

Local seventh-graders take a spin on 'Dancing With the Stars'

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Dance instructor Tony Meredith holds Lisa Lakovitsky while her partner Austin Joson laughs with Melanie LaPatin during the kids' rehearsal.

They are national dance champions, masters of formal technique, seasoned world travelers and ... they're in seventh grade.

[Liza Lakovitsky](#) and [Austin Joson](#) head to [Los Angeles](#) this weekend to compete in ABC's "[Dancing With the Stars](#)" youth competition, airing on Tuesday. And the 12-year-olds aren't fazed in the slightest by the prospect of performing on one of the country's favorite dance shows.

"The stage is different and it's a TV audience, which is bigger, but we will perform the same way we always do," says [Brooklyn](#) native Lakovitsky, with a marked certainty that comes with six years of dance training.



The dancers share a smile.

During their final rehearsal at Dance [Times Square](#) studio last week, the pair tweaked their samba routine, which is only 58 seconds long due to the show's time constraints.

Onlookers are impressed by their technique and enthusiasm, but notice something rather odd: Joson is an entire head shorter than Lakovitsky. However, this doesn't hinder the routine, or the working dynamic between them.

Partners for nearly two years, the duo returned last week as U.S. National Champions in the Junior One Division, adding the title to their two National Preteen Championships in Latin, Standard and Ballroom.

"We don't fight," says Lakovitsky, as the two exchange playful smiles during a break in rehearsals. Joson adds that instead, some of his battles actually occur away from the dance floor.

"Some kids at school give me a hard time about the dancing and all," says the [New Jersey](#) native with a wry smirk. "I guess they think it's girly."

But with all the physical conditioning that goes into being a championship dancer, Joson - who has been at it for two years now - may have the last laugh. Practicing three or four times a week for hours and hours, Joson and Lakovitsky acknowledge that fitness is paramount.

"I don't know about her, but I run every day and work out a little," Joson volunteers, taking a spirited jab at Lakovitsky. Quick to retaliate, she brings the focus back to the upcoming challenge, where they will be competing against other teen couples from around the country.

"We do a lot of run-throughs before a competition to build up our stamina."

And unlike Joson, who says he wants to be a professional tennis player when he grows up, for Lakovitsky, dance is everything.

"I want to dance forever," she says, "I want to compete and teach, have my own studio, like my teachers do now."

The pair is coached by champion dancers and choreographers [Melanie LaPatin](#) and [Tony Meredith](#), who have worked with a long list of celebrity clients such as [Celine Dion](#) and lent their talents to "Dancing With the Stars" and "[So You Think You Can Dance](#)."

"Coaching kids their age is tricky at first, but once the pair feels comfortable together, everything works out," says Meredith, with LaPatin explaining that Joson and Lakovitsky are certainly talented and driven enough to win any competition.

"Their own passion is what gets them to come practice day in and day out," adds LaPatin, "Trust me, mom isn't dragging them, they *want* to be here."

The youngsters even worked collaboratively with LaPatin and Meredith on the routine, making suggestions and taking direction on how to make sure the routine showcases not only their technique but also their personalities.

And before the foursome return to rehearsals, Lakovitsky reveals why they picked this routine for Tuesday night's performance.

"It's a samba, it's a lot of fun and there's a lot of shaking."