

Thousands of spins later, he's still swinging

By JAN STEVENS

Community News Editor

On Wednesday evenings, Leon Raper country swings his way across a polished floor; his feet and arms seem in continuous motion as his partner whirls and twirls to the beat.

Raper, who has been dancing everything from the West Coast swing to the jitterbug for the last 25 years, says dance is a "contagious disease for which I hope they never find a cure." And besides contagious, Raper says dancing can become an enjoyable obsession.

He should know. He has competed in more than 400 West Coast swing dance contests, including a world championship contest at the Palladium in Hollywood, Calif.

"I started hanging around with dance junkies who live their whole lives for dancing. And I became one," he said.

Raper, who instructs lessons in all types of dance on Wednesday evenings at South Beaver School, 506 S. Beaver St., said his passion for dancing began after his divorce, when he became a member of Parents without Partners, a group for divorced parents. He said the group that he belonged to revolved around dance lessons.

"I hadn't done any dancing up until about a year before that. Our class was in a dance studio so we got studio training in the rumba, samba, mambo and the cha-cha. The dance instructor took us out to see a swing dance contest once and it just so happened the world champions were dancing that night. I saw the world champion pick up his partner and twirl her like a propeller in the

air three times," he said.

"Right then and there I thought that was for me."

Raper said the dance movement he saw was a triple shoulder spin, which at the time only about 10 people in the world were able to do. Raper made up his mind he would be one of them. After two years of work and hundreds of hours, he met his goal.

Raper received instruction from teachers he called "the best in the business" — Skippy Blair, Kenny Wetzel, Dean Collins, Willie Desatoff and Jack Pina. Raper competed in dance contests for more than five years.

"It finally just got too draining. It was such hard work," he said.

However, Raper did not give up dancing. He began his own dance club and starting giving lessons and workshops.

"I taught ballrooms full of people how to throw other people through the air," he said.

In addition to teaching dancing, Raper worked as a talent agent in Beverly Hills, where he represented clients for motion pictures, television and theater. After his move to Flagstaff five years ago, which he said he did because he wanted "to get the hell out of Los Angeles," he continued his ties with Hollywood. He now operates Raper Enterprises Agency, which books movie stars and sports celebrities for personal appearances around the United States and Canada.

Raper, born and raised in Phoenix, said he had visited Flagstaff often as a child and always wanted to return to live here.

But although moving to Flagstaff



Leon Raper takes a student for a waltz recently as he teaches country dance lessons in the gym of South Beaver Elementary

Brian Winter/Arizona Daily Sun

was a calculated decision, Raper found out quickly that northern Arizona was not the social center of the world that he was accustomed to.

And he missed dancing.

He began giving dancing classes to community residents about 4 1/2 years ago, and more recently started up free lessons during the school

School. Raper's dancing took him all the way to Hollywood; in Flagstaff, he teaches locals tricks of the trade.

year for NAU students.

"I just enjoy seeing people learn, especially the people who say they can't do it and all of a sudden

see themselves doing it. The only people who don't learn are those who don't try," he said.

For more information, call Raper at 525-9091.