

DANCE trouper



Karen Hardy credits dance with helping her beat cancer and post-natal depression

Strictly Come Dancing's Karen Hardy is a force to be reckoned with. She talks to **SUSAN GRIFFIN** about addiction, depression and releasing your inner dancer...

As a huge fan of the sequined TV spectacle *Strictly Come Dancing*, I'm excited to find myself hot-footing it to a brand new studio in south-west London, owned by one of the show's professional dancers, Karen Hardy.

Since partnering with brooding cricketer Mark Ramprakash in 2006, with whom she went on to win the series, Karen's become a firm fixture in the *Strictly* line-up. It's a lucrative status that's given her the opportunity to open up her own luxurious dance space.

Entering the studio, there's a lounge area filled with plush sofas and luxurious wallpaper offset by crystal chandeliers twinkling from the ceiling. It's a glamorous place, "the equivalent of putting on one of the show's sparkly dresses," says Karen, who's petite, smiley and dressed in a woolly jumper and jeans. She looks 10 years younger than her 38 years.

The studio's a joint venture for Karen and her ex-dancer husband, Conrad. "He's very much the business side and I bring the ideas," explains Karen, although she admits it's a gamble. "We needed to pull on all my experience, to understand what people need when they walk in a studio and what we can do to make people feel relaxed."

While many of us harbour fantasies of learning to dance, there's something daunting about actually giving it a go. But you only have to see *Strictly's* professionals looking toned and lithe, and

the celebrities - whose bodies transform before our very eyes - to witness the health and fitness benefits of dance.

Karen's only too keen to spread the gospel by which she lives. "A healthy diet, a healthy body and a healthy mind, that's my principle. Learning to dance, you lose weight, you tone up, you learn to sit and stand, walk, talk and feel confident," she says.

Gyms, however, aren't really for her. "Nobody communicates," she says. "They've all got their earphones in or they're watching MTV, anything to just get through that half-hour run. Whereas if you have a 45-minute dance lesson, you'll think it's over in five minutes."

And the calories you can blitz speak for themselves, says Karen. "Did you know you can burn something like 560 calories in 20 minutes doing the quickstep? And at the same time, you're holding your frame, which is equivalent to pushing a machine at the gym for 20 repetitions. But you'd never know you're burning that because you're enjoying the music, talking to your teacher and jumping across the dance floor," she adds with zeal.

Karen's a fighter. She's beaten cancer and post-natal depression after her son, Callum, was born in 2005, and she's made no secret that dance helped her through her darker days. "Once the endorphins are flowing, you've got the feel-good factor," she says. "I've dealt with depression, with feeling insecure and dance allowed me back out."

"A lot of will power comes from happiness," she continues. "If you're sitting there vegging out in front of the telly, you're not going to want to get up. But once you have that, 'I'm going to the studio today, I'm going to listen to great music,' psychologically you're getting happier and you're doing movement at the same time."

It's through sheer determination that Karen's made it to the pinnacle of her profession. Having first set foot in a dance studio at the age of five, when her mum dropped her and her brother off at a class so she could get on with the weekly food shop, Karen says, "I got hooked, I just loved it, I absolutely loved it."

"I won my first medal and said, 'Woo, I want another one. Mum, mum, when can I get another one?' It was addictive. And then you wear your first dress, and it's, 'Mum, mum, when can I get another new dress?'"

Before the days of sponsorship, her mum would make all her competition outfits. "We would drive up to London

[from our home in Bournemouth] and go to this great sequin shop. As a child, you'd walk in and think you'd arrived in Disneyland," she says wistfully.

But while Karen believes dancing is in everybody, for her, it ran deeper - it was an "uncontrollable drive."

"A lot of my friends would go out to the discos on the weekend and I never worried about not being there. I was more excited about going to school on Monday and telling them I'd won a competition."

By the time she retired from professional dancing in 1999, Karen and her dance partner Bryan Watson were the undefeated UK, International, British National and World Masters champions of Latin American Dance. But the journey was tough. "If you take the competitive route, it's like becoming an Olympic athlete. You have to sleep, eat, drink it," she says, describing her training regime as "intense, intense, intense."

"But if you want to be a representative of your country, you've got to push your body to awful levels, awful."

Despite her friendly chatter and booming, throaty laugh, there's an underlying steeliness to Karen. This is one woman you don't ever underestimate and if she's putting her all into a project, then you'd jolly well better do the same!

"With the students I coach - the future World Champions - they have to commit 150 per cent, if not, don't waste my time! If I'm going to open up a studio, it's going to be the best studio. And with *Strictly*, I was retired six years and I'd just had a baby, so I was running, training and getting myself back up to a standard that I could just about deal with. Everything I do is about quality."

(She's just as), straight talking when I ask about the importance of diet. "I hear about all these mad diets and I've never heard such insane things in my life," she says. "If you have five Mars bars a day, you will be fat. Don't think running a marathon is going to get rid of those Mars bars if you have them every day. It might soothe you psychologically, but physically, eventually, your body's going to go, 'that's not good for me.'" I don't dare ask if she's a fan of said chocolate!

As a dancer, standing in front of a mirror for hours on end, studying in minute detail every step, every gesture, has to affect the way you view your body, right? "For me, it's made me over-critical of myself," Karen says. "When you get to number one in the world, you want to make sure you're always perfect."

Which is perhaps why she's tentative about signing up for another series of *Strictly*. "I haven't made a decision," she says. "It's always an emotional roller coaster for me because I've just fallen in love with the show, but unlike the others, I'm not a professional competitor anymore. I sometimes find myself thinking, 'Oh no, I can't do that anymore.' But there's the credit crunch, diseases, poverty, and for an hour on a Saturday, you forget all that. It's magical."

For more information on Karen Hardy's dance studio visit www.karenhardystudios.com or call 0871 218 2341.



With two of her *Strictly* Come Dancing celebrity partners, above, cricketer Mark Ramprakash, with whom she won the show in 2006, and below, with former Coronation Street actor Brian Capron in 2007



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Right, the plush lounge area of Karen's new dance studio in south-west London

Far right, Karen with ex-dancer husband Conrad and their son Callum, who was born in 2005

