

Larry's Corner

Volume 3, Issue 3

Can be read online at

Mar 2003

<http://www.danceempls.com>

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



Barb Linton

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Barb Linton

We met this lovely lady at our Singles All Together Dance class which is held at the Medina Ballroom on Tuesday night from 7-930pm. She was taking West Coast Swing Basic lessons, from Instructor Larry Ablin. This persons name is Barbara Linton, she's the happiest go lucky person I Have met in a long time, and may I say what a nice person to know. Barb loves to dance, to prove that Carol Anne Carlson who is in charge of SAT's dance lessons, said Barb has taken 8 sessions of lessons, which were WCS, Country 2 step, and Night club 2 step, she hasn't missed a class since starting. What does that say? She also does Ballroom lessons every Monday night at Lenox Community Center from 7 to 9 pm and has been doing lessons for a year and a half. Barb loves Medina Ballroom on Wednesday night where she'll dance 13 sets and then go home to rest her happy feet. She also has gone to the Minnesota West Coast Swing dances and had a good time on the dance floor. She says there warm and friendly, and has made her feel welcome there. Something unique about Barb is her love for life. She loves in Bloomington, has three sons and one

granddaughter who she is very proud of. Her youngest son is going into the Navy, which she is heart broken, but she said he's old enough to know what he is doing. Barb works for Health Partners and Schedules Doctors appointments for twenty two clinics. Really sounds like a lot of responsibility. Other activities she enjoys is her water arobics, which by the way she has lost a lot of weight in the last year and a half—Congratulations Barb, you look terrific. She also belongs to a card club and would you believe that on a Saturday night she has given up dancing to care for her grand daughter, Barb you are a great Nana. Barb has been a widow for eleven years now. Family and dancing is her life.

The Way Dancing Is (mis)taught

Most teachers teach dances rather than dancing, because it's easier. But the focus on steps in dance teaching may be the biggest single obstacle to the learning of dancing well. This is best summed up in the following quote: "Bad teachers taught me steps, great teachers taught me dancing." Learning the pattern of the week is not the key to success. Being able to lead that move in a club is much more important. For the lady, being able to follow a weak leader is the mark of a good dancer. A lot of people miss this very important basic concept in any partner dance:

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We need to teach women to follow their partner, NOT the exact foot placement instructions that this or that instructor says is the "right" way to do it. Narrow-minded instructors who say that this or that way is the RIGHT and ONLY RIGHT way to do it usually end up producing dancers who can only dance with other people who have learned by those exact same rules. I GUARANTEE that No two teachers are identical in the way they teach. Teaching dancers lead/follow allows them to adapt to different styles easily. The dancer I teach will be able to adapt to the one you teach and dance comfortably with him/her. The dancer taught exact foot placement rather than following will end up being an elitist dance snob and be unable to dance with anyone who has learned in the different styles which DO exist and are taught in various parts of the country by very reputable instructors.

Many teachers don't teach connection, instead they teach step sequences which make beginners feel that dancers just happen to be holding on to each other as they trace out memorized step sequences with their feet. Lead/follow exercises are an essential foundation to provide students with, possibly the most important thing dance instructors do. The most essential things - posture, balance, appropriate force (tiny), small steps, appropriate contact (incl. Eye contact), rhythm recognition, leading/following, etiquette, floor craft -- these are hard to teach, and most teachers would rather "have taught 20 moves" than "have developed 10 essential concepts". The trick is to overtly teach dances while covertly teaching dancing. Surreptitiously. Rather than lecturing you want to drop little messages from time to time, such as:

You are responsible for your own balance -- don't rely on your partner to keep you from falling over.

Think tall.

After the swing the lady ends up on the right, as always.

Techniques that best illustrate the feel of lead/follow to students:

The concept of "strongly connected" (AKA "giving weight", "connecting

with your partner's entire body through her hands", etc.)

Taking my partner's hand in mine. "When I tug at her hand I don't just want her hand, I want all of her". (showing first the non-dancer's, then the dancers response -

non-dancer: hand moves, then lower arm, then upper arm, then shoulder, and finally the rest, (sideways :-)

Symmetrical (Scandi) hand-behind-shoulder hold. "The force on your palm should be the same as that on your shoulder (where your partner's palm touches it)"

Start from standing, then move around together, forward, back, and around each other, maintaining balanced force. Natural leading/following conventions are fundamental - "natural being those that need no external explanation, since they rest on principles of physics and knowledge of how people's bodies move.

I go the extra mile to make sure that I know a pattern both from the lead and follow position. 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 the need for them to wait to be led and how the pattern should feel. I go to great lengths to teach "lead and follow" in all of my classes, and I even go as far as handing out a list of patterns to the leaders. (Which they do not show to the followers), so the followers follow rather than anticipate the patterns they have just learned.

What worked best for me as a beginner was 1) developing a good lead, and 2) developing a nice repertoire of steps/patterns for each dance. Leading/following is a technique issue. There are other technique items but a good lead/follow will take you a long ways and allow you to start having fun sooner than if you beat frame, posture, balance, arm styling, motion, etc. to death. I have seen students bored to death when there instructors force a lot of technique upon them which can take a long time to master when they could reap short term

benefits just developing a good lead/follow. As a single leader without a regular dance partner having a good repertoire of steps led well will take you pretty far. Being able to offer clear leads, follow them, give decent frame, keeping time with the music, etc., are important early on. It's inappropriate to have beginners spend lots of time on stuff like sway and swing and head position and foot placement when they could be learning more useful social dancing survival skills. The better your technique, the better you will dance with an arbitrary partner with arbitrary dance skills. If you find that you can only dance well with certain people who took the same classes that you did, you definitely need better dance technique! :-)

When I was first learning, I wanted to learn the steps most people do. While I understand now the 'importance' of lead and follow, as a rank beginner I only understood that the guy was supposed to lead a move and the lady was supposed to follow it. Partners of mine would get bored if instructors went on about lead and following skills too long. Ultimately, I really learned about following skills/correct arm tension from more experienced partners. It's very hard for two beginners together to learn to get this right. Yes, it's a concept instructors should spend some time on, but most students are just worrying about their feet...

Non-dancers tend to think that dancing is step-sequences. And the more step sequences they cram the more dancing they have learned. Teachers often succumb to this market pressure, and besides, anyone can teach step sequences but few can teach dancing. At least not simultaneously to many students, all of who have individual needs. What some people like to marginalize as "styling" - posture, balance, weight change, appropriate force, basic timing and footwork, dancing with the music and with your partner these are the 'essentials' of dancing. The rest is just so many patterns. If you wanted to learn a language, the infrastructure of culture and grammar would be essential. Any dictionary can supply any number of words. Anyone

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who thinks they can learn a foreign language by translating word for word with a dictionary would be as foolish as someone who wants to learn to dance by concentrating on step sequences.

When I first started, I learned a basic set of (10) step sequences. Later I realized that those step sequences are purely didactic constructs designed to teach and practice smaller units.

As I see it, dancing is not steps. Dancing is posture, balance, and connection, leading, following, weight-changes, harmony, flow, and music. But beginners are easily impressed with "fancy steps". And teachers often succumb to the pressure to teach "fancy step sequences". It's so much easier to teach them, than to teach dancing. The best teachers in any dance form emphasize the importance of doing the essentials well. Imagine learning a language. A lot of people want to learn slang words, impressive big words, or simply many, many words at the beginning. And usually students memorize standard conversational phrases. While the canned phrases are useful because they provide the student with material to practice with, language really means having something to say, and being able to say it, not having a large number of phrases memorized and drilled.

One danger with fancy steps is that it's tempting to think that if we can do the steps in the sequence, that we have accomplished something. So we keep doing the sequence, but we neglect the underlying basics. And practice makes permanent. It's like talking with all sorts of big words, but not having mastered natural pronunciation, or basic grammar. Another danger is that the very process of teaching fancy step sequences to beginners' conflicts with their learning to dance. -- their attention is focused on the teacher, their own feet, their thought processes and memories, instead of being focused on their partner, the music, and being conscious of their surrounding environment.

How to learn to dance

1. Learn a few core patterns and some basic things about dance frame.

2. Now concentrate on technique, technique, technique, + leading and following (This definitely requires private coaching.) Do this at any pace comfortable to you. Most beginners concentrate on patterns. This leads to frustration and dance partners arguing and fighting with each other. If you instead concentrate on technique, you will focus more on dancing well yourself, instead of casting blame on your partner. The better your technique, the more dancing pleasure you will give to your dance partner.

3. Then go back to learning more patterns. You will find it very easy to pick up new patterns.

4. Now observe those people who started learning about when you did, but concentrated on patterns and neglected technique. You will notice they are still trying to learn the same patterns you saw them learning a year ago.

Keep these in mind as you read this compilation: Dancing is taught backwards. They start with a partnering situation teaching steps, and only then work on basics of body movement, lead/follow, etc. Teaching that you're in this position on 1, here on 2, like this on 3... is only a crutch to get you to do the pattern. When you quit trying to be EXACTLY in those places on EXACTLY those beats, and start viewing those instructions as static snapshots of the real goal; continuous movement, your dancing will remarkably improve. Beginners are generally too impatient and only want to develop enough skills to get around the dance floor. They never would stick with it if they had to spend dozens of hours of practice before they ever got on the dance floor. It's the initial fun, when you don't know any better that gets you hooked. If it were all work and no fun, few people would do it! If you stick with it long enough, you will learn that one well executed open left or right turn (or what ever) is a lot more enjoyable than ten poorly done "fancy steps."

Balance And Your Head Position

The human head has significant mass, as well as being at the very top of the body and very easy to throw around. If you're trying to control your balance to within a centimeter or less, as top dancers do, then throwing a heavy weight (head) around, out of sync with what you're trying to do with the entire step is quite detrimental.

Most of the head's mass is in front of the axis of the neck. If you leave your head looking straight forward, then most of the head's weight will be forward of your body's center of gravity. That leads to counterbalancing the head weight by sticking out one's butt or leaning on one's partner, neither of which is considered good dance form. If you put your head slightly to one side, then the head weight will be more over on foot and therefore less likely to require body or frame distortions to counterbalance the head weight.

Try the following exercise with your partner: You and your partner must each take closed dance position, bodies against each other, with the arms out and somewhat forward to maintain a convex back (keeping the spine as the most posterior portion of the anatomy). Then try to lead her. By holding the arms out and slightly forward and up but not touching each other, it is possible to practice movement w/o relying on the arms and maintain proper frame. It should work for a waltz, if you are really good, you can lead a Viennese waltz. You'll immediately feel how important the balance of the couple is. Yes, you will feel, when your partner moves her head! (Note: For proper movement and frame, you must maintain a forward poise.)

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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

Medina Ballroom is having Country dance
night every Thursday from 7-11pm Live
Band

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.

Dance Etiquette

Line of Dance is counter clock-
wise around the room for
dances that move, like Fox-
trot, 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.

TGIS dances will have free lessons

1 hour before Dance starting at 730 pm on
the 1st and 3rd Saturday. We will be learn-
ing 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 at 26th and Hennepin 612-668-
2740

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

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 posi-
tion.

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)