

Larry's Corner

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Do you have any likes or dislikes, stories, 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

For the month of November I didn't do a newsletter to see if anyone would notice. Several people asked where it was so here is another newsletter. If anyone has anything to write about or add, Let Barb or Larry know about it.

Arm Tone, Connection, Force Level And Body Leads

Keep the coupled hands equidistant between the bodies, so that both the man and the lady retract their elbows behind their backs and upper bodies are very close.

Imagine you have a broomstick connecting your elbows, so they can't extend past the torso, in order to eliminate the awkward chicken-wing look. If your elbows are far behind your back, you may also tend to stoop over the top of the lady when you lead the 4. (And the man should lead the 4 in the sugar-push, you do not want the woman to voluntarily take the 4 step without a lead!)

Choose a coupling weight, and KEEP IT CONSTANT. Keep it to 8 ounces or less, but that after that you may choose whatever weight you want.

Bring the upper arms back enough to be parallel to the torso, but never further than that. Reasons:

It creates a nice visual line. Bringing the arms behind the back creates a "chicken wing" look.

It creates enough room between the partners for footwork variations.

The coupled arms should form a straight line, so that if there is a height differential, the coupled arms will form a straight line diagonal with respect to the floor. This makes for a position of strength.

Use a heavy coupling weight 8 ounces or less.

The more I learn, the more that seems to be the case. It would seem that the best followers, the ones who do the greatest range of creative variations, are in part able to do so because they are more responsible for their own weight, more independent. They are still following, to be sure, but since they are always more centered they are less likely to be thrown off balance. Each dancer should maintain balance without depending upon the partner.

Most of the top teachers teach light is better. They don't



always practice what they preach though. I once saw a couple of these teachers dancing, not demonstrating but they drew a large crowd because they were doing some really incredible stuff. At one point they lost the connection and the lady went flying backwards a couple yards.

When you get really good it's OK to play like that: when you get really good you're also not likely to accidentally dislocate someone's shoulder. If the follower has a heavy anchor

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(coupling weight) she can use the force and energy to do stuff that would not be possible if she had to support all of her own weight.

From a practical point of view, beginners need to learn to put tension and snap into their body movements before they put any real force into their connection. A lot of the tension is illusion, because your body line creates it.

The use of illusion. This is indicating-instead-of-leading in disguise. For example, suppose that you are going to do a slingshot. Instead of pulling the follower forward and whipping her around; the leader should step forward which will gently bring your arm and if there is a good connection with the follower, it will bring your follower's arm forward also; on the next step, step backwards and now lift your arm to indicate the turn - this gives the illusion that you are pulling the followers arm when in fact you are just stepping forward and then backwards, a much more pleasant alternative. The use of illusion is essential in good West Coast Swing.

When you're playing around, you can also put REAL snap into it, if you want to go at it full-throttle. Consistency in the level of coupling force is what's to be aimed for. Beyond that, it's an individual choice.

In speed swing at high tempos (160+ bpm), the connection actually has to get tighter and shorter. This is compensated for by switching places more rather than the man holding cross-slot. If the partners switch places, the woman doesn't have to travel as far and doesn't require as much force in the lead. Also, the man doesn't have to pre-lead by moving his center back to pull the woman forward. He leads more with the arm, pulling himself up to her as well as pulling her towards him.

With the approach I take, I teach the woman that her right foot follows her right shoulder, which follows her right hand. If the man doesn't give her extension, she doesn't take it on her own. On the other hand, if the man gives her extension, she takes it.

The point that needs to be emphasized is the connection that is possible between the partners. On the 3&4 of a push-break, the key is to keep the arm bent at the elbow, so that one's upper arm is parallel to one's torso and one's lower arm forms a straight line (in every direction) with the partner's lower arm. Because your upper arm and elbow are in line with your torso, you are dancing more from your "center" than if your arm is fully extended from the shoulders, or retracted with elbows behind your back. And because the lower arms are aligned, you can easily build up compression on the 3 of a push-break ("sugar push") without putting undue stress on elbows or wrists. In other words, you don't have to rely on the arm itself as the force behind giving or receiving the lead. Rather than making the arm muscles do all the work, you each get a feeling of direct connection with your partner's hips, carried through the arms as conduits. Good "connection" doesn't require heavy force levels on the anchor step. Higher force levels may be necessary for certain moves/syncopations, (usually signaled by going to a palm to palm handhold - and the best followers signal when they want more force by smoothly getting heavier over 1-2 beats before they need it)

but heavy should not be the default level - It limits what you and your partner can do if you are holding each other from falling backwards all the time.

If leaders wanted to pull something around all day they'd become dairy farmers! When you dance West Coast Swing the last thing you want is a follower pulling you out of your anchor step pretending she's a ski boat, because some knucklehead taught her to pull back. Leaders: when a follower starts falling back out of her West Coast Swing anchor steps on every pattern, "accidentally" let her hand slip enough to make her eyes bug out and force her to recover her own balance. After only two or three times she will quit expecting you to hold her up. There is a night & day difference between a dancer who uses his/her partner for leverage to add speed or impact, and a person on a dance floor who expects their partner to hold them up because they haven't a clue what balance, poise, and posture mean.

Guys -- the amount of force in the connection is a function of body position. When your arm muscles aren't generating the force, it's really not tiring. With a good lead-follow, simply moving your body will create enough force on the tips of the man's fingers to move his partner. If she follows, then the connection is light (maybe even a few ounces). However, if the leader's timing is at all off, which it usually is in a social dance, then he will have to use muscle, e.g. an arm lead. This feels bad to the follower and increases the force of the connection. Conversely, too soft a frame on the follower, which is typical for social swing dancers, will cause an on time lead to be picked up late. When the follower falls behind with respect to the leader's body, the force of the connection becomes considerable when she finally acknowledges it. This also does not feel very good to the follower and is entirely of her own doing. One consequence of complete isolation is a light lead in all circumstances. A light lead has a practical benefit for dance instructors: dance inherently creates unnatural pressure on the joints which can and will lead to injuries eventually. The cumulative effect of years of moving joints in unnatural ways puts an end to a dancer's career. More force creates injuries faster and ends one's dancing career quicker. Thus, in teaching complete isolation, the national names who have to teach this stuff for a living are acting rationally in that they are simply trying to survive for as long as possible. This has a lesson for the rest of us. Force has the potential for pain (not to mention the embarrassment when you slip away from your partner and go flying) and is therefore bad. Leads do not have to be forceful and connection need not be heavy to produce the desired follow. Therefore, since you do not need something that is bad to dance well, don't do it. In other words, lighten-up. Of course, this is easier said than done. It requires team work between the leader and the follower.

Remember that in swing (as in most other partner dances) the woman provides nearly all of her own momentum. All you need do is guide her. Your job is to 'open the door' for her. Think of a simple underarm pass: Do you actually turn her? No, she turns herself, by moving forward until she "runs out of arm". Why is she moving forward in the first place? Not because you powered her forward, but because you led her to walk forward, and then you simply got out of her way. Getting out of her way is an obvious case of something that can be much more subtle: You don't just lead with your arms and

hands; you lead with body positions (and even head positions) that create openings for her to step into and which guide her to the right spot. The body positions that make this work also make your dancing look better.

Leaders don't pull but take the lady with you without shortening the distance between you and your partner on 1. Thus, on the basic sugar-push, the leader can get the follower moving on 1 just by taking a step back no more jerky pulls! Likewise, the follower's move forward on 1 is natural, because her whole body comes along as she feels the leader step back. By contrast, if your wet-noodle arms are extended on 1, retracted on 3, and extended again on 4, you lose this sense of direct connection to each other's hips and easily fall into bad habits: the leader who yanks on 1, or the follower whose arm comes forward slightly ahead of the rest of her; the leader who tries to stop the follower on 3 with arm strength, or the follower who simply stops herself; the leader who pushes the follower away strongly on 4 with his arms (rather than letting her push herself off of the "wall" he should have formed with his hips), or the follower who steps back on 4 without using the compression that should have been built up on 3.

In the West Coast Swing Sugar Push when the leader steps "back, small step back - or together" the follow steps "forward, forward." This allows the follow to "sink" into the lead as preparation for the push on count 4. On count 2 the leader is only presenting a firm but resilient wall for the follower to push from by placing his hands palms out. He is not actively pushing her away - he is just matching her level of push. This allows the follower to vary how vigorously she is sent back. The follower gives the leader an indication of how much of a push she will be given on 4 by sinking tight to the leader or just meeting his hands. This gives the follower the choice of footwork/syncopation - she may want to do a syncopation after a light push or a body dip after a strong push. (Syncopation in swing dancing is the shifting of a step from one well-defined beat location (timing) to another well-defined beat location (timing). i.e.. changing 123&45&6 to 12&345&6).

While a lady may use the man at the end of the slot on 4 to brake, she should negate the backward momentum by rotating counterclockwise, allowing the right foot/hip/shoulder to be a hinge point while allowing the left side of the body to rotate. Having negated the momentum away from the man she is able to move forward on 1 without being dragged forward.

An exercise that illustrates all this is to practice a hundred sugar-pushes with a partner, where each of you holds onto the other's arms just above the wrists for the entire six counts. This provides an excellent way to practice keeping the elbows bent throughout the pattern, to monitor the connection between partners at every step along the way, and to break those nasty bad habits.

The best connection is generated when the forearms describe a straight line from the man's elbow to the woman's elbow, with neither elbow behind the body. You can turn the push slightly sideways to the slot to get the dancers closer together, but this will take away some of the woman's variations so don't do it all the time. (Turning the sugar-push

slightly sideways will also give the illusion that the dancers are much closer than they actually are, this helps make the dance flow. But do not let your forearms go up into a teepee.)

Re-establishing connection on the anchor-step should never be part of the WCS vocabulary. There should be a continuous connection at all points in the dance. The connection alternates smoothly between "leverage" and "compression" throughout the dance. If you deny a follower the RIGHT she has to a continuous connection, (unless you are doing free spins) you have just destroyed the dance for her. Trust me, this is a great way to have most of the better dancers dreading to dance with you. The anchor step should be a light connection. It's most important that your centers be connected at the last beat of it in order to start the lead on 1. The anchor step is not supposed to be some sort of tug-of-war between you and your partner. You cannot play when you are leaning back at some huge angle. If you want to style your dance with the 'big lean' you should lead it occasionally, but don't make it the standard anchor. Maintaining a continuous connection doesn't mean you have to be leading all the time. For example, the basic left side pass only requires an open the door type lead on 1 2. The rest is left up to the follower. She may get to the end of the slot on either 3 or 4; it's her choice and it does not screw up the leader's footwork.

Everyone has a weight they are comfortable with when it comes to leading and following. Being consistent and light is the goal. If a guy is too forceful, tell him! Guys - if you like more or less weight from a woman - ask - it's no big deal - everyone is different. If she (or he) takes insult to being asked - then - did you really want them as a partner again, anyway? Otherwise, try this: When faced with a partner who's an extremely heavy follow, intentionally get even lighter in your lead, so that the follower has to listen more closely. He likened it to the way a whisper can command more attention than a shout, because people have to lean in and pay close attention in order to hear. A good lead/follow is like a good conversation - when one person yells, the other yells back. You only need to talk. As you get better, all you need to do is whisper. Don't tense up - instead become a limp noodle when someone "yells".

Mario gives two pieces of simple but good advice. First, when you do a syncopation, try and keep the position of your body relative to your partner's the same as it would be if you did the move with basic footwork. The fact that you're doing something fancy with your feet must NOT make it harder for your partner to dance with you. Second, **THE RESISTANCE OF THE LEAD OR FOLLOW IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN DOING SYNCOPATIONS.** You MUST keep that resistance there whatever else you are doing. Practice keeping your arm tension constant as you do various flashy things with your feet.

Syncopations are like shoes - you can never have too many. But some women think that to be a hot shot WCS dancer, they have to have lots of syncopations - so they fool around so much that they forget all that fancy footwork isn't supposed to effect the lead. The excitement and interest of syncopations are that they are the exception, not the norm.

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 Twin City Ballroom

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.

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 Niteclub 2 Step on Tuesday night 8pm at Medina.

Starting West Coast Swing Basics again on 10/28/2003

Teach Ballroom at Jefferson Community Ed on Wednesday at 26th and Hennepin 612-668-2740 Next class starts 10/9/2003 630-830 8 weeks

Phone: 952-891-9014 Email: lablin@earthlink.net westcoast65@earthlink.net or dancempls@earthlink.net

Web <http://www.dancempls.com>

Dance Etiquette

Line of Dance is counter clockwise 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 dancing to, before excusing yourself.

Don't do a step that requires kicking, 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 position.

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)