

Three Brothers

“I Want to Beat You When You’re The Best”

BY EMBER REICHGOTT JUNGE



*Seth Westlake, Peter Westlake, Lisa Westlake, and Nic Westlake.
Photo provided by Lisa Westlake.*

THREE BROTHERS FROM RAPID CITY, South Dakota—fiercely competitive, fiercely loyal, driven by rules: all three rise to the top of their shared sport by their early twenties. They pull—and sometimes push—each other to their personal goals. Golf? Basketball? Football?

No. Ballroom dance. Not just any style—the most formal, technical, rules-driven style there is: International Ballroom or Standard dance. Imagine three brothers competing together dressed in their formal black coattails

framing their partners in their elegant ball gowns and dance wings. Any one of the dance duos could come out on top.

Three brothers, eight years apart: Pete, the eldest, always the leader, always the organizer; Nic, the second, full of energy. He’s the people-connector who talks of going into politics someday. Seth, the youngest, always happy, who laughs at anything. He is the other sports guy, starting soccer at age six and running track and cross country.

Competitive? You bet. All of them. It’s easy to compete with your favorite people. You want them to be the best so when you beat them, you beat the best. That way you are just a little bit better than the best. He can be second place. (I’ll be first.) But always considerate of each other and others. And always opening doors to the ballroom dance world for hundreds of friends as early as their high school years.

It started with a former high school music teacher who taught them a few dance lessons. Pete and Nic, one grade

apart, wanted to attend their all-school prom. They pulled together a group of people for a few swing dance lessons in her basement. “She showed us the basics and we sort of trudged through prom that year. We had a lot of fun, but we had no idea what we were doing,” laughed Pete. The second year he went to prom with his date, but by the third year he thought it would be more fun if all his friends were dancing too. So Pete, ever the organizer, set up a dance club in his senior year, “and we actually got a whole chunk of kids dancing” with the instructor once a week. “A whole chunk” is a lot in a school of some 2,000 students.

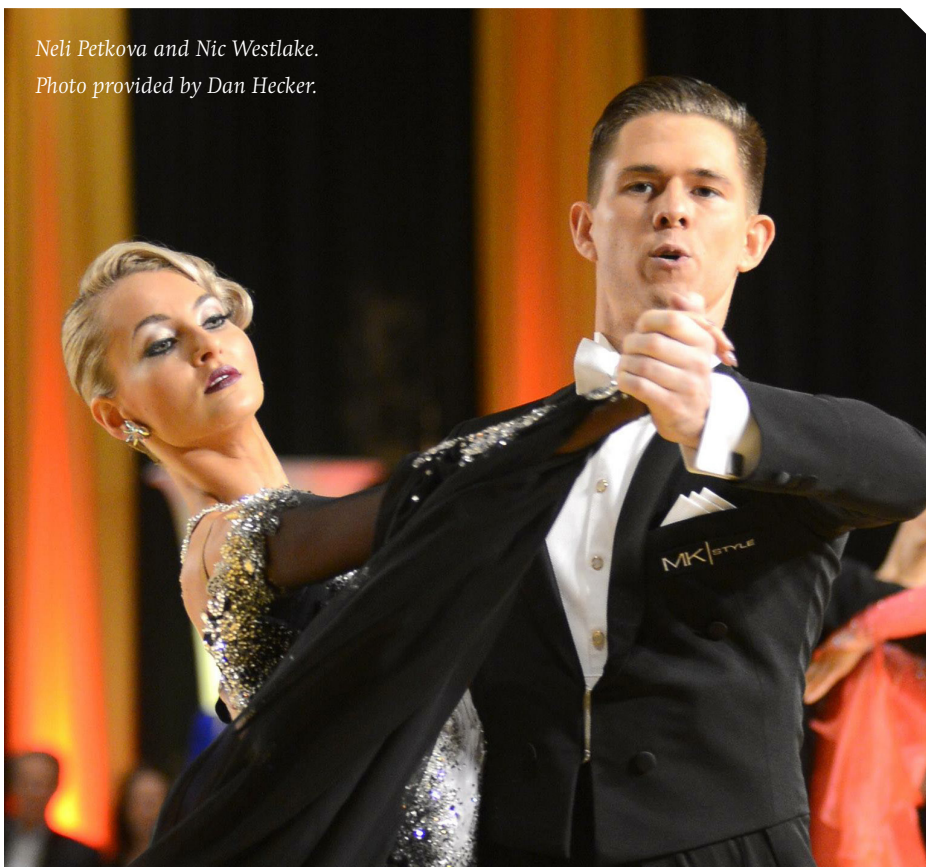
Nic finished high school in three years, so he and Pete both graduated together in 2005. It was another example of the two brothers “running neck and neck” throughout their lives. “That made us both better dancers, better at a lot of things,” Pete remembered.

Pete enrolled in the University of Minnesota (UMN), and quickly landed in the Ballroom Dance Club, becoming president of the club his second year and leading the club for three years. “I enjoyed organizing and making sure other people could dance. We did a lot of good things to get better lessons for everyone.” There he met Nels Petersen and Theresa Kimler whose coaching and gifted resources to the university “certainly made dancing easy for us college students.” Under Pete’s leadership, the club membership grew quickly and the club introduced its first competition team.

Nic took a different route. He pursued music with his band, traveling the country and living in Hawaii and Nebraska for a time. He chose not to attend college, once telling Pete he thought degrees were too expensive for what you receive, and he felt more than capable of learning those skills on his

own. Nic picked up computer programming quickly from the internet. “I felt like anything Nic wanted to learn, and he always wanted to learn, he would pick up very quickly. He was skilled in problem-solving,” Pete shared. Nic and Pete would occasionally meet up in Minnesota, and Pete invited him to dance lessons and events. During Pete’s junior year, Nic decided to move to Minnesota full-time, in part to enjoy dancing. Recalled Pete, “Somebody once told me that the only reason Nic wanted to dance was to beat his older brother. I think that was probably true. It was good for me too. He made sure I never rested on my laurels. Nic was right there, nipping at my heels. If I sat around too much he would beat me. Yes, he did beat me a few times in our amateur days after college.”

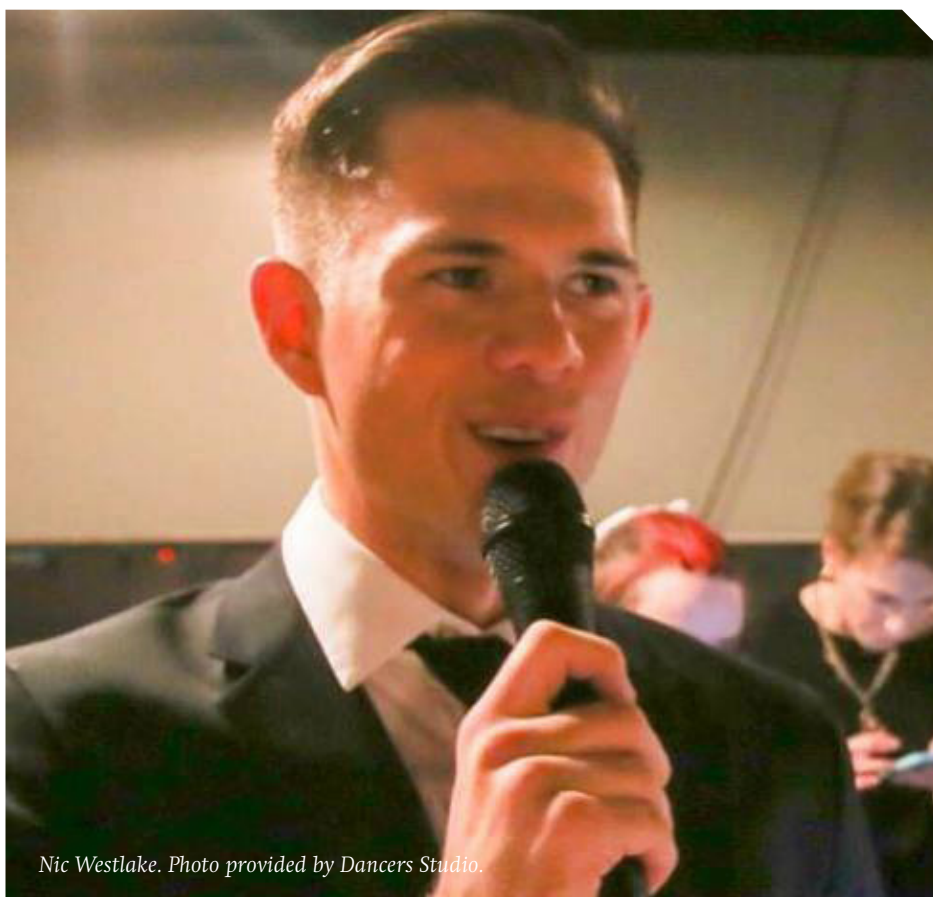
Seth, meanwhile, was pretty scared of dancing, being six years younger than Nic. But he would brag to others about his dancing brothers. At age 16, Seth visited his brothers in Minnesota and they gave him a dance lesson—his first introduction to ballroom dance. As he approached his prom in junior and senior years, he asked each brother to give him and friends a lesson. The lessons didn’t always go well. Seth recalls when Nic tried to “overuse” his expertise and pull Seth into frame. “I wasn’t really comfortable being that close to another person, much less my brother. He’s trying to get our hips really close together and I’m kind of resistant and he is like, ‘What, are you scared of me?’ I really hadn’t done anything like that before.” On the upside, Seth was able to lure “adorable” Kiah to the group lessons, though her parents later said she was too young for prom. As it turned out, the prom dance floor was so crowded Seth and date couldn’t do much except jump up and down. Eventually his group left the prom to go bowling.



*Neli Petkova and Nic Westlake.
Photo provided by Dan Hecker.*

When Seth graduated high school and came to Minnesota for college, he was excited to spend more time with Nic, who he didn't know as well growing up. "I bet I can get you to try the ballroom dance thing," Nic told Seth. "I've got a friend who needs a partner for a ballroom event in October. Would you do me the favor of learning a couple dances and dancing with her at the competition? I'll give you lessons." Seth loved it. He worked with Nic most weekends, then auditioned onto the UMN Ballroom Dance team, which had grown in size and quality from the strong foundation Pete's prior leadership helped build. Seth practiced with three partners for the first three semesters, admitting "I prioritized ballroom more than I should have with some of my studies. I tried to give each partner a couple hours of practice a week. That wasn't always the best use of time, because if you are working on many routines with different people it doesn't always make excellence. But you learned a lot about dance in different styles."

Just how unlikely is it that three brothers go on to make their individual marks in the competitive dance world? Very. Clearly, they all shared talent, discipline, and the same thought process. It is not a coincidence that all pursued careers in Information Technology. Technology is all about rules, structure, and detailed perfection, just like International Ballroom dance techniques. As Seth describes the thought process for both, "There are a lot of specifics you can adhere to, a lot of rules that make it very specific, but also allow a lot of creativity. If I'm given too many rules, like if I'm told to paint a painting and I have too many colors, I find that frustrating. But if you give me a pencil, I can doodle just about anything. If I have fewer tools that I can try and master, I feel the most creative."



Nic Westlake. Photo provided by Dancers Studio.

Pete continued his dancing in New York and married his UMN Ballroom Dance Club partner, Sehyun Oh, in 2017. Nic and his partner/fiancée, Neli Petkova, moved up to seventh-ranked in the World International Ballroom. Like Nic, Seth remained in Minnesota with his long-time "adorable" girlfriend Kiah Schaeffer and competitive dance partner, Isabella. Seth had a dream. He looked forward to the day that all three brothers would compete on the same dance floor of a national ballroom dance competition. All three brothers had danced their way into the highest echelons of ballroom dance. Who knows which brother would have won that competition of which Seth dreamed?

Sadly, Seth's dream will never be realized. On July 15, 2017, 29-year-old Nic was tragically killed when a light

rail train ran a red light in St. Paul and crashed Nic's vehicle. Neli was severely injured. Pete had unknowingly seen Nic for the last time when he and Sehyun married in New York just weeks before.

Much has been written about this terrible—and preventable—tragedy. What hasn't been told, however, is this story of the remarkable bond that Nic and his brothers shared in life and beyond.

"The place I'm going to feel (Nic's loss) most is that person nipping at my heels. I still feel that missing glow behind me to chase me to go a little bit faster. Nic would bring a tidal wave of energy to anything he did. He would be willing to throw himself in it in a way a lot of people and myself couldn't match," said Pete.

"Nic taught me a lot when I came to Minnesota about being my own

adult, and new ways to think about the world,” recalled Seth. “Nic seemed to understand people really well; he could make connections very fast and ones that were lasting. He made just about everyone feel like they had a personal and special connection with him. It was an incredible thing to see. Nic talked about being in politics someday and he would have excelled in something like that. That energy mixed with his aptitude of quickly solving problems was unique to Nic.”

While the brothers were not interested in competitive ballroom at the same time prior to Nic’s passing, “we all got involved in this same activity, and I always found there was a lot of beauty in that. Anytime I can be on the dance floor it seems like I’m connected to my brothers. I always like to imagine that Nic’s dancing with me when I’m on the floor,” said Seth.

And with that, the two brothers, connected by Zoom from New York and Minnesota, seemed to go to their own special place as brothers who just needed to talk and heal.

Pete: “Seth, I’ve always been curious. One thing I’m always disappointed with is that my life took me out of Minneapolis right as you were showing up there. I was thinking about it getting ready for this (interview). I know I had a pretty big influence on Nic’s dancing, and I know Nic had a big influence on yours. I was curious. How has my dancing influenced yours? How have I influenced you from a dance perspective?”

Seth: “It was easiest to look up to you because you were the brother that always made sure I was included. In Nic’s earlier years he was a lot more guilty of trying to shrug off the younger brother and wanting to do things he thought were cool at the time. You said your unique skill was leadership and

I’ve always felt that. When I bragged about a brother doing ballroom dancing it was usually you first, and I thought of Nic as the imposter—the duplicate—for a time. I thought of it as Pete’s activity for a long time. I think it would have been really cool to be able to learn from you and Nic if you had still been in the Twin Cities.”

Pete: “Yea, that would have been fun. Another life we won’t get to live. It would be interesting to see all those other lives though, wouldn’t it?”

Next Month: Nic, the would-be politician, becomes a household name at the Minnesota Capitol, as Pete and Seth join forces to ensure their family tragedy never happens again. E



Lisa Westlake, Grandma Westlake, Seth Westlake, and Nic Westlake. Photo provided by Lisa Westlake.