

Chelsie Hightower

From small-screen stardom to even bigger dreams

BY COURTNEY RAE ALLEN

At just 21 years old, Chelsie Hightower has become one of America's favorite primetime dancers. She first captivated audiences with her bubbly personality, fierce footwork, sassy moves and partnering prowess on Season Four of Fox's "So You Think You Can Dance." She's now appearing on her fourth season of ABC's "Dancing with the Stars."

Hightower won her first national ballroom title at age 11, only two years after she began dancing in an after-school program to help her overcome shyness. Since discovering her natural talent, the fresh-faced, blue-eyed blonde trained at Center Stage Performing Arts Studio in her native Orem, Utah, and has been performing and teaching nonstop across the country and abroad. She's achieved the kind of success that would be enough for many, but Hightower is just getting started. She has ambitions for, among other things, opening her own studio, recording an album and performing on Broadway.

This month, Hightower is teaching at The Ballroom Dance Channel's first-ever Superstars of Ballroom Dance Camp in Burbank, California.

Dance Teacher: You've been very successful at such a young age. Did your dance studio training prepare you for a professional career?

Chelsie Hightower: Absolutely. Everything I learned in the studio is what I'm teaching and applying today. There were times in my competition days when I wanted to quit. I didn't like the cut-throat competitiveness or the traveling.

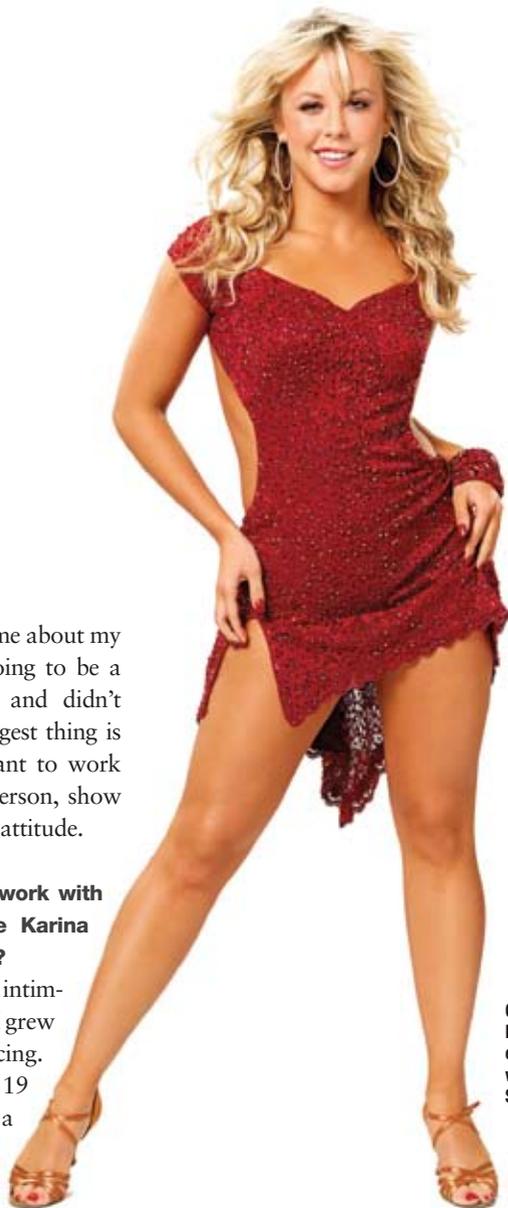
My coaches kept reminding me about my talent and told me I was going to be a star. They genuinely cared and didn't want to see me fail. The biggest thing is learning that people will want to work with you if you're a good person, show up on time and have a good attitude.

DT: What is it like to now work with those famous dancers like Karina Smirnoff, who coached you?

CH: I can't even tell you how intimidated I was my first season. I grew up idolizing Karina's dancing. Then I came on the show at 19 years old and I expected in a way to know everything the major professionals know and to be just as good as them. I'm still a little intimidated, to be honest. I know I'll never be Karina with my dancing, and I'm OK with that. It's not always about the dancing, but about bringing the best out of the celebrity. I'm confident knowing that I can do my job, and I focus on that every week.

DT: Partnering is challenging for some, but you've got it down to an art. What is your method?

CH: It's all about the story, the feeling behind the dancing. You can think about technique all you want, but the minute you get on the floor, it's about the performance. I'm always aware of my partner. It's so easy to get sidetracked and worry about your own dancing. I sit down and think about the intention behind each move and what I want people to see when I dance that move. It's sometimes about showing



Chelsie Hightower on "Dancing with the Stars"

myself off, and some moves are about playing to my partner, getting close and showing that relationship. If you are 100 percent into the feeling, the chemistry will come naturally.

DT: Tell us more about your own dance studio. When will it open?

CH: Hopefully in the next year or two. There's so much untapped talent in Utah, but I don't want to compete with the surrounding studios. It's going to be an hour north of Orem. It's going to be an all-style studio—competitive jazz, hip hop, ballroom. I want it to be fierce; I want us to win. But I don't want it to be the kind of studio where students are out to beat each other. I loved my studio because I learned how to have an amazing work ethic and to be competitive without being catty. I want that same good vibe and good dancing. **DT**

Photo by Bob D'Amico, courtesy of ABC