

Efforts We Can Make To Improve All Our Dancing

by Harold & Meredith Sears

Are there any universal rules that we should be following in all our dancing, efforts that we could make, no matter what figure or even what rhythm we are dancing, that would make it all better? Yes, we think so. Oh, there will be exceptions. If the cue is Twist & Shout, you might not maintain your usual body tone. In Argentine Tango, your head won't be as "up" as in other rhythms. If the cue is Circle Away, you certainly won't "stay close." But these dance tips are widely valuable. Think about them all the time, follow them often, and break them happily when you have a good reason. Your dancing will feel better.

1. **Maintain good posture and a toned frame.** Surprise! You look better and feel better when you stand up straight, tummy in, chest out, shoulders back, head up and a bit left. Don't exaggerate anything. We don't want stiff military attention, but toned liveliness, alertness. Don't slouch or droop. Your "frame" is the horizontal oval described by your arms in dance position. His right hand is on her left shoulder blade, and her left arm lies lightly along his right arm, and her left hand perches lightly on his upper arm or shoulder. His left arm is extended to the side. His upper arm slopes a little down, and his forearm slopes a little up. His left and her right hands are joined, at about her eye level. Again, we want a horizontal oval with adjustment made for height difference between partners. As you dance, keep this frame toned and controlled. All your muscles are contracting just a little. One muscle seeks to bend a joint, and its partner tries to straighten it. The result is tone, a controlled position, smooth movement, no sag, collapse, or floppiness. Move your arms and hands as a part of your upper-body frame. Don't move them independently -- no pushing or tugging.
2. **Keep your head up, stable, and over its spine.** As you sway left, you will integrally look left (lady right). Right sway will close her head, but don't turn your head independently of overall frame movement or let your gaze wander around. Unexpectedly, your head is the heaviest and most influential part of your body. If you don't keep it up and poised, it can throw you completely off balance and dramatically impede your spins and turns. If you do keep your head in good position, you can flow with surprising power -- with head closed, your Big Top will snap around. Don't look at other dancers for tips on what you should be doing. Don't look at your feet (or at your partner's feet). Don't stare unfocused at his chest, in deep concentration. Don't look at your partner at all unless you have a good styling reason.
3. **Stay close.** If you separate from your partner, you can't feel his or her movements. You can't lead and follow as effectively; you can't dance together. Not only that, but in your turns, in rolling across, you'll have a longer way to go, and these figures will be rushed, even frantic. On the other hand, keep your top lines apart. When you keep your shoulders apart and your heads in their own windows (to your partner's right), you are in your own space and out of your partner's way. You can also better use centrifugal force in your spins and turns. Remember, a spinning top has a narrow base and a flaring top.
4. **Be deliberate in all your steps and actions.** Just as you are alert and alive in your posture, so commit to your steps and your gestures, too. If the step is forward, take the full step. Don't just shift in place. If "arms" are called for, extend your arm thoughtfully. Place it where it should be, maybe not vertically, but at least somewhat above the horizontal. Don't let it droop half-heartedly. Let your hand and fingers extend the line. Don't forget about your hand and let it limply hang off of your wrist. Keep a corner of your eye on your partner, and match your lines. Your overall shape is an important part of the dance. On the other hand, you can overdo anything. Don't out-step your partner or push your partnership into moves that are uncomfortable. Always be prepared for a deliberate and purposeful action, but, even more important, be constantly aware of your partner and ready to blend into and mesh with his or her choices.

5. **Lead what you want, but dance what you get.** Men, guide your partner, support her, do what you can to make her movements comfortable. Remember, her steps are almost always more complicated than yours. She is spinning and twirling as you walk comfortably along. But if she doesn't do what you expect her to do or dance where you think she should dance, go with her. You respond to her and adjust to her dance. You follow her, just as you expect her to follow you. Remember, she is the picture; you are the frame. She is the performance; you are the stage. Don't make her look bad.
6. **Learn your partner's part as you do your own.** Learn the steps, the figures, the sequences. Men, you especially need to know what your lady is doing. Otherwise, you won't lead her in an informed way or even allow her to do her part. Instead, you'll get in her way. For instance, in a foxtrot Reverse Turn, the lady wants to dance a nice, tight Heel Turn on step 2. It's a dramatic little picture, and she's looking forward to it. If the man doesn't know about her Heel Turn, he can easily step a little wide or away from her, force her to take a side step instead, and so dash her hopes for that special moment. Of course, you can overcompensate, step too tightly into her, and force her into a back step -- it's a fine line. Ladies, you too need to know what he is doing in each figure so that you can blend smoothly with his motion and dance as one. Not knowing both parts doesn't necessarily cause you to collide or to fall down, but your figures won't flow as smoothly.
7. **Dance to the music.** In round dancing, our teaching and our study are primarily focused on the cues, on the steps and the figures. It is easy to forget about the music -- but don't. Be aware of the music and dance on the beat. Dance to the music, not to the cues. If your cuer "stacks" the cues, don't rush. Just remember the cue and dance the figure when that musical measure arrives. On the other hand, in order to fully complete a particular step or turn or just to show off a particular position or body line, be willing to stretch a beat. Be willing to borrow an extra moment from the previous or from the following beat. If it will make the move better, be willing to start it a hair earlier and to end it a hair later than the music would seem to dictate. If you dance to the cues, without regard to the music, it looks and feels bad. If you dance to the music, even if you adjust your timing to accommodate your moves, it'll feel great.
8. **Wait for your partner.** Ladies, wait to be led, wait to fully commit your step until he has taken weight, but, men, you wait, too, wait to initiate the next figure until she has completed her turn, twirl, spiral Imagine a rumba Underarm Turn. There are at least two ways in which the man can exhibit his impatience or his anxiety about completing this figure. Either he can whip their joined lead hands around, powering her turn, or he can get ahead and dance his final side step before she has completed her turn. Even worse, he could begin the next figure, maybe a New Yorker, before she is ready. This kind of thing happens when you doggedly dance to the music or to the "drummer" in your own head, regardless of what your partner is doing. Be sensitive to and aware of your partner's dance. We dance to the cues and to the music, but most important, we must dance with (to?) our partner.
9. **Use Lead and Follow.** In these tips, we have mentioned lead and follow, a basic part of social ballroom dancing but sometimes less emphasized in round dancing. The man (usually) initiates and directs the steps that the couple will take, and the lady, well, follows. But what exactly is lead and follow? Fundamentally, lead is nothing more than dancing a figure properly and cleanly. For each figure, there are details that can be specified -- rise at the proper time, not a beat earlier or later; raise the lead or trail hands; rotate the upper body left or right; rotate the hips left or right; take a closing step rather than a back step -- but it can all be summarized as dancing the figure precisely, and with no extra movements of the head or arms, independent of the frame. Extraneous movements are those that are not a part of the figure being danced. You might look at another couple on the floor or at the cuer. You might push with your hand, relax an arm, shrug your shoulders, turn, shake, or jerk. All this is like noise at a gathering or static on the radio. Noise blocks communication. Your partner will not know what you are doing, what you are trying to lead. Follow is responding to the leader's clear, non-noisy movements. In closed position, when he steps forward, she feels his left hand and right arm move. These are not independent movements. He is not pushing with his left hand. His frame is moving, and this happens well before he "takes a step." She feels his hips move forward, and she begins to step back. She feels his right hand release pressure on her back, and she moves to maintain

or regain that pressure. In semi-closed position, when he steps forward, she feels the movement at all these points of contact and she begins to step forward, too. Follow is dancing into the space that is opened by your partner as he dances and out of the space that he is closing off. Round dancers often ask, why use lead and follow? We both hear the cues. We both know what to do without any lead from our partner. But we *don't* always hear the cue, or we hear but can't translate that cue into movement. Lead and follow is another source of information that can keep us dancing. More important, lead and follow can fine-tune our timing and help us dance *together*. If you listen and respond to the cues, you can dance the dance, but you can dance it smoothly, gracefully, and "as one" only if you sense and respond to your partner, and that means lead and follow.

10. **In relation to your partner, dance small.** In the Smooth rhythms, you will want to dance big, with long reaching steps and dramatic progression around the floor, but your steps around or away from your partner should be small. A big jump apart is likely to be clunky and awkward. If you step apart to the end of joined hands, it will be with an uncomfortable jerk. Keep it small and controlled. If you make a turn by dancing wide and around her, it's a long way to go and you'll have to rush. Instead, dance through her hip, which she will gracefully pull back and out of your way. If you are the one who is opening the door for your partner to go through and turn you, do get out of the way, but don't move your whole body. Just move that shoulder and hip back to let her slip by. Your partner is not an obstacle to be avoided. You are dancing intimately *with* her. Is it like sweeping with a broom? You wouldn't make grand gestures, way over there and then around to here. You'd have debris everywhere. Keep it small and under control.
11. **Use sway during your turns.** Sway is an inclination or tipping of the body toward the center of the turn, like banking your bicycle as you go around a corner. You create sway by lifting the outside hip and stretching that side of your torso. The result is that that shoulder goes up, relative to the shoulder on the inside of the turn. It is so important not to lift the shoulder as in some kind of a shrug, but only to allow it to rise, allow your topline to tilt, as you lift that hip. We especially like the use of sway during a Curved Feather and even more during a Hairpin. These are sharp turns to the right, and we make those turns so much more easily when we lift the left hip (lady right) and so sway right (lady left). During a Reverse Turn, men, lift your right hip and so sway left.
12. **Use side lead.** Side lead is a turn of the upper-body frame so that one shoulder and that hip is ahead of the other. If you are dancing forward, left-side lead has the left shoulder forward; the upper body is turned a little to the right. If you are dancing backward, left side lead has the left shoulder a little back; the upper body is turned a little to the left. Side lead is a great mechanism to move you from one dance position to another. In closed position, left-side lead (lady right-side) blends you gently into banjo -- so much better than stepping to the left to an awkward, hip-to-hip banjo. Just a little right-side lead will bring you back to closed position, and a little stronger right-side lead will move you to sidecar. Dancing a forward-lock-forward (man LRL; lady bk R, lock in front L, bk R) is much more comfortable with man's left-side lead. Make your turns smoother with side lead. The man turns left by stepping forward L with right-side lead. He turns right stepping forward R with left-side lead. In essence, he is initiating turn in his upper body before he turns at his feet. Formally, when you step with one foot and lead with the opposite side, it is called contra body movement, but don't let the name intimidate you. Side lead greatly improves the smoothness and gentleness of your dancing.
13. **Dance on the balls of your feet.** Of course, that does not mean on tippy toes, but a little bit up, with a certain amount of springiness, lightness, and responsiveness. Think of a boxer, up, poised, ready to turn left or right, move forward or back, not flat-footed, heavy on the floor. Certainly, you will use your heels. In the Smooth rhythms, moving forward, the man will begin with a heel lead, in order to reach out, to travel, and at the end of the measure, he will lower to the heel again. But in between, he is up, on the balls of his feet, light like a feather. The lady uses her heels a little more, as she steps back on her toe, rolls to the flat, and over her heel in a smooth, reaching back step. But the time spent on the heel is momentary. The percentage of our weight born by the heel is low. We mustn't settle onto our heels or settle into the floor. If you are weighted into your heels, you will be slow to get moving again. If you dance on the flats of your feet, you will be heavy, clumping, ponderous. Some of your figures will be strained, and others just won't happen at all.

14. **Use Rise and Fall.** "Fall" sounds slightly catastrophic, and some prefer to think of Rise and Lowering, but do make use of the third dimension in space that we have available. Of course, we will dance forward and back, left and right, and often on those graceful diagonals -- all this is on the horizontal. Rise and Fall lets us dance the vertical, as well. We can distinguish between "foot rise," which is rising off the heel and onto the ball of your foot, and "body rise," which includes straightening your supporting knee, stretching your torso up (think of filling your lungs), and perhaps lifting your chin just a little bit more. Rise is literally a physical lift. Your frame and center of gravity are farther from the floor. It is also a look, a lightness, and one reason to rise and fall is to look and to feel light and graceful. For the same reason, ballet dancers move "en pointe." Second, we use rise and fall to move more smoothly. Lowering at the end of one figure prepares us to reach out farther for the next figure, and the subsequent initial rise tells the lady that the next step is coming. It is a strong lead and it helps us to dance together.
15. **Use appropriate flow or flight in your dance.** Most of our Smooth rhythms move smoothly (of course) and continuously. The Latin rhythms are more of an intimate conversation in place. So, in waltz, foxtrot, and quickstep (not tango), let your steps and actions blend one into the next. Let your two bodies move as a single unit, the upper and lower body connected and smoothly flowing through the dance, with no jerks or pauses. Let there be no announcement that you are beginning or ending a particular figure, but let each step and figure flow smoothly into the next. For instance, when we dance a Promenade Sway and Change, we shouldn't step to semi-closed position, hold it, and then kind of jerk to closed position. We should step, gradually stretch the right side (lady left), use the whole measure, and without a pause change to left-side stretch, rotate a little to the left -- a continuously flowing arc of movement. But in most of the Latin rhythms (e.g., rumba, cha, mambo) the dance does not flow around the floor. It is more in place. And the upper and lower body are separate. The dance frame is still there, toned, and moving forward and back, left and right, in relative stillness, but we dance the hips a bit more actively and separately from the torso. In rumba and other Latins, we dance the Latin Hip or Cuban Hip, a little thrust to the side as we step and straighten the knee. In samba, we dance a Samba Bounce, a gentle pelvic tuck and thrust.

Print this list, share it, tuck it in your shoe bag, and as you drive to each dance, have your partner read one aloud. Think about one idea that night and see if it doesn't smooth your body flow. Go further -- ask your friends; ask your teachers. What one important idea is missing from this list? Add it, like adding a key to a key ring: keys to comfortable dancing. And when you find another good one, please let us know -- harold@rounddancing.net.