

Off the floor

Luke Watson

“I was blown away when I heard that *Out of the Blue* had been nominated as International Dance of the Year at the Australian Line Dancing Awards in 2008. And I was even more stunned when it won!

“While my friend Laressa was on the phone from Tamworth telling me the good news, it was announced I had won International Choreographer of the Year as well.

“I was over the moon!”



On Tuesday afternoons in Christchurch, NZ, Luke’s mum loved to go line dancing. One day his older brother, who was supposed to look after him and his twin brother Stephen, didn’t show up. So she had no choice but to take them along.

“We were to sit quietly and watch, and not cause too much trouble,” says Luke. “But the instructor wouldn’t start until we were on the floor to take part, and as they say the rest is history.



Luke at the 2009 Beat Awards

“We must have enjoyed it because Mum immediately dispensed with our brother’s childcare services. We continued to go on Tuesdays and soon started attending the Friday class as well which was a real treat.”

Luke says he didn’t have a huge interest in country music at the time but loved the faster songs and dances. “Mum and Dad followed the country music scene but it didn’t play an instrumental role in my taking up line dancing.”

He now has two clubs. “Dixie Line Dance is for competition and was established back in 2000 with a vision to coach young people. Dancers have come and gone and now we are a smaller group of seven. We have been the most successful NZ competition team and love the thrill that a competition can offer.

**“I’m not here to give you everything you want.
I am here to challenge and encourage you to do the best you can.”**

“I also teach two social classes a week for Templeton Linedancers which I took over from another instructor about 18 months ago. They are a very friendly group and there was a lot of adjusting for everyone to make, but they made me feel welcome right from the start.

“I came in with the philosophy of ‘I’m not here to give you everything you want. I am here to challenge and encourage you to do the best you can.’ This has been a big challenge for me - from the teaching aspect right through to deciding what I will teach each week.

“I was so nervous when I took my first class. I really didn’t have much confidence in my teaching abilities.

“I had one week to prepare and no idea what to expect. I kept thinking ‘Half the class is going to walk out any minute now! But everyone was really understanding and patient with me while I played catch up on the dances they already knew and obtained all the music.

**“With a bit of patience,
understanding and sense of humor,
I believe a dancer can achieve anything
they put there mind to.”**

“I like the surprise on a dancer’s face when they have mastered a new step or dance that they may have thought was beyond there abilities.”

Luke says line dancing in New Zealand has changed dramatically from the early 90’s. “The class sizes then were a lot bigger with up to 40 to 50 on a bad day. And up to 200 would attend socials with the line dancing band The Electric Cowboys. But there were also a lot less teachers then. Whereas now nearly every area in Christchurch is catered for.

“A lot of the line dancing population has been dancing for 10 to 15 years, if not longer, and there seem to be fewer younger people picking up the activity. It’s great to see the same faces still enjoying the activity after all this time, but also alarming that if newer blood isn’t introduced there is a definite possibility that line dancing won’t grow and be at risk of dying out.

“The dance form itself has come a long way from the boot slapping, thumb in belt stigma - however it’s the old school look of line dancing that is often portrayed in the media. Some instructors still prefer the old school style, which is fine. But given the opportunity to show the potential of what line dancing can be like, it doesn’t really give line dancing a chance to thrive into the future.”

“I really enjoy the different styles of dancing and variety of choreography now incorporated into line dancing.”

Luke has never been formally trained in any other style of dance. “I have tried Two-Stepping. I do it once in a blue moon – badly. I’m a bit rusty on the turns! I have also tried Rock & Roll but I really struggled with the timing. It didn’t feel right to me to dance to six beats of music unless it was a waltz! But I wouldn’t mind giving it another go.”

Luke started judging at the New Zealand Line Dancing Championships when he was 16. By this time he had been competing successfully - as a duo with his brother Stephen and also in a trio and a team.

“It seemed natural that the next step after competing was to start judging and offering any assistance with the running of competitions.



That's Luke on the

He started to choreograph in 1997, often writing dances with Stephen. “We never really took it too seriously, just did it for the hell of it. It wasn’t until 2000 when we entered our first choreography competition at the New Zealand Line Dancing Championships that our dances started to be picked up. We choreographed an advanced waltz called *Eternity* that took the top spot, beating out the favourite to win.

“I don’t have a preference when it comes to what style of music I choose – though I do find that country music dances tend to stay around a bit longer. But I am quite selective with the music. I have to listen to a tune quite a few times to make sure that I won’t get sick of it! Then I put steps to the music that feel natural and try to create a flow from there.

“I like to surprise my class with a new dance I have done. They are my best critics and will always give me an honest opinion – even if I don’t like it!

“I enjoy the identity that you get from a club, the camaraderie and closeness of a group of people who also share the same joy and passion.”

“I think the only real difference between New Zealand and Australia is that the Australians tend to push themselves a bit harder and embrace the more challenging dances

“One of my funniest memories is of a dance weekend in Blenheim. Stephen and I had had a few drinks and the dance *2001* came on. We both barreled onto the floor, throwing in all the extra spins, jumps and flourishes we could think of. I heard a slapping sound and turned around to see Stephen flailing around on the floor. He claims he slipped. And as any good brother would, I stood there and laughed hysterically.

*“A good song is key.
If a dancer can
connect to the song
it shows in the way
they dance to it.”*

“But my proudest moment was dancing at Mayworth 2008 and winning a silver medal in the Ashby Cup. There was 10 of us in a team with an age range from 16 to 42.

“I had never danced in such a hyped up environment. None of us thought we had danced well enough to get a medal so when it was announced we placed second to Cowboys & Angels, it was a big moment for me. We had all worked so hard. I was also dancing with an injury but the last thing I wanted to do was pull out. I would do it all again in a heart beat.”

“I have grown up line dancing and would hate to think what I would be doing now if I didn’t have my dancing friends to keep me on the straight and narrow. They also made sure Stephen and I continued to dance after Mum passed away in 1996. I have met some fantastic people whom I know are life long friends and will continue to help and support me.

“I don’t get a lot of spare time but I do like to chill out by myself. I play mindless games on Face book, watch DVDs or play on Play Station 3. But I have recently discovered how good I feel after a gym workout so I am now going to the gym more often as well.

“I think my bank balance would be a lot better if I didn’t do so much travelling around for line dancing. But I like to travel so with dance I can have the pleasure of both.

“It’s definitely the dancers themselves that keep me motivated and enjoying myself, as well as the thrill of dancing in a competition.

“It has been my life for so long now I don’t know anything different.”

*“Regardless of what side of the Tasman you are on,
line dancers have the unique ability to just have fun.”*

Luke