

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 News-letters

Connection

Leading and following is all done through that elusive thing called "connection." Professionals talk about making the three connections: with your partner, with the music, and with the floor. Connection is a magic that happens through the physical contact between two dancers and their common interpretation of the music that makes the two individuals dance as one unit. Eventually the leads get so subtle that it seems that just a thought carries the couple through a dance, in directions neither had thought of before. Magic? No, just something that we wish we could do on every dance. Being mortal we struggle with "centering" and "flashlights" and "anchoring" and "finger-tip leads" and "body leads" and all those things that we hear help to capture that magic that happens a once or twice each time we go dancing.

Have you ever been fortunate enough to dance with a real dancer? ...a woman -

-with such wonderful connection that, without ever saying a word, you can have an entire conversation with her through your fingertips ?

-who will bring a huge smile to your face almost immediately upon taking dance position, open or closed, because you can "feel" that she's there and moving with you; not moving on her own or wrestling with you ?

-with who, using only one hand... Oh heck, with two fingers as your entire connection, you can lead nearly

ANYTHING and have it appear in her body as if she was reading your mind ?

Those magic moments and feelings of connection are a big part of why I dance. (Of course when I dance with women who are that good, I tend to focus on all my faults, which suddenly become very evident to me :-)

I had a talk with my dance instructor about teaching "connection" in group classes. Her opinion was that it is best left to private lessons (but then again, isn't everything?). I used to think this too until I started teaching connection in a group setting? and in a private lesson?

I would like to ask the dance students reading this: What concepts, methods and exercises have your teachers used to give you a good understanding of connection? Connection is a difficult subject that is so much more than just level of force. But how do you define and explain it? People have written things like: The trick to keeping a good connection has two parts. One is feeling that your hips/groins are pushing into the balls of your feet as you step. The other is feeling your lower shoulders/ribs connect with a) your arms and hands and b) your partners' spine.

Is this definition adequate?

Use consistent terminology; "leverage" to mean a tension or pull connection, and "compression" to mean a push connection.

Many teachers use "tension" to refer to both push and pull, leaving it up to you to try and figure it out from the context.)

Leverage should have a bungee-cord-like feeling - elastic and springy; NOT like a rope (alternately taut or slack).

One of the exercises we teach our beg & intermediate levels is to dance open hand palm to palm with a Federal reserve bill held by counter pressure. If the lady lets the hand separate (and the bill drops) she buys him lunch.

Likewise, each couple holds a coin between their connected fingers (i.e., his and her fingers), and having us perform various moves without dropping the coin.

While many teachers teach beginners to lock the bi-

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iceps & forearm muscles and pull, we teach that you lock the upper pectoral & latissimus dorsi muscles while keeping the arm and forearm relaxed, pliable and responsive (toned).

Great stuff! Is there any more?

When I teach I explain the lead from both a foot and a body position, showing the leaders where and when their body (center) must move to continue the connection throughout the pattern. I also explain to the followers... how the pattern should feel.

There is a whole exercise in which partners purposely attempt to be alternatively heavy or light--that teaches them the possible range and how to find what's comfortable.

Practice with both partners grasping a man's tie (or a piece of rope) rather than each other's hands directly to help the leaders understand how to lead from their centers and to help the followers understand how to stay within that lead. (For you physics and engineering types, a rope is a tension-only, 2-force member; the line of action can only lie along a straight line drawn from endpoint to endpoint.) Since a tie will go slack if there is no tension on it, it is readily apparent when "leverage" connection is lost.

What other exercises are there?

While facing each other, place fingertips of each hand of the leader against the fingertips of each hand of the follower very lightly. This should make a light but tactile connection between the two dancers. Both the leader and the follower should then move their hands around together (up and down, right and left, forwards and backwards) while maintaining constant pressure between the pairs of fingertips. This should also be done with the eyes closed." With eyes closed, take a two handed open position hold and then 'dance' without music. The man should be able to lead, vary step size, and even vary the cadence of the dance all with the ladies eyes closed.

Build yourself a "Couple Developer" It consists of a "spring scale" - often called a "fish scale" - with a handle on each end. You have each partner hold a handle and apply a light tension - as in a WCS anchor step - and you read out the force level on the scale dial.

Develop resistance by falling against solid objects, breaking the fall with both hands being careful to not let the elbows go beyond the centerline of your body, and push yourself back to balance. You will quickly find the feel you like and that a Leader or Follower will appreciate.

In order to overcome spaghetti arms many teachers use the word "resistance". Resistance, while getting the immediate result, creates a whole new set of problems. Any top teacher knows that arm "resistance" is wrong. Instead of locking the biceps and forearm muscles to create resistance, a good teacher teaches to isolate the upper pectoral muscle which locks the entire arm in place eliminating the spaghetti arm yet making for a easily leadable follower. Some use the term

Action/Reaction which while partially explaining lead and follow, is more suitable than "resistance". Frame is "the minimum tone required to achieve position and maintain it."

These are all a big help, but can you bring it all together? Or are there so many elements that you need to develop each one separately? If so, what exercises are best for the former? for the latter?

I teach East and West Coast Swing, Foxtrot, Waltz, Chacha, Rumba, Nightclub 2 step, Cajun 2 step, Cajun Zydeco and Waltz, Country 2 step and Other dances, so what I'm talking about is based on my experience with those dances, particularly with regards to teaching "anchoring" or the break ending connection in WCS. First of all, I give the following imagery: Imagine a board. In one end of the board is a nail. Tied to that nail is a string. Tied to the other end of the string is a ball. Now imagine that the board is flat. If you knock the ball, where does it go?

It goes in the direction it was knocked and then kind of wanders around according to the subtle warps of the board, right? Now, imagine that the end of the board with the nail is propped up. If you knock the ball now, where does it end up? It may wobble a little, but it ends up straight down the line toward the ground pretty quick. When you're dancing, the man is the nail, the woman is the ball, and the arm connection is the string. Given that the man is usually taller and heavier than the woman, the woman has to incline herself slightly more than the man to achieve a balanced connection, the path of the arm connection is usually slightly downhill, much like the string.

Then I have them do a little drill to prove the point:

First, have them line up where the man can touch the woman's shoulder Have them assume a one-hand open grip.

Ask the lady to fall to either side and ask the men to try to support them with just the one hand they are holding.

They will all laugh as they stumble around the floor.

Then have them back up to the point where, with their arms extended, they can just barely touch each other's elbows.

Have them assume a one-hand grip.

Tell the men to lean back slightly, and then tell the women to lean back until they find a comfortable balance point they can hold.

Then have the women fall to either side and have the men help them keep their balance.

They will IMMEDIATELY see the difference and "ooh" and "aah" in a flash of enlightenment. :)

Then we add on to the drill:

Have them get back in the proper position described above.

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Then have the ladies pick up their left foot and the men pick up their right.

Make sure they are staying balanced.

If they are not connected, they will have a VERY hard time staying balanced in this drill.

Have them point the free foot in front, out to the side, and then cross behind (with no weight on it).

Then have them repeat with the other foot (left for the men, right for the women).

Have them repeat this a few times.

The stronger the connection (to a point, of course), the better their balance will be.

Then have each partner do whatever they want to with their feet - wave them around, shake their leg, kick, lunge, brush, etc., all while maintaining connection.

This shows them how they can do whatever they want with their feet without affecting their partner.

At this point, a scaled down version of the hokey-pokey usually brings a good laugh. :)

I love connection and prefer a constant connection to a noodle arm but a constant connection often turns into a constant heavy connection. I like constant finger tip connection, occasionally a leveraged connection and what one can call a bungee cord connection on count 6&1. I like the speed you get off of the spring of this bungee cord like arm and the lightness and responsiveness that can flow in between anchor steps.

True, but everybody has to start somewhere. A lot of beginners use something like a steel truck spring (TOO STIFF!!!) for the bungee, which is hard on their partners. I think it's important to get people to decrease the noise in their connection and be able to feel it, before trying to add any modulation and spring.

I do teach connection (and lead/follow) in all of my classes. I think it is the most important thing to making a dance FEEL correct (especially WCS) It is one of the first things I teach in a basic class. It is the way I dance (constant connection) and so it is what I teach. I find the methods I use, the neck ties, etc., teaches the connection along with a whole lot of fun.

I also use a method called the Diamond Technique. This Technique represents the leader's (Man's) foot placement for leading all of the basic WCS patterns (6 and 8 count) using his center and teaching him to lead back and down the slot. It has been working for me and I have been sharing the concept across the nation. Every instructor that teaches a connection class has his or her own little tricks and I would strongly encourage all students (of all levels) to always take these classes.

What I tell students is that is NOT how much tension you use in your anchor that makes a woman feel heavy or light - it is how you respond to the forward lead. A

woman using NO tension who does not respond well to the forward lead will feel heavy, while a woman who is using the man to support 20% of her weight won't feel heavy if she comes forward strong on the 1-2 (at which time the connection relaxes).

Teaching connection in WCS is a tough job. I prefer very little weight sharing on the anchor until the &1 (probably starting on 6.) The connection builds on the & until the forward lead is given on 1. Unless I do a power whip or similar move, I don't expect to hold her up on the anchor. There is a good chance that I'll chose to do a turn or spin. I don't want her pulling on my arm when I'm trying to go under it! (A Limbo turn. :) I practice syncopations while I am free standing. But, if I practiced syncopations while leaning from a doorknob, I might prefer to have a heavier connection during the anchor. But then, how could I let go of her for a man's free spin and expect her to be where I left her?

One interesting aspect of leading is this: how early does the man set up the next movement? If you are with the music, but are not well connected _and communicating with your partner, you are relying on her to "be correct" because you aren't really leading her. If, on the other hand, you are always facing her, looking at her--with feeling, so that she is practically unable to look away from you, you can merge with her so completely that "anything you do, she does." This is the way to lead without force.

You need to work one on one with someone. If they don't get the way you are describing it one way you can try something else and so on...Unfortunately we don't have that luxury in a group class. Generally I say: "Everyone, please keep your elbows in front of your body, hold your own arms up don't lean all over your partner and ladies... please don't let your arms go limp like spaghetti..." Is that general? Yes but again group classes are really for patterns and social dancing. Note that the concept of "connection" is too advanced for many dancers. Not everyone cares. Many just want to learn how to lead patterns, and that is fine! But they will be leading with their arms and will not achieve this type of dancing. Also, understand that if you are dancing with a man that is new or leading an average lady in a dance, Don't expect him/her to lead/follow me using these subtle ideas! Yes, it is going to take some extra hints - which usually means, yes, you guessed it... a strong arm lead. My greatest challenge as an instructor is people assuming connection is something that is only in your arms. "Oh, I have a strong frame. See, my arms are solid; I have a connection" ..Yeah this is a start, wiggly, limp arms won't cut it but a stiff frame won't work either! You need to understand all of this before you can ever achieve a "true connection".

1. Understand where your own body weight is. Too far back on the heels? Too far forward on the toes? Or in the middle of the foot? Ooh yeah just right! You have to learn this for yourself.

2. Understand where your partners weight is. "Okay, her weight seems to be fully over her right foot in that

rock step, yeah I can feel the hip settling, cool, now I can close her foot and move on to the hockey stick."

3. Create movement from the center of your body. (This is a whole other topic)

4. Understand equal pressure and creating that equal pressure from the center of your body, not by pressing you and your partners hands together.

5. Understand arm tone, and the difference between keeping that tone yet still being flexible and receptive, man or woman.

If you need help with any of the 5 above, seek help from Private or Group classes.

****Visual connection** (NO HANDS)** This takes practice and it has to grow on you. I have only used this one for the Latin dances so far... Take turns leading for one song each. I usually use a Rumba. Stand in open position, just far enough apart where you can look at each other from top to bottom. To make this work you must keep eye contact at all times and use your vision so you can still watch what the leader's entire body is doing.

The leader will do basics horizontally and vertically in random order. One leads (the other person is doing the mirror image of what you are doing) rumba walks forward, check, backward walks, rock step, cucarachas (side breaks), chase, rumba basic, rumba walks right to left, keep your body facing your partner.

It is the leader's responsibility to lead these basics CLEANLY and CRISPLY. If they are not followed it is the leader's fault! No exceptions. The leader must know what he is going to do next, and almost over-exaggerate it so the follower has a chance at following. I really like doing this and my dance partner Barb and I use this for short periods. It really makes you aware of each other. You can use hand movements to exaggerate where you are going such as turns!

****Center and Hips**** (this one is definitely best explained in person). Think forward, forward, forward!!!!!! Okay what do I mean? One person stands in 2nd position (for cucarachas) and the other person is on their knees with both palms about 1 inch away from the other persons hips (2 inches away if you have really good hip action). The goal of the person doing the cucarachas is to get their hips to skim across the other persons palms....

Now, if you are in the mind set that your hips move side to side then this exercise will be weird for you....I teach and dance that your hips move in a front to back action, this puts the energy toward your partner, hence, you will get a connection from your center. If your hips are flying from side to side... then well your energy will go from side to side, even though your partner is in front of you.

****Using your Arms**** (Learning each other's weight changes to the extremes) On your own: Do a push up into a wall and think from the bottom up: Feet, knees, hips, stomach, chest, head. Stop before your elbows get behind your back. Push your self back and forth.

This works better if you use a dance bar because you can grasp the bar when doing the reverse. Your arms have just enough tone to get the job done, and what is the job? To allow the weight of your body to move into the wall and to push it away. If you don't have enough tone you will smash your face into the wall and if you have too much tone you will be too stiff and won't be able to do the push up.

With a partner: Do the push up into each other same as above. You will learn to trust each other with your weight. If he gives too much, say from up top, she will fall back. If she does not give enough he will fall into her. Keep your tone, palms to each other fingers closed. Do not grip each other. Now, do the opposite. You will start to pull your center away from your partner. You will change hand holds, palms together for the push up, 2 hand hold for the pull away, and at no time will you loose contact! To change hand holds: The guy will press his hands out and down, eventually having both hands as if he were holding two cups, and the lady will place her hands, fingers down in the man's hands. They will continue to disperse their weight back onto their heels until they are both equally balanced. DO NOT grasp each others hands. This should be a relaxed hold. Repeat several times, push up then pull back.

I want to mention again that these techniques are for the type of person that really wants to learn more about their body. Once you believe, I mean ***really*** believe that the lead comes first and most importantly from knowing your body and executing your steps clearly and definitively then these techniques can work for you. But I know there are some un-believers out there and that is okay because there are some things that I guess just need to be lead with your arms....Hmmm like those pretzel, 6 under arm turn, tunnel widgets in the Hustle.

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If you want to read dance storys they are under Headlines.

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