

# Larry's Corner

Volume 5, Issue 8

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August 2005

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I enjoy writing something for you. LARRY

## Leading And Following

Do followers need to know figures, or just how to follow? Can a step be classified as "leadable" if it can only be followed by someone who has been previously trained how to do follow it? Is this question self-contradictory?

Every action, every step, even footwork in the strict sense (toe versus heel leads, toe versus heel releases, foot rise) is leadable. And - it is infinitely easier to lead using a 'one hand hold' than using a dance frame. Why? because one's own dance mistakes don't automatically translate to an incorrect lead - the hand can be controlled pretty much independently of the body, thus permitting a good lead to be given even if the leader dances poorly. With a dance frame, your lead is transmitted through your dancing, and you must both lead well and dance well enough for the lead to be transmitted with-

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Leading And Following

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out too much noise.

Following a good dance frame is almost automatic. Leads are conveyed by changes in the structure of the dance frame, which necessarily moves the entire torsos of both dancers. But note that a dance frame and a one hand lead can transmit equally complete information - each has six degrees of freedom (two directions of horizontal translation, vertical translation, and rotation about three axes). In addition, you can move the one hand more than you can move the body - the hand has the extra movement permitted by the reach of the arm. Thus, the vertical dimension, for example, can be much more fully utilized by the hand. (For simplicity, I've ignored the additional degrees of freedom introduced by changing the geometry of the one hand hold, and letting the dance frame 'breathe').

In any proper lead, the information does not have to be decoded. Rather, the follower just responds to the lead in such a way as to release the tension, and make the contact more comfortable and natural. It is true that the dance frame tends to most directly move the torso of the follower, while the one hand lead moves one hand of the follower. But in either case, the follower must still move the hips and legs appropriately, to a position that is natural for the particular torso or hand location and orientation. Moving only the torso and not the legs will not result in correct dancing - rather, it will result in falling over.

Men who are real *\_dancers\_* can lead syncopated footwork (12&3) in American Waltz through a one handed connection while turning the lady! (This is not terribly difficult to follow, when it is led by a good dancer.) They can lead a partner to close her feet for a heel turn in Int'l Foxtrot. They can lead a woman's head to flick in Tango and even more. Yes, it's true that these things are easier to lead in closed position. But they are entirely possible to lead, even in open position, even with a lady who doesn't know what's likely to be coming next.

For empirical evidence, I submit that swing dance teachers usually start focusing on lead and follow very early, because relative beginners can do it. Judges look for 'connection' in Latin competition at intermediate levels. In contrast, in international standard, the emphasis is on figures and routines through very high competitive levels.

Now, it is difficult for beginners to learn to follow when

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the people they are dancing with don't know how to lead.

So then what are effective methods to teach (right brain) leading and following skills, rather than (left brain) step sequences?

I have observed that the best followers - the ones that seem to read your mind - tend to be people who have learned primarily by dancing with very experienced leaders, rather than learning in classes with other beginners. Many are children of dance professionals who are not planning to make dance a career - thus, they haven't been pushed to learn figures or to dance with other children, but instead have just danced with lots of senior instructors. Some of these exceptionally good followers do not know even a single figure in a single dance.

How can we make this happen more? Well, lots of senior, experienced dancers - should make a point of dancing, even competing, with the beginners. I'm not sure this model is useful in a dance studio setting.

Ladies should be spending their efforts learning how to follow rather than on learning the steps. No one is claiming that the gent should be able to lead a lady who "doesn't even give you any resistance in her arm"; rather, we are saying that the lady should be concentrating on learning how to give the proper resistance, so that the gent can lead her into whatever figure he wants. If the lady just learns the figure, she may end up going blindly into an open hip twist even if the gent leads something else.

It should be noted that where both the gents and the ladies are relatively inexperienced, this method simply doesn't work. It takes way too long for a gent to develop a lead that a beginner lady can follow, and similarly too long for a lady to develop a follow that a beginner gent can lead. In these circumstances, the only hope is for the lady to learn her steps and help the gent out.

Good dancing is about leading and following. Following is NOT about "knowing the pattern". If the lady has some concept of what following is all about, and if the man is a good lead, then she won't have to fake anything!

There will be a continuous connection, and the lady will end up exactly where the man wants her to end up. If the lead is solid, and the lady knows how to follow, correct footwork will happen. It's a by-product of good dancing, it's not the central concept. You are right in saying that the lady has to "know her part" if our definition of "knowing her part" is the ability to follow a lead.

In social ballroom dancing the follower has no idea what is about to be led. If she "knows her part" well and does it, the man can't lead what he wants to lead, but must lead what she thinks he is supposed to lead. So, if she "knows her part", she had better forget it and concentrate on following what is being led -- which might not be what she "knows" at all! There are so many steps, even in just the American style, and so many people doing oddly constructed open steps, that there is *\*no way\** a lady could know what is coming up.

While a woman who has learned and practiced the steps is infinitely easier to lead than one who has not, a woman taught the principles of following would eventually follow a partner better than one who has memorized the syllabus exclusively. Why? Because there are few absolutes in dancing. Few leaders feel similar to one another, in fact a pattern done twice in a row would rarely feel exactly as the one before. A woman doing a memorized pattern tends to dance a defined amount of turn for example while one who follows through her center exclusively would be more likely to more closely do what her partner intended. Most high level competitive ballroom couples tend not to do routines rather do groupings according to the demands of floorcraft. Latin couples on the other hand do routines because of the demands of speed and connection necessary to achieve the desired look. Social couples on the other hand would be better suited concentrating on lead and follow than on endless repetitions of syllabus steps. While optimally one would want a female partner to know the patterns, a good leader does not require a partner to know the step. I've always liked the following maxim 3 Rules for Ladies:

Never Hold On

Never Let Go

Don't Think

Lead-follow dancing has a vocabulary for both leaders and followers, and being a good dancer includes knowing that vocabulary. At one extreme is the woman who says, "I've never learned a single step but I can follow anything!"

At the other extreme is the woman who is technically very good in terms of movement and "knowing steps," but is too much on auto-pilot, in the sense that if anything that is not strictly in her repertoire is led, she will map that to the closest sequence she is used to and proceed to do it (or attempt to). (It is generally some of the women who do a lot of choreographed competition routines who fall into the latter category.) While both present interesting adaptation exercises for the man looking to improve his social dancing skills (being able to dance enjoyably with a variety of partners), lead-follow dancing strives for something more than that.

For me, the more subtle and delicate the lead can be (to achieve the desired result) the more enjoyable is the dance, and the more controlled and flowing (for dances that flow) the end result. That is the sensation of dancing with a woman who feels as "light as a feather" (and has little to do with her weight!). Achieving this requires a combination of at least two things:

1. KNOWING THE VOCABULARY, so that the merest suggestion of a movement or weight change, etc., from the leader, is sufficient indication to achieve the desired result. The more vocabulary the follower knows, the better she can distinguish between leads that may otherwise appear similar, and the more easily she can recover from ambiguous leads.
2. Technical skills of movement, balance, sensitivity (to

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the leader's movements, patience (not to rush the leader), etc.

For the vocabulary (steps, if you want to call it that, but I prefer to think of it in terms of "elements" of the dance, which are often initially learned in the context of amalgamations called steps), what is different for the follower is that her knowledge is more of the "recognition" kind than the "recall" kind. The leader must be able to plan the moves ahead of time for variety, navigation, etc. (even though this too can become second nature barely requiring conscious thought). The follower's familiarity with vocabulary manifests itself more in the form of "I'm sufficiently familiar with this movement and lead, and my body consequently knows what to do without my requiring someone to manipulate it through every piece of that movement."

If a follower is a trained dancer:

she knows on which foot her weight is and which foot is free, so she knows with which foot to step next,

she knows from the lead in which direction I want her to step, and

she is feeling the rhythm so she knows exactly when to step.

A dancer trained in another dance discipline has probably learned enough of body and foot movement and balance may be very easy to ballroom dance with even though she may not have had much formal ballroom training. But she has certainly learned "steps"--just not in the same way a ballroom dancer may have. And even then, there are certain perfectly leadable movements that she will not be able to follow if she hasn't seen them before.

The analogy to language vocabulary is a good one: It is possible to have a conversation with someone who has picked up language "on the streets" and, just as in dancing, it may have its own charm, compensating for lack of subtlety and richness by a refreshing rawness and forthrightness. Here a leader would probably use a slightly different technique to lead a lady who didn't know the step than with one trained in the step. (A really superb dancer is used to adjusting his lead to his partner, and is able to make even the large adjustments necessary to get a total beginner to put her where he wants her!) But one can have quite a different conversation with a well read person, who has a rich command of the language, and can use its nuances effectively with someone else with a similar knowledge.

And just as in dancing, a good vocabulary can be abused, perhaps by trying to impose it on someone not prepared for it, or in trying to assert one's superiority, or in over-emphasizing it over more fundamental things: the dancer who prides himself on knowing many steps but doesn't have the basic technique to carry it off is much like the person who uses "dictionary talk" without knowing correct grammar.

So certainly a woman doesn't have to know many steps

to enjoy dancing, and can, often to a large extent, be led through many other steps that she has never done before. But it is a gross overstatement, and one that I would advise the beginning follower to ignore, to suggest that "women have no need to learn steps at all."

One problem is that the words "leading" and "following" are misnomers. What we call leading and following in ballroom dance is really a form of bi-directional communication. The type and style of dance determines the vocabulary of the language of communication. The follower is not a sack of potatoes. She must be able to distinguish a right turn from a sack toss into the french fry machine, and respond accordingly. Fred Astaire could do a great dance with a lampstand, but that isn't ballroom dancing. Neither are judo throws.

If I say "hajimemashite" to someone who speaks Japanese they will probably respond accordingly. If I lead an open hip twist with a follower schooled in international style Latin she will probably respond accordingly.

Someone who speaks neither language might be able to guess from the context and fudge accordingly, but they're more likely to go "huh?". If I feel like doing a feather step in foxtrot, I'd like to have a partner who knows what a feather step is, and how to make it feel good for her leader as well as herself; who, essentially, know the language that I'm trying to speak.

Leading in social dance requires experimentally determining the followers vocabulary and picking out from the subset of your possible leads the ones that you determine she's likely to be able to follow.

In competition dance, the leader and follower have already chosen their base vocabulary during their practice. Only the subtle adverbs and adjectives that allow them to avoid other couples and interpret the music need be communicated on the dance floor.

Even in a rehearsed competition ballroom dance routine there is bi-directional communication. A good leader will not only lead a step, but then also adjust to his partner (a form of following). The follower may have ended up on a different part of her foot due to the limitations of her own skills or due to avoiding traffic in the leader's blind spot.

A good leader will then respond to his partner and perhaps modify the next step to blend in with how they ended up after the last step.

Leading is following, following is leading. Each pair of partners negotiates the precise boundaries needed to make the dance work. These boundaries change with different dances (WCS vs. intl. foxtrot) and with different steps (forward vs. back changes). For A leader: It's all about communication, not what patterns she knows and doesn't know. For A follower: knowing the patterns and amalgamations helps. I have a better sense of where my body should be when within a step - and where his should be when. In the short run, it does mean training yourself not to anticipate specific patterns. In the long run, though, I think it gives a better overall sense of what we're doing as a couple.

Everyone agrees that truly excellent leaders can lead even fairly inexperienced followers through patterns that are far beyond their level. I would argue that a truly excellent follower can follow even an inadequate lead - but NOT if she doesn't know the steps. A woman who does not know her part ends up being utterly confused by a man with an inadequate lead. (And the very best followers will, upon getting no lead, do nothing.) I've had both instructors and good dancers tell me that you can't expect to dance Rumba with a follower who isn't trained in the figures.

As strongly as I believe in teaching (and practicing) good lead/follow technique, I think it is critical to teach the followers their proper footwork. How should you teach followers? Should you teach them the actual proper steps to the pattern or should you put far more emphasis on following technique?

Whenever the issue of leadable vs. non-leadable steps in traditional style competition comes up, I point out that if you take even someone with some moderate dance talent that doesn't know West Coast Swing and try to lead them in a basic without telling them ANYthing about it, they WON'T have proper footwork. Their body may be in the right place, but their feet won't. I also maintain that the reason beginner WCS followers want to walk forward out of an anchor step early is that they are subconsciously reacting to the tension connection: in every other dance she'd call that a (arm) lead and she'd walk forward. It is her conscious realization that she's on the anchor step portion of a pattern that causes her to remain in place and anchor back.

And the follower who can follow every single thing someone leads after learning just a push step and a whip step is a very rare breed.

EVERY step (to a point) is a learned step. In closed position, if the follower maintains frame, good lead/follow technique can give the leader complete control over the follower's footwork. In open position, especially with a one-hand hold, the leader can not possibly control all the follower's footwork all the time. Followers MUST learn their footwork.

Women must know their parts. If you don't believe me, try leading a lady who doesn't know the step through an open hip twist! If all you have is ONE hand as your entire connection, and the lady doesn't know what to do and maybe doesn't even give you any resistance in her arm, you're screwed, no matter what you do!

This goes along the same lines as the notion that in order to become a better dancer (and when I say "better dancer", I mean "technically correct dancer") you have to dance with someone who's a worse dancer than you are; again - it just doesn't work!

Yes, you will become a better social dancer, meaning, you will learn how to compensate for other people's mistakes - but in the process, you will compromise your technique and your lead because in order to lead someone who doesn't understand the correct lead, you'll have to exaggerate, or give her a wrong lead. That does not help you to improve your technique - not even your cor-

rect lead.

If you dance with someone better than you, they will compensate for your mistakes, in order to make it feel right for you, the way it should feel if done correctly, and therefore you will learn, not them - they had to use wrong technique in order to make it feel right for you.

A woman who knows her part properly can often help a man who doesn't know his well, yet a woman who does not know her part ends up being utterly confused by a man with an inadequate lead. Don't you think, for the benefit of everyone involved, that the woman should learn her part rather than just learn to follow it when it is led properly?

I can tell you from experience that I wouldn't have learned nearly as quickly if I hadn't had a LOT of very talented female dancers who were able to follow me and end up in the right position even when I wasn't leading them there very well. I ended up learning what it was supposed to feel like. Call it backleading if you want, but I don't think a woman having a pretty good idea where she's supposed to be and where she's going is a bad thing.

Most importantly, when it comes to competition, the woman should DEFINITELY learn the routine. You started performing better when you start making an effort to learn the routine, rather than relying totally on immediate lead-follow.

The fact of the matter is that no matter HOW good you are, when doing advanced moves, some moves are only 90% effective socially. The woman learning her part reduces the 10% odds of a mistake down to a more acceptable level for competition and exhibitions.

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Larry L Ablin : [labin@frontiernet.net](mailto:labin@frontiernet.net) Phone: 952-898-3513  
Barb Johnson : [westcoast65@frontiernet.net](mailto:westcoast65@frontiernet.net)

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