

Larry's Corner

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Do you have a story or helpful hints for dancing? If so, write it down and give to Larry Ablin or Barb Johnson. We will add it to one of the future News letters.

If you would like to tell us how you became interested in dancing, write it down and give to Larry or Barb, we will add your picture with it and put it in one of the future Newsletters

Leading And Following

There are 2 things followers should say that will help you be a better leader. "IF YOU DON'T LEAD ME, I'M NOT GOING TO MOVE!" and "DON'T DANCE ME INTO THE FURNITURE!"

Leading and following that takes place between two people out on the dance floor can be analyzed down to the tiniest detail and is probably the most complex form of communication that takes place between two human beings. At its best and most highly developed level, it is immensely gratifying to the couple that achieves it, especially in spontaneous dancing when you meet a partner who can lead (or follow). Leading and following are skills that require true

intelligence and abilities such as learning, pattern recognition, and non-verbal communication. Watching a champion Jack & Jill couple is like watching an improvised composition of a piece of art.

There are many misconceptions about lead and follow, expounded by both men and women. Untrained dancers sometimes seem to think that the lady is just supposed to go limp and the man bends her to his will. This is grossly mistaken. While some people may be willing at a beginning social level to tolerate this, it cannot last long it is too exhausting for the man and too painful for the woman. A woman without good posture, correct body/foot positions and body tone is simply not leadable. The man cannot be expected to position every part of the woman's body. A man without these qualities is not follow able because the woman cannot distinguish the signal from the noise (and may be physically prevented from doing the intended figure). Leading should not be tiring - it is only tiring when the follower isn't following. Leading is not pushing or pulling. It is communicating an intention. Dancing is an art form, despite the fact that it requires the prowess of an athlete.

A good lead/follow is like a good conversation - you don't have to yell, you only need to talk. As you get better, all you really need to do is whisper. Leading is not to be misinterpreted as "pushing or pulling". Though poor followers often

say, "If I have a strong leader I can follow", they would need the force of an "Arnold" (after he's properly warmed up) to move them across the floor. Equal sympathy goes to followers who encounter a leader who hasn't the foggiest of what he's trying to lead and can't move rhythmically to any music, doesn't know a slow from a quick and has no conception of what misery he is inflicting on his partner. It's not a leader's job to haul the follower around the floor every second, nor is it the follower's job to just hang there like a sack of potatoes and be dragged. Leading and following is a dynamic process that requires a great deal of effort on the part of both members of a partnership. It is readily possible to lead a woman through a fairly intricate step that she doesn't know without apparent force. Possible, though it is not within the powers of most men. If you want women to vie with each other for the opportunity of dancing with you, this is what you must learn to do. It is skill, not force, you are seeking, (Grasshopper)!

Men who claim they can lead anyone to dance well are not giving their partners enough credit. Women who say they can follow anything are not giving truly good followers enough credit. Experienced dancers never say such things, because it is simply not true. To say that all any woman needs is a good leader unfairly detracts from the many very talented female dancers. It also places too great a responsibility on

Inside this issue:

Leading and Following	1
Swing Clubs	4
Dance Etiquette	4

[Home](#) [Next](#) Page

(Continued from page 1)

the man - it implies that all errors are his fault. Sometimes women say, "I just follow." This demeans following as a trivial thing, which it most certainly is not.

Partnering skills are vital to good ballroom dancing, and equally vital to West Coast Swing. It is very difficult to cover the technique in classes since this is probably the most complex element to couple dancing and takes many years of coaching to perfect. It is not a matter of simple cueing, but an understanding of the entire body and how to make 2 people move as one around a common center. Competitive dancers must work extremely hard with this and it is actually tougher with couples who are used to each other than with perfect strangers.

After learning a new step or technique she starts fussing that I don't feel right anymore, or she will interpret the change as a lead to some other move that I used to do with her. However, I apply the same new technique to other competent dancers whom I rarely dance with and, voila, it works beautifully! Apparently, a long-time partner can get very used to the feel of their partner, and it is tougher to practice any improvement or change.

Even competitive routines are lead/follow. Any competitor taught "dance your own part and let your partner dance theirs, you don't have to lead/follow" has been taught wrong! The judges can tell the difference between a couple with a real lead/follow connection and a couple that is just going through their routine. One competitor writes Ballroom is social dancing - it is dependent on lead and follow, even in competition. My competition (Standard - "smooth") partner and I had a few pre-choreographed amalgamations

we used in competition. But I still always had to rely on my lead to know what we're doing, where we're going, what timing we were going to use this time. How I feel like expressing it this time. "There is most definitely lead and follow, even in competitive Latin where one's routines are choreographed to the hilt. Good lead and follow is critical in Latin dancing, both for the sake of speed, control and balance, but also simply because a step well-led and followed is a thousand times more pleasurable to dance for both partners. "Without even dancing with them you can tell the competitive dancers who can't lead and follow; just look for the couples who keep running into others on the floor, you can best see that by going to a USABDA dance. Because they dance their own parts, they have not developed and practiced the dynamic process of leading and following (floor-craft) required to negotiate around obstacles and unexpected incursions into their line of dance. Even with a routine, there is still a need to change directions unexpectedly, or completely alter a routine to deal with the fact that other couples are also dancing. In competition, there is never a place in the routine where lead-and-follow are not taking place. Even in the Latin dances, and even when the couple know the routine, you must lead. Most of the steps you perform in competition dancing require a special attention to lead and follow; you see this aspect where good competitive couples can make the dancing appear to take no effort, and therefore appears that no lead and follow is happening. That is an instance of good dancing, not no lead and follow. There is lead and follow happening, even when the couples are dancing side by side and not touching. It is just not typical, it's often done with body placement and eyes. During side by side solo dancing the man has to watch for on coming couples

and possible collisions so that he can adjust them or readily change the routine. In Jack and Jill Competitions, when you draw your regular partner you may not do very well since the judging is very highly directed toward lead and follow. It's pretty obvious when regular partners are doing a routine without lead/follow. You can tell when a couple try to do a routine: they do the same steps but since no lead/follow takes place they will look like two individuals rather than a couple! I often test my regular partner by altering our routine on the fly. If other couples are on the floor you can never be sure what will happen. You may have to avoid a collision or simply forget what comes next! :-)

Men, to truly lead well you must know the lady's part to every figure you do. Leading and following are very different skills, and following well is every bit as difficult as leading well. Recognizing figures in a noisy, moving environment is a complicated task that is certainly equal to figure transmission. Of course there is one thing the leader does that the follower has no analog for - floor craft. The leader has primary responsibility for obstacle avoidance, and this can be a difficult task, especially on a crowded floor with couples moving at widely differing speeds. The leader truly has to do everything at once, he's got to listen to the music, decide what to do and how to do it, think not only about his own movements but about his partner's and those of all the other couples, etc., etc.

And to make matters worse, when beginning his dancing career the man has to learn how to do everything at once. Yes, the follower has to be able to perform a lot of actions, but the leader has to be able to perform and initiate them. In addition, there are many varia-

tions that differ only in detail matters of raising an arm or not, or something subtle like that, and the leader has to be aware of the differences, and has to indicate clearly where the movement is going. Of course as a pro, he'll manage to hold a conversation in a foreign language while leading a gold level sequence!

Following skills are as equally important as leading skills. A dance is much more enjoyable when the leader need only give firm, not forceful, leads to his partner to indicate what is wanted, and when a partner senses body movements that serve as leads. For this to work, the lady must become sensitive and responsive to the feel, and sometimes sight of leads, and not expect that her partner will literally carry her through the dance. The skill of following is greatly underestimated. Whenever I am trying to teach beginners about leading and following, I always have a hard time conveying the idea that dancing is a PARTNER sport--each person has to carry his/her load, or the whole thing fails.

Leading/following implies a one way connection (man to lady) but in really good dancing both partners are putting various different energies into the dancing at different times, and even though the leader is usually in control of things like floor direction, timing, and choreography, his awareness of the actions of his partner, how far did she go...is she finished with her line yet...is her weight over the foot I'm about to turn her on, etc. are vital. Women follow, but men must lead and follow; i.e., men must watch to see what the women are doing and compensate.

The leader, who is in creative control, needs pattern-based thinking, with frames of reference that

can include the whole dance floor, the space occupied by the couple, the spatial relationships between the two dancers, and the patterns of connection between the two. It seems that followers are mainly concerned with the last frame of reference, i.e., they react to the patterns of connection. Following is more fun than leading, because you

- (a) have much less responsibility for navigating and
- (b) don't know what's going to be lead next, so each dance is something of a "magical mystery tour".

I think the best part about being a follower is being led in patterns or syncopations that you don't know! When led well, good followers execute moves that are totally unexpected or unpredictable but incredibly fun. Some leaders complain about how boring it gets to only do the same repertoire over and over all night long. They say followers have more fun because they're doing different dances all night. "A good leader never dances the same way with every person. The way you do the same dance changes from one partner to the next. Were you to see me dancing with a beginner, it would be difficult for you to tell that I'm other than a good beginner. Were you to see me dancing with one of the Champions (with whom I'm comfortable) you would see something quite different. Were you to see me dancing with someone I know well and with whom I've been dancing for years, you'd see something different."

In addition learning the figures in the first place can be as analytical for the follower as it is for the leader, though the habitual execution of them might not be. Also, there is an added dimension for the follower, which is that you must have in your head the entire

menu of movement possibilities at every point, not just the one you're going to use. Since you don't know what the guy is going to lead, you have to be ready to do everything and very rapidly react to the situations and signals you get to eliminate the things you're not being asked to do. This is a skill that relies as much on spatial or pattern based thinking as floor craft, albeit in a less linear way.

Note that the lady does not lead when she is stepping forward. The lady does not change the direction of a step unless a collision is imminent, and not always then, and the gentleman is then responsible for getting out of whatever position she got them in to if she does take control for a moment. Rather than saying that the lady leads when going forward, it might be better to say the gentleman follows when going back. The man always initiates direction of movement, but the person moving forward dictates the size of the step. They always step on the floor before the person going backward, therefore leading the way. And, while the lead that determines the length of the stride is different from the lead that determines what figure to do, the follow associated with each of these is the same.



Swing Clubs

East Meets West; 952-949-3016; 1st and 3rd Friday
Dance at Dancesport in Hopkins 816 1/2 Main St.

Minnesota West Coast Swing; 651-731-9768; 2nd
and 4th Friday Dance at B-Dale Club South of the
Dale and Cty. B in St. Paul.

TC Rebels Swing club; Hotline number 952-941-
0906; Dances are at Everett McClay VFW on
frontage road of 494 by Mall of America.

When dancing West Coast Swing be sure to line your
slot with the boards on the floor. If no boards then
line up with length of room

Singles all Together has Ballroom lessons on Monday
night 8 pm at the Lenox Center in St Louis Park.
Singles all Together West Coast Swing on Tuesday
night 8 pm at Medina Ballroom.

TGIS dances will have free lessons

1 hour before Dance starting at 730 pm on the 1st and
3rd Saturday. For November we will be learning East
Coast Swing. There will be 15 minutes of Beginner to
get people started, Then 30 minutes of intermediate.
Then 15 minute practice till dance starts. So for all you
singles that want to learn to dance while holding each
other come on out.

Larry L Ablin
Help's at Singles All Together dance class on Monday night, at Lenox center on
Minnetonka Blvd in St Louis Park.

Teach at Singles All Together West coast swing on Tuesday night 8pm at Medina.

Teach Ballroom at Jefferson Community Ed on Wednesday 26th and Hennepin

Phone: 952-891-9014 Email: dancempls@earthlink.net

Dance Etiquette

Line of Dance is counter clock-
wise around the room for
dances that move, like Foxtrot,
and Waltz.

People who aren't moving like
Rock and roll, Rumba, or
Swing Dance in the middle of
the room.

If you bump into someone, say
sorry.

If you step on partner, say your
sorry, then forget it. (Don't
rag on it.)

Finish the song you started danc-
ing to, before excusing your-
self.

Don't do a step that requires kick-
ing, on a crowded floor.

Dance etiquette offenders

Bulldog: One who does step or kick, no matter who is in the way.

Chatter box: One who is always talking. (Social talk ok but not
constantly)

Crooner: One who sings or hums with music.

Debater: One who talks politics or religion while dancing.

Iceberg: One with no smile (At least look like your having fun.)

Jolly Extrovert: One who is cheerful with surrounding people, but forgets
his own partner.

Lead foot: One who can't seem to lift one's feet from the floor.

Octopus: One who holds the partner everywhere but the correct dance po-
sition.

Quitter: Suddenly tired 1/2 way through song. (Finish Song)

Sherman tank: The Leader leads her, but she isn't moving.

Truck driver: One who steers the partner like he drives.

Wrong way charlie: Clockwise traveler. (Against line of dance)

