

Let's dance!

Who says you can't get some serious cardio and look cute at the same time? Swing dancing is one sport that will have you breaking a sweat in vintage style

TAKING TO THE DANCE FLOOR

for a bit of Lindy Hop, the Charleston or Balboa, not only gets your abs working and your heart racing, but also fires up those facial muscles used in smiling. "It's really hard not to smile when you swing dance, it just makes you happy," says Lexi Keeton, one of the leaders of the swing dance revival and part owner of Melbourne's 1929 Studios. "There's something special about the rhythm of the music that's designed to keep you moving through the whole song."

Swing, a 90-year-old style born in the dance halls of 1920s Harlem, is firmly back in favour. A strong resurgence kicked off about 15 years ago and now most nights of the week, in every capital city, you'll find a group of guys and gals wrapping their heads around the intricate, happy steps.

Picture jitterbug-style movements with a partner, and those lightning-fast feet, swings, tosses and turns, and you're pretty close to swing dancing. It's all about the high-voltage Lindy Hop, thigh-burning Charleston and energetic shuffle of the Balboa. Why not also try the Boogie Woogie, Ceroc and Modern Jive?

If vintage is your thing, dressing up in fabulous '40s frocks is all part of the fun – which is the main goal of this style, says Claudia Funder, director of a leading swing school, Swing Patrol. "It's about getting off the couch and away from computers,

joining a dance class, chatting with people, dancing, sharing a glass of wine and having some fun," she says. "It's also about being part of a night out, rather than locking yourself away in a dance studio, all anxious about which way your foot is pointing."

Heart popping

Swing also delivers a decent cardiovascular workout and toning session. Just how much of a workout will depend on whether you're doing a heart-popping or slower routine, along with how many breaks you have while learning. Either way, you'll be stepping, twisting and turning, keeping your back, core and thigh muscles interested for most of the hour's class. Concentrating on your footwork keeps another part of your body in great shape too – that large grey muscle connected to the top of your spinal cord.

You have got to do the steps by coordinating both sides of the body, "So it helps your brain with those left and right connections, at the same time as helping you become physically fit," says Lexi.

Fancy footwork

Stepping into the world of swing dancing is as simple as turning up to a local hall, willing to have a go at something new. Partners are not a prerequisite, nor are vintage clothes. Most dance clubs have a beginner's class, which rotates through

the steps every six weeks or so, teaching all the basics of each of the dances.

Usually it's a relaxed just-turn-up affair, with no need to book, call ahead or prepay, and classes are between \$10 and \$15. Once you've mastered the basics, you can start moving through to the intermediate and advanced classes.

Swing is not about hard-and-fast routines, instead it's about learning a bunch of moves to pick from as you go. Specifically, the males do the picking – this is a style where the fellas lead the way, and for once, us girls, usually follow.

Romantic workout

Being a partnered dance, men and women are paired up and, after a few run-throughs, you move onto another partner in the circle. So there's a huge chance you might meet a future boyfriend, if that's what you're looking for. There's nothing like a bit of dancing and music to prompt a spark!

As for when you're going to show off all your new spins and moves, dance classes hold regular social nights and workshops. There are also many other opportunities to flaunt your swingin' steps, including balls and an annual jitterbug competition.

"There is this huge sense of community that goes with swing dancing," says Lexi. "All these people are going out after class, or they may travel to another city to dance. Every class organises a social night, one or two times a month, and also arranges get-togethers. It's all pretty good fun."

Swinging friends

It's no accident that most of the classes are held in church halls, community venues and rooms above pubs. It's to encourage mingling and socialising afterwards and to make dancing a part of the community.

"We try to hold our classes in pubs, clubs and different venues. We don't own a studio, because we want to take dancing to the people," says Claudia.

Some dancers enjoy the fun side of dressing up, and it's a nice homage to the period, especially on the social nights, >



Burn up the dance floor

You wouldn't expect to get a moderate-to-intense cardio workout, while having loads of fun, would you? You'll charge through 1,200 to 2,300 kilojoules an hour while swing dancing, depending on your level of fancy footwork skills.

You got rhythm

Get bopping by downloading these classic swing tunes:

- ✧ "Shiny Stockings" by Ella Fitzgerald
- ✧ "Sing, Sing, Sing" by Benny Goodman
- ✧ "It Don't Mean a Thing" by Glenn Miller
- ✧ "Jumpin' at the Woodside" by Count Basie Orchestra

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DANCE CARD

Fresh to Australia after moving from the UK, 27-year-old Emily Jones decided to give swing dancing a go.

"I was new to Sydney, with no family or friends, and


I was walking past this dance class every week on my way home from work. And I thought, I should try it as a social way to meet people. So I tried it, loved it and have been doing it ever since.

The first six weeks, we learnt the Charleston. That's quite fast and involves

all that heel kicking. The classes were three hours long, so that was quite the workout. It's the kind of activity you do, that you don't realise you are exercising, and that's the kind of exercise I need. When I'm on a treadmill I'm wondering when is it going to end? Whereas with this, it's fun. I've lost weight, and I'm getting married next year which means we'll have a dance to do at our wedding!"

but classes are done in whatever way is comfortable. Feeling as though you have two left feet when you swing and flip to the rhythm is no excuse not to try either.

“Nobody has two left feet,” says Claudia. “Some people take a little longer to pick up the steps than others. It’s not a race or a competition; it’s just good fun.”

“Dancing is not about being good at it,” Claudia continues. “It’s about interacting with other people and having a good time and a hobby that’s physical, emotional, enjoyable and brings reward to your life – and you can do it forever.” Yep, this is one fitness workout that you can do well into your twilight years with a dapper young-at-heart partner. 

SWING NOT YOUR THING?

Head to the dance floor and whip into shape with one of these styles.

HIP HOP

A combination of breakdancing and body-popping, with sharp isolations and big breakout sequences.

Best for: Those who want to tone up and embrace their inner Kanye.
Attire: High-tops and baggy pants.

JAZZ

If you secretly love *Glee* and want to be in a musical, then this is for you.

Best for: Those who love the theatre and are born performers.
Attire: Sequins, lycra and glamour.

FUNK

A stylised combo of hip hop, jazz and pop. It’s all about sexy moves, popping, and lots of attitude.

Best for: Those who want to add sass to their dance floor moves.
Attire: Tights and leg warmers.

BALLET

It’s a tough workout that involves flexibility, discipline and skill, but expect amazing whole body tone.

Best for: Those who fancy themselves swan-like and graceful.
Attire: Leotards, tutus and buns.

SALSA

A steamy, sexy and flamboyant dance, originally from Cuba, that will work your core and posture.

Best for: Those who want to let loose and embrace the music.
Attire: Flirty dresses and high heels.



One to watch

She’s a pocket rocket used to being flung over her dance partner’s shoulders and tossed in the air. As a teacher with **Swing Patrol**, **Amanda Evans** (above), 28, runs classes for beginners, right through to workshops on the tricky aerial twists.

How did you get into swing dancing?

“It was one of those fluke, chance things. My boyfriend and I were just checking out videos on Youtube, and we saw this clip about swing dancing. There were vids of aerals that had all these amazing moves, so we thought we’d give it a try and we both became hooked.”

Would you say that swing is your favourite sort of dance style?

“Yes, definitely. I had been dancing since I was three years old, mostly doing jazz and modern, and I also did gymnastics. But I just love the fun of swing. We still go out and do a few different classes and styles, such as hip hop, to keep things

a bit interesting, but we always come back to swing dancing.”

What do you love about it?

“Initially, a big part of it was the music. I’d grown up listening to Frank Sinatra and big band stuff with my dad. Then after a while, it was the people we were meeting that I loved. Many of them are very friendly and welcoming. It’s a very active social community.”

How does it feel to do aerals?

“I love performing and practising aerals. The feeling of flying through the air is exhilarating. It’s also a great way to work on flexibility, balance and coordination.”



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