

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

Hearing the Beat

Not everyone can hear the beat. The problem is very seldom a rhythmic thing. There is a thing called entrainment that is innate in all normal humans and enables them to naturally fall in sync with repetitive musical patterns. It doesn't work well when you don't listen carefully because you're focusing on other things like dancing properly. It also won't work if you listen to the wrong things, like the cymbal instead of the instruments that are holding the beat your feet are supposed to be moving to. You don't need great rhythmic sense in order to dance. All you have to do is learn the leads and footwork well enough so that you can listen to the music while you dance. Turning up the bass and turning down the treble is a good training tool. This helps them to learn just what they should be listening to. There is so much going on in that set of drums, that some people just aren't aware of what we are dancing to. Try clapping it out along with the music. Use straight 4's first, not quicks and

slows. If you can't keep the beat, practice by yourself for a few days until you can. Some people are more tactile than auditory, and for those you may find it helpful to tap their body or shoulder in time to the music, and let them tap feet or clap hands or tap on a table. This gets them started with an extra physical cue reinforcing the auditory cue. I ask folks to listen to the radio as much as possible, and to routinely tap the beat with their feet, or tap on the steering wheel, or clap the beat, or whatever... to try to practice hearing the beat. 15 minutes alone can often be equivalent to an hour while being watched. When they can hear the beat, then have them tap out the dance rhythm (quick-quick-slow-slow, etc.) Once he can clap quicks and slows consistently, let him try walking it. Walk it continuously, the living room will be too small, try it outside on your daily stroll (don't laugh, this is how I learned three against two, other people might laugh, but if your determined enough...) Then you can move to the living room, don't worry about the space. Go in circles, back and forth, in place, and combinations of all of them. You might want to replace the words quick-quick-slow-slow with quick-quick-slow-lead occasionally, have him do the arm movements as best as possible at the same time. In class, the best way to get students to dance on time is to count the rhythm properly while the music is playing. The overwhelming majority of beginners, in my experience, want desperately to dance on the instructor's count. When practicing, 1) KISS! (keep it simple) If the newbie is a follower, be restrained in what you lead. And if the newbie is a leader, accept that you will be following a very simple dance. Dancing very simple basic patterns is much more enjoyable than struggling with complicated wraps, ducks, and whips when one partner can hardly hear the beat. 2) Select slower music to dance to. It may not be as exciting, but it will be far more comfortable for your newbie partner, and they will be far more likely to develop good dancing habits.

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Some followers have trouble with timing in C/W Two-step, especially when doing the basic step, even though they have no trouble with waltz, cha cha and west coast swing. Here is some insight as to why.

In Waltz you can hear when you should be stepping

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with your lead foot because it is a 6 count basic over 6 count phrases.

Two-step is a 6 count basic over 8 count phrases, so you can't tell what foot you should be stepping on by listening.

Cha-Cha you can tell whether it's a front break or back break by the direction he's moving.

In Two-step, he's always moving the same direction.

In WCS you can always use the anchor-in-place as a reference point to which foot you need to step with next.

In Two-step you generally have no reference point. This is why I like doing a lot of Texas whip patterns and variations of it; changing tracks every 6 counts provides a good reference point. Keeping turning while you're in closed provides a good reference point too.

Just in case any Followers wondered why, sometimes we Leaders get off the beat to save you from some hazard of which you're unaware. Sometimes such actions cause a slight loss of balance. The combination of getting off the beat and balance can make us seem like clods for a bar or two till we get it back together. We Leaders very much appreciate the skill of you Followers who will follow our momentary lapses without back leading or complaint. Things happen. Worse things could happen.

Always be grateful for the men that have asked you to dance. They lead to the best of their abilities. Follow to the best of your abilities. I realize that the ultimate, perfect follower should be able to follow ANYTHING he leads. Your sure to mess up, so why not get back on track as soon as possible and go back to concentrating on having fun and doing everything as well as you can. Appreciate that some men seem to get stuck in warp patterns. The only way that these men seem to accept that change is needed is in self discovery. Sometimes you need to just keep following until he realizes something is not right. After all, he has the lead.

Active Following

In social ballroom dancing where the female is supposed to be literally unaware of what will come next, "back leading" is a clear violation of the intent as well as the spirit of the encounter. Back leading is an attitude problem; when a follower back leads, she's saying that she neither respects nor trusts the leader's ability to lead, to dance or even to select figures. However, in Swing dancing, things aren't quite so chauvinistic! :-). Swing dancing is an improvisational environment and that makes it interesting and exciting to both partners. The best followers will "take over" and surprise the leader with variations during passes, etc., and also at the end of most any figure.

With "active following" comes a few ground rules: Followers should not steal the lead without having already established an overall sense of "intent to follow" and leaders should not pull followers out of syncopations without having established an "intent to be responsive to the follower's communication." Followers must be able to control their weight during syncopation - they must not pull or push on the leader.

The leader has to lead and follow in WCS. So ideally, a leader would not only be able to choreograph to phrasing on the fly (and choreograph moves that interpret the music), but also be able to amend them as the follower adds her own moves. Leaders are always, in a sense, following too. They set something in motion, wait to see what happens, and adjust accordingly. (If the follower misses a lead, spins off balance, etc. they have to be ready to respond to the situation). Dancing with an "active follower" takes even more than the usual amount of concentration from the leader because he has to react to the follower's surprises, giving her time to show off, while still recovering smoothly.

While one partner is spinning, a good dancer will use that as an opportunity to "play". While some men object to the woman taking more than two beats to spin or play, you should have no objection to that as long as when you finally lead the woman in, she goes. I look at West Coast Swing as having three facets, I dance, she dances and we dance. If you set the woman up to break or "play" and she stands there like a lamppost, you'll be less likely to give her the chance to shine again. If she takes the opportunity then give her the chance more often.

The Leading And Following Of Slows And Quicks

Most dance classroom instruction is directed at leaders, even when classes are co-taught by a leader/follower team. And when a teacher is a male/leader, instruction to followers is often phrased in the negative ("Don't anticipate" or "Don't do this because it makes it difficult for the leaders") rather than in the positive ("Keep the tone in your arm, and let the leader indicate where you are to move"). Following is not merely the absence of bad habits, of knowing what NOT to do. Teachers know this, but their actions do not always reflect it.

Toddlers all learn to babble before they can learn to talk with proper diction. Though we all first learn to talk this way, note that this is not the way for adults to learn language; their brains are wired differently. Ballroom dancing is like a language. I think it important to learn partner dance skills as a language, as you say, but the way you'd teach it to adults:

1.the alphabet has positions -- and here are closed, promenade, and offset positions; let's see what they feel like...

2.the punctuation has movement and rhythm -- slows and quick-quicks; let's see how they feel when combined with the alphabet of positions...

3.words are "steps" that use the alphabet and the punctuation... some simple ones to look at are the magic step, the left turn, and a couple of patterns with SSSS and QQQQ

4.sentences are amalgamations of steps.

Adults are capable of assimilating this kind of organization, and using it to speed the learning process beyond the kind of rote learning required for small children. If you consciously organize the instruction this way, and make the organization known to the students, you can make it very interesting and it will better prepare students for real dancing. They will learn that dancing is a language, rather than a frozen set of steps and amalgamations. As it is, there are too many (studio-trained) partners who are terribly insecure as soon as you get off the schoolbook amalgamations.

Foxtrot comprises the following two most basic counts:

quick-quick

slow

All other combinations, including SSQQ and SQQS, and many others such as QQQQ and SSSS, are made up by combining these. Beginners are often mis-taught to expect either SSQQ or SQQSQQ when they follow. It takes some unlearning for them to become real foxtrot dancers. The above is a good example of

how teaching "the count" (either SSQQ or SQQSQQ) fools followers. If they were simply taught to follow S and QQ and expect no such thing as "the count" we would all be better off. Example: when I lead natural right turn with the rhythm SSQQSSSSQQ I find that some women are unable to accept the fact that four slows can occur in a row. Their brain forces them into a quick-quick after two or three slows.

To prevent this, I teach foxtrot thusly:

Not tell them that SQQ or SSQQ is "the count". Instead, tell them that the basic steps are S and QQ. Count S and QQ randomly to real foxtrot music so they can hear it in the music. I explain to them that the critical property of foxtrot music is that you can do SSSS... to it, and can replace any S by QQ. Teach you to lead and follow SSSS... ad infinitum, the leader changing the direction of S arbitrarily.

IF YOU CAN'T DO THIS YOU CAN'T DO FOXTROT!

Then teach them to lead and follow SSSS... ad infinitum punctuated by random occurrences of QQ. All possible combinations of directions would be included.

IF YOU CAN'T DO THIS YOU CAN'T DO FOXTROT!

Once they can lead and follow this, add traditional patterns:

SQQ SQQ ... (box and other waltz patterns)

SSQQ SSQQ (magic rhythm)

mixtures of these

When I encounter a beginning student who confuses SSQQ basic with SQQ I often try to break up the step and 'practice' just forward walks (SSSSSSS) and side steps (QQQQQ left or right) in closed position. When these work I try various combinations of SSSSQQQQ just to practice the point. Then I stick to the school figure. In this case, for practice, I would talk and agree on the plan. Spontaneity can come later.

1. The 'basic' step isn't just Forward-Forward-Side-Together or SSQQ but a "pattern moving down the line of dance in closed position composed of forward walks and also has side steps." One should be able to lead and follow any simple variant (eventually).

2.It's easier to practice things in isolation. When practicing a series of slow walks, we both can concentrate on the walking action, lead and follow, rise and fall. When practicing a series of side rocks we

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can concentrate on that feeling also. When we practice changing direction from forward to side we can concentrate on the gathering, momentum change or whatever.

Each step encompasses many techniques, movements and positions. If necessary, break it down and work on one at a time. I also don't try rhythm changes, syncopations or too many variants to make the point. Keep it simple - and get back to the basic which wasn't working when you started.

Other beginning school figures illustrate other techniques or positions: promenade position, offset, parallel partner, or moving backward.

The next level of the same concept is a student who follows the basic (closed position) patterns, but 'refuses' to follow offset position leads, trying to keep in closed position whatever distortions are required. Usually she hasn't been introduced to the offset position and feels it's 'wrong'.

One can execute any number of slows, backwards or forward, in offset position just to practice the feeling (learning situation) or just because that's what I felt like executing to the music (real-time dance situation). It's not required to stay with the school figures - though they do usually run the gamut of techniques.

When teaching foxtrot timing I call the Basic in American Style.

and Step, and Step, Quick, Quick.

1 2 3 4 5 6

By calling the Slows "and step" it helps in getting the student to delay the weight change to the second beat. I have found that technique is the key to good timing. Remembering that the legs are there to hold up the body, so they should be under the body. Also try to push off the opposite leg in any step that has direction (fwd., back, side)

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 Harmonie Dance center Corner of Old Shakopee Rd and France

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 Next session starts 1/6/2004.

Basic Step for Country 2 Step is

Man

Left foot forward slow for 2 beats.

Right foot Forward slow for 2 beats.

Left foot short step forward for 1 beat.

Right foot short step forward for 1 beat.

Lady Does the same thing only backwards starting with the Right foot.

Larry L Ablin and Barb Johnson

Teach Beginners at Singles All Together dance class on Monday night, at Lenox center on Minnetonka Blvd in St Louis Park.

Teach at Singles All Together on Tuesday night 8pm at Medina. Starting West Coast Swing Basics again on 1/6/2004

Teach Ballroom at Jefferson Community Ed on Wednesday at 26th and Hennepin 612-668-2740 Next class starts 1/29/2004 630-830 8 weeks

Lakeville Class starts 1/30/2004 630 to 930pm Century Junior High 952-985-4610

Prior lake class start 2/19/2004 630 to 940pm Grainwood Elementary 952-440-2930

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