



Pow Wow Highway

Dear Dr. Per Cap:

Do you recommend pow wow dancing as an occupation? When the lockdowns ease up, I'd like to give it a try.

Signed,

Fancy Like Auntie

Dear Fancy

Fortune and glory on the pow wow trail – I get it. You're not the first young Native to chase the dream and you won't be the last, so let me offer some sage advice from a classic country ballad.

"If you're big star bound let me warn ya, it's a long, hard ride."

I'm not a pow wow person, although I have been known to kick a little dust during an intertribal or two. But I have friends and family who are. Some win enough money dancing and singing to supplement their main source of income. However, it's by no means an easy life and unless you really love pow wow, there are probably better paying, more stable ways to make a living.

For starters it's an expensive undertaking – gas, hotels, camping gear, meals, entrance fees. They add up fast and a person needs to win enough to cover expenses and still make a profit.

Regalia is not cheap. Depending on your style – beadwork, quillwork, dress, hair ties, plumes/fan, leggings, and mocs can easily run into the thousands. Some dancers buy used or trade to cut costs.

It's also unpredictable income because there's no guarantee you'll win. There's a lot of competition out there. Moreover, like any other type of dance or singing contest your fate lies in the hands of judges making scoring subjective. Contest pow wows can also be cliquish making popular dancers and drums hard to beat.

I reached out to my friend, Scherri Greene (Nez Perce), an experienced three style dancer (traditional, jingle, and fancy) for more insights. Scherri offers the following business tips for folks looking to cruise pow wow highway.

1. Scout your competition and rate yourself. Do you have a background and a reputation as a dancer? If not, keep practicing, learn your songs, and think about avoiding pow wows that draw the big names until you're ready.
2. Pay attention to how many dancers enter each category. Your odds are usually better competing against ten dancers than thirty.
3. Enter the specials when possible. That's often where the biggest prize money is.
4. Budget and pay your taxes. Any winnings over \$600 are considered taxable income by the IRS regardless of whether you're issued a 1099.
5. Follow the exchange rate if you dance north of the border. At present a Canadian dollar is only worth about 80 cents U.S.
6. Read the fine print on flyers and contest rules. Prize money can be subject to change.
7. Have a back-up plan if you don't win. A little extra savings can make all the difference.
8. Check out some virtual pow wows in which contests are livestreamed or require video uploads. It might feel odd but some virtual pow wows save money by not paying arena fees and offer decent prize money.

And here's a final tip from Dr. Per Cap – get unscented Bengay for those dance achy muscles and joints. You don't want your snag thinking you can't afford real perfume or cologne!

Ask Dr. Per Cap is a program funded by First Nations Development Institute with assistance from the FINRA Investor Education Foundation. For more information, visit www.firstnations.org. To send a question to Dr. Per Cap, email askdrpercap@firstnations.org.