

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

Sensitivity

"Sensitivity exercise 1: 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. Practicing lead/follow with your eyes closed is a good exercise but there is a visual component to some leads and missing a lead with your eyes closed does not necessarily mean you were anticipating with them open - see Sensitivity exercise 7.

"Sensitivity exercise 2: Both the leader and the follower place their hands on the other person's shoulders. The leader should walk around and the follower should be sensitive to the leaders' motion. They should maintain a constant distance between them and also close their eyes to "feel" the light touch that is needed to make a recognizable lead/indication and for the follower to hear the lead/indication."

"Sensitivity exercise 3: Leader and follower place their hands flat (palms down) and alternating on top of each

other's hands similar to a 'who will reach the top of the baseball bat first and be it... type method.' Your hands will look like four stacked pancakes. Then the leader and follower take turns bending down and then jumping up. The person not doing the jumping should "stay with" the person jumping. That is, maintain a constant connection with the person jumping and not impede the jump in any way or release the connection in any way. This allows both the leader and follower to feel when to be relaxed in their arm tension so during a twisting move, someone's arm will not get yanked out."

"Sensitivity exercise 4: Try doing turns and dancing without touching hands. Pretend that there is an invisible force between the leaders and followers hands and do turns, etc. This will help to maintain balance and keep yourself over the balls of your feet instead of having to rely on your partner to maintain your balance. It will also make you realize the importance of the communication that is done with the hands and arms. A good dancer can turn effortlessly on his or her own."

"Sensitivity exercise 5: stand on one foot (either will do) and take the lady into dance position. The lady can then easily determine which foot she should be on (the natural opposite). From here the man should change weight with a light side to side movement. If you watch, ballroom dancing competitors always do this before they begin dancing as a way to establish the connection between partners. The ability to "lead" a weight change while not moving down the floor is actually the most basic principle of lead/follow technique. In ballroom dancing, the leader decides which foot to start on. The starting foot is established before dancing, by the leader firmly placing his body weight over the supporting leg; his partner follows this movement, so she ends up with her weight on the natural opposite. This is why good dancers don't care which foot they start on: It's all in the lead. Beginning dancers can start fast swing with 1&2, because a sideways movement is easier to lead. More advanced dancers can start on rock-step. All weight changes must be led and followed. The partner who changes weight first effectively changes weight for the couple. If the lady changes first, the man simply cannot lead her."

"Sensitivity exercise 6: Connection in WCS - 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 she buys him lunch. The guys are always told to use the biggest bill they have which will determine
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Sensitivity

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where he gets lunch. Ladies sure understand the value of money because few bills ever hit the floor.”

“Sensitivity exercise 7: 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. Or you can tie one handle to a doorknob and use it by yourself. The goal is to be able to maintain constant, light force level no matter what you are doing. You can build a spring scale couple developer out of a \$6.00, 50 lb fish scale (available at walmart or kmart), by popping open the back of it, and replacing the stock heavy spring with a light spring available at a hardware store. This makes the fish scale read 2 pounds full scale, and then it will be great for practicing WCS syncopations while you try to keep the needle at the 25% mark.”

For moves where you need to apply a compressive connection, cut off the D-handle from an old snow shovel (or just go buy a replacement shovel handle and cut it off) and, holding the D handle, place the cut end of the handle perpendicular to the thin edge - the thickness direction - of an open door. This easily shows whether or not you are pushing straight along the handle (and thus your partner's arm) because any sideways force will cause the door to rotate on its hinges, and any time you pull on the handle, you will become separated from the door.

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.

“Sensitivity exercise 7a: Non-contact Leads - maintain eye contact with your partner, and W/O hand or body contact, practice dancing. With the leader "leading" visually, and no music playing, start and stop together, rotate the basic together, even change tempo together! Then switch roles. Remember, don't look down at the floor because that gives a visual lead for the woman to move to the spot that you are looking at!”

“Sensitivity exercise 8: Both partners grasp 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.”

All of the suggestions on improving dancing are very good. Implied in these suggestions is PRACTICE. This is the single most important thing to do if you want to improve. The more you practice, the more natural the moves become, the more graceful you are, the more desirable a partner you become. Yes, you should know how

to do the moves right & that will take some lessons. Take everything you've seen here & add practice, practice, practice. This cannot be over-emphasized. I have seen to many beginners get discouraged but after investigating the facts I would discover that they never practiced and always had an excuse as to why. I practiced a lot at first because I wanted to get to a point where my dancing was comfortable for me and any prospective partner. I prefer to practice by myself at first. I also did not need a studio, instructor, partner for practice purposes. To make the styling, footwork, and even lead feel natural I would always practice it by myself at first. Then polish it up with my instructor later. Consider something one of my dance teachers told me a while back. "Practice doesn't make perfect, practice makes PERMANENT". It takes a lot more time to learn to dance correctly if you spend a lot of time developing bad habits first. Good instructors teach the way they do for a reason. You might ask them what those reasons are. I pride myself on being 100% consistent. Everything that's in our curriculum has a reason, and I can give it to you. Of course, sometimes advanced students can really put you on the spot. But I haven't had one yet that I haven't been able to figure out an answer that was consistent with my basic technique concepts. That's the nice thing about dancing by rules and not by rote. All too many instructors teach things a certain way because that's the way THEY learned it, not because they've really studied it, given it some thought, and decided it was really the right thing to do. A great way to get your money's worth is to ask the teacher what you are doing wrong and WHY his way is right.

Here are some practicing tips: 1.) "Practice doesn't make perfect--'perfect' practice makes perfect." If you disagree with your partner about something, do not spend a lot of time in a power struggle trying to be right. Save it for your coach. Agree to do the step, even if it is wrong. Your coach can fix it in minutes. You probably can not fix it in hours. Don't waste your time. It's hard to fix things on your own because you are not a dance expert, and because you can't observe yourself dancing. Even world champions have coaches. If you are having a specific problem, try three times using the dance knowledge you and your partner have to fix it. If you can't, then just put the problem aside after that and take it up with your teacher. If you are trying to instruct and are not really competent to do that, find the very best instructor and take a private and have them dance with each of you. Let the instructor do the correcting. Private lessons are usually easier on your partner's ego, and the partnership/friendship/relationship because your teacher points out his/her flaws and attempts to correct them. Feelings are much less likely to get hurt this way! It makes it nicer and easier if you don't have a relationship with them too. Also try to have more than one practice partner. Write up an agenda for when you go to the instructor and communicate your concerns and desires with your dance partner.

2.) If during a practice session, you and your partner feel you are not accomplishing anything (e.g., you are

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tense, angry, tired etc.) go to the mirrors and practice basics. Do some ankle lifts, exercise your top-line by flexing and bending your body parts. Do simple movements until you are able to continue or, as a last resort, abort and come back another day.

3.) Some strengthening exercises may also help. Pay attention to your body. Not everyone uses their feet, ankles, and knees in the same way ballroom dancers do. Many men can lift 200 pounds but still find it awkward to keep their right arm up in dance position for 10 minutes. If you notice limitations during a lesson take a note. Don't compromise your dancing for lazy ankles, practice toe raises and ankle rolls until you can do better.

4.) (a) recite steps and patterns, (b) listen to music... You may also find that there are particular isolated moves or techniques that you observe with partners (or instructors point out) can be worked on or strengthened by yourself.

5.) If you're serious, taking notes helps. It also changes the way you pay attention in class. You DO want to practice everything you recall from a lesson. You DO want to try to breakdown and practice isolations of any technique you can understand. You DO NOT want to practice wrong steps and bad technique for hours on end until it feels correct. Listen in class for things you can practice. Then, try to practice what you learned in class. Take your questions back to class. I find that if I practice about 1 hour for each class hour I learn MUCH faster.

6. Practice basic, simple moves to perfection. Not mechanical perfection, but essential perfection. Forget about choreographed floor-space hogging step sequences. When a fancy step sequence is being taught, evaluate it in terms of lead ability and practicality on the dance floor. Don't bother with anything that you can only dance with someone who has taken the same class, or with something that is inconsistent with considerate floor craft. Measure your progress in terms of the quality of your dancing (style), not the quantity of step patterns.

7. When observing excellent dancers, look for the essence of what makes them excellent, and seek to emulate that. This essence is often marginalized as style (or styling), spirit, rapport -- things that are rarely taught, especially in group lessons.

8. You might want to seek out a dance that is not so crowded. Sometimes "singles" dances have few attendees (and even fewer dancers) resulting in a spacious dance floor -- paradoxically, exactly what you want if you are a couple :-)

9. A technique to use for waltz and foxtrot: Set up chairs or other obstacles at random in your practice path, and work around them intentionally.

10. As a helper-over-the-hump (but turn loose of it as soon as you can), string together some of your favorite

steps as short choreographed sequences that you practice as routines. This will help you keep dancing even when you're too distracted to think of another step right at the moment. Your body will remember the next three things that come after you do a crossover (or whatever), so that you don't have to think about those next three things. I say turn loose of it as soon as you feel comfortable, because you don't want to be so dependent on choreographed routines that you can't vary your combinations to suit the music. You'd also be training your partner to 'anticipate' the next three things, instead of following. When you are able to think of it on the floor, occasionally do one or two of the middle steps without starting with your usual pattern. This will help keep your partnership in the habit of lead and follow.

11. KEEP DANCING. Dance as often as you can, at as many different places as you can. Dance when you're intimidated, dance when you're terrified. The more you do it, the easier it becomes.

12. Keep a "cheat sheet" to refer to of newly learned moves and patterns (reduced and laminated, in a shirt pocket) until they've become ingrained in your mind.

13. A lot of dancers shun the beginner classes and move on to intermediate and advanced classes right after their first beginning lessons. If you watch, you might notice that some of them have picked up very little of the advice given in the beginning lessons. What I did was to take the beginning classes over and over from many different teachers, until I not only knew the basic steps, but was picking up the little hints that the good teachers were throwing out about how to do the basic movements. A lot of advice that some folks say you can only get from expensive private lessons is actually said in group classes by the better instructors. There just isn't the time in group classes to make sure the students really heard and understood what was said. And most students are much too busy, figuring out which foot to move where, to have any time for these tidbits of advice. But they're there, if your instructor is good. Listen. Write them down in a notebook; review before you next go dancing; it might help.

14. An exercise: Stand in open dance position (no music) and practice giving her slight, consistent, smooth, deliberate leads. (Not necessarily to do patterns that you know, but to send her in different directions, positions, etc.) Then, switch roles.

Place a lot of emphasis on grounding in Latin dances. Try to keep paper towels under your feet while doing basic steps. I always THOUGHT I was keeping my feet near the floor, but there was a big difference between what I knew I should do and what I was actually doing. Even though you emphasize grounding, you still want weight changes to occur. However, while weight is centered over the supporting leg, the other isn't just flapping in the breeze out there. As a dancer, your whole body must always be toned - sort of like steel beams, covered in a velvet glove. When I was learning the ba-

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sics of ECS when I first started - and this was single-time, the easiest form of all (step, touch). I started listening to appropriate music in my car, and simply counting the steps in time: "Step, touch, step, touch, rock, step". I'd do entire songs end-to-end this way. After a few weeks of this and attending classes two nights a week I had no more troubles with the basic step. (There have been several studies that show that "mental practice" -- i.e. visualization -- is almost as good as, and certainly a great supplement to, actual practice for physical skills. One famous one involved people doing basketball free throws. They took four groups of players and measured their skill. The control group did no practice. One group practiced free throws but was advised not to think about the experiment otherwise. A third group did nothing but 'visualize' themselves practicing free throws, for the same amount of time that the second group was actually practicing. The fourth group did both actual practice and visualization. At the end of the experiment, skill levels were measured again. Of course the fourth group improved most of all, but the second and third groups had improved by about the same amount, even though the third group had done no actual practice!

The reason, I think, is that when you visualize you can visualize yourself doing it 'perfectly', with none of those bad muscle-memory habits to get in your way... visualization can actually form new muscle habits, literally without moving a muscle.) Visualization for swing dancing is effective proportionally to the amount of detail visualized. I do it all the time, but it can easily take longer to go over a move this way than even with an imaginary partner, so I reserve this method for situations where I'm stuck waiting and can't try the stuff for real. I think a large part of the benefit is to have spent the time recognizing the details involved. When there is nobody around to practice with and you've grown tired of your imaginary partner, try some Country Western line dancing. For a beginner, it can really help with timing. For intermediate dancers, it can help you ingrain those syncopated steps that you only use occasionally. If they aren't in the particular line dance you're doing, throw them in there. Doing them a lot isn't overuse and it will give the less experienced line dancers a chance to figure out your new variation. Use line dances to practice spotting, work on pivot turns, do lock-step footwork, practice cha-cha and ECS Latin motion, work on balance and weight distribution and generally have a good time. Since you can't always do those kind of things with a partner - line dances are a good opportunity to work the bugs out of new techniques as you learn them. Use them to get your heart rate up and turn your evening of dancing fun into an aerobic workout. They really do help one's endurance. Line dancing serves another purpose:

Do you feel 'mechanical' when dancing? FEEL is not mental. Period. It's physical. Losing the mechanical feel so that you can move gracefully takes time, stretching (stretch regularly - it's difficult to flow if your body is constricted) and practice. After you know the moves to

the point where you can dance & converse simultaneously, and you understand the music's structure, then you can stop dancing like a robot. This takes a few minutes in some people, a few years in others. When you have music on at home, as you move about the house, move in count to the basic step of the dance your choice. What you want to do is teach your muscles the count so your mind doesn't have to worry about it. They will never forget! See if you can move body parts in isolation. Does cocking one hip up cause everything from ankles to neck to move? It shouldn't. Can you flick a foot and keep the thigh quiet? You need to be able to. Being able to move just the part you wish to is a major breakthrough in learning how to move to the music as opposed to just doing the steps.

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 Nightclub 2 step 6/1/2004

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