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Living 

Friday, January 26, 2007

Prime Partner: Winning dancer says she loves hitting the the road between television seasons

By Janice Gaston
JOURNAL REPORTER

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So how goes life on the road for a TV and stage star? For dancer Cheryl Burke, it means sharing a tour bus with seven other dancers and sleeping in a bunk bed. That's fine by her. She likes traveling, learning about life on the road, seeing new cities.

"I can sleep anywhere," she said. "Sleeping on a bus is as good as sleeping in a hotel room."

Burke has become a familiar face to dance fans as the partner to the past two winners of TV's Dancing With the Stars. She will bring her sparkle, sass and sizzling dance moves to the Greensboro Coliseum on Saturday night as part of "Dancing With the Stars - The Tour". Burke will once again team with Drew Lachey, the season-two

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champion.

In season three, which concluded in November, she won with football legend Emmitt Smith, who is not part of the tour.

The stars who are scheduled to appear in Greensboro include actors Joey Lawrence and Harry Hamlin, actress Lisa Rinna, actor/singer Joey McIntyre and singer Willa Ford. In addition to Burke, the professional dancers on the tour include Louis Van Amstel, Edyta Sliwinska and Karina Smirnoff, Mario Lopez's sultry partner from this past season.

Burke, 22, started dancing at 4, as a baby ballerina.

"My mom always loved to dance," she said last week by cell phone from her tour bus while en route to a show in Lexington, Ky. "She put me into a lot of extracurricular activities - basketball, soccer, horseback riding. When I started dancing, I loved to do it. I decided to take it seriously."

When she was 11, she switched to ballroom. Within a few years, she was traveling from her hometown in Atherton, Calif., near San Francisco, to competitions around the world. After finishing high school in 2002, she enrolled in community college in Atherton. She studied online when she competed in Europe.

"It got to be too much," she said. "I was to the point that I wanted to focus more on my competition, so I took a break from school."

Then Dancing With the Stars came along, and her career took a new turn.

Burke's success as a partner and choreographer for her celebrity charges - she was nominated for two Emmys last year but lost to the choreographers of High School Musical - has opened doors to other opportunities. She has done a little bit of acting and bits as a host, she said. Both jobs interest her.

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Town Hall

"I don't know yet if I can actually go that way without being trained," she said.

Burke doesn't have to think beyond dancing now. But people who begin dancing competitively when they are young eventually feel the strain in their bodies, she said.

"If you have been doing it all your life, you reach a certain point where your body will just reject it. As long as you can do it, go for it."

The current tour will run until mid-February, and the fourth season of Dancing will begin March 19. Burke isn't sure yet that she will be part of it. She will find out soon, she said.

The new lineup of dancing stars remains under wraps. But Burke can think of at least two men she would like to see on the show - George Clooney and Andre Agassi.

"It's time to have a tennis player instead of a football player," she said.

For now, she is performing two numbers each night with Lachey - the pasodoble and a freestyle - and several numbers with other professional dancers. Dancing gives her a great workout, she said, and it's fun.

"It's the best form of exercise," she said. "You're not watching every minute go by."

Although she danced in front of millions of viewers on TV, the studio audience for Dancing numbered only 200 to 300 people, she said. Performing in auditoriums with thousands of people looking on gives her a different kind of rush.

During the show, she had to deal with choreographing new routines each week that would showcase her partner's skills and disguise his weaknesses. She had to worry about how well he would be able to pull off his moves and whether the team would survive each round. The process was nerve-wracking.

"For the tour, it's more excitement than being nervous," she said.

Dancing With the Stars helped change the public perception of dance and made people think of it as a sport, she said. "Dancers have kind of taken a back seat. It's opening up new doors. Hopefully, it's not just a trend.

"I hope it lasts for a long time."

• Janice Gaston can be reached at 727-7364 or at jgaston@wsjournal.com.

If you go

Dancing With the Stars - The Tour will begin at 7:30 p.m. Saturday at Greensboro Coliseum. Tickets are \$48.50 and \$58.50. For more

information, call 888 397-3100.

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