed with open arms, a lei, and a pair of goofy sunglasses, among other props.

## The formula, despite its radical history, has worked from the beginning.

The first Ballroom Beach Bash competition, held in April 2015, elicited 4,900 entries and actually made a profit, a feat that is almost unheard of for a competition in its first year. Numbers of entries



quickly grew to over 8,000, a level that the competition retains as of 2017.  
“We like the product we put out.”

One unique feature of the Ballroom Beach Bash is the opportunity to transition gently from the gruelling days of intense competition and superior athletic performances into what some would call ‘the real world.’ On Sunday morning, sans the makeup, glitz, and glitter of the last competition and after snagging a few hours of sleep, many competitors will saunter from their rooms. Rather than stuff their bags into a cab and embark immediately on the journey home, as they would do after most competitions, these competitors indulge in a complimentary breakfast and a game or two of Trash Talk Volleyball on the beach. It’s a perk found only with the San Diego Ballroom Beach Bash, and only Michael Mead, Toni Redpath, and Jonathan Roberts could have come up with the concept.



(Dancers in photos at the Ballroom Beach Bash are:

Michael Choi and Sophia DAngelo

And

Andre and Natalie Paramonov)

Photographer Stephen Marino

Presented by Jonathan Roberts, Michael Mead & Toni Redpath

# San Diego Ballroom BEACH BASH

## April 10th-14th 2018

**Over \$70,000 in Prize Money and Awards**

★ Hilton Resort and Spa 1775 E Mission Bay Dr. San Diego, CA 92109	★ Full range of Professional, Pro-Am and Amateur Ballroom Competitions	★ Trash Talk Volleyball Kinked Combat Klash Sand Sculpture Showdown	★
--	--	---	---

[www.BallroomBeachBash.com](http://www.BallroomBeachBash.com)  
[www.BeachBashBackside.com](http://www.BeachBashBackside.com)