
EDUCATION: Chairman Wilson & Ann McCreary
The following is taken from the 1987 Seattle Convention URDC Syllabus. Our
thanks to Mike & Diana Sheridan.

LINE AND PICTURE FIGURES

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The items you should spend time mastering are posture, stretch, sway, balance, and what I'll call propulsion. Every figure has elements of each of these and understanding of each can make figures less difficult. Our efforts should be directed at mastering each of the main elements and then coordinating them to create nice lines and attractive figures.

A. POSTURE

Good posture can be achieved by using a straight solid object, like a wall. Standing with your back to the wall, you will be straight when your heels and your head touch the wall and you are stretching your body out as far as you can. If you now shuffle your feet a little to move away from the wall you will get an idea of how you should feel when you're standing straight. Many people feel like they're leaning backward when they're in this position. Because they have seen others leaning backward too far, they see this as undesirable and tend to lean forward instead, throwing themselves and their partner off balance.

Good posture should put your body in a position that is normal and natural. Exaggeration of body positions generally turns out to create poor lines and poor balance for at least one partner in the couple. If, after you are in a closed position with good posture, you feel a bit strange, it is worth the effort of studying what you were doing previous to the good position to avoid it in the future. You can practice good posture by taking a position yourself and having your partner observe you. You can then observe your partner.

We like to have one of us get into position and hold it while the other observes. Then, while still holding the position, the partner can assume his/her part of the figure and the other partner can back away and do the observing. This helps each to feel the balance of the figure independently and to study how the parts of the figure fit together.

B. STRETCH

Stretch is the next most important factor after posture. Stretch is used to achieve sway and to keep the bodies of the two dancers in balance. It is also important to get partners in positions that allow following figures to be executed correctly.

It is hard to describe exactly what stretch is but it's not so difficult to practice it. Stand straight and tall, against a wall is OK if it will help to assure you're really straight. When you are straight, try to stretch your rib cage so you become 1/2 inch taller. Be careful that you do not raise your shoulders as in a shrug, but just will the space between your ribs to expand so you grow, or stretch to a little taller height.

Stretching is only done through your rib cage. There is no shoulder action, no arm action, no neck action and no leg action. You're just moving your ribs apart so your whole body grows upward a little. Try it and imagine you're getting taller. Keep trying over and over, each time paying attention to your shoulders to be sure you're not raising them.

C. SWAY

Sway is achieved by using stretch. To get sway, however, you just stretch one side of the body at a time. For example, to sway to the left, stretch your right side. The effect is subtle and the movement is really quite small, but the visual effect is exactly what you want when combined with correct movement between the partners.

Many of the descriptions seen for sways and other picture figures, use terms like "lower the right shoulder" or "lean to the left". Invariable if a couple is having trouble with picture figures, the problem has been with a dropping of the shoulder or the leaning of the body to the point that it is no longer in balance. To avoid this, we like to think only of stretch. We never think of lowering or dropping anything for purposes of sway, we always think of stretching the opposite side. We also try to avoid the term "lean", as it tends to create problems with balance.

In summary, if you think up instead of down (stretch instead of drop) and avoid leaning, you should be able to master stretching to achieve the sway you desire.

D. BALANCE

If you have good posture, stretch correctly and use sway to help your figures, balance will be achieved easily through moving into and out of steps as described for the figure in question. There are only a few figures which cannot be performed by either partner alone. For example, in a ballerina wheel, the woman is dependent on the man to rotate her body. Generally, however, either part of a figure should be executable without the partner. To do a figure alone and to keep good posture you must keep your body balanced. You should never, except for those instances mentioned above, depend on your partner to hold you up, keep you from falling or to support your weight. If your partner vanished into thin air, you should always be balanced and able to continue.

Another element of balance is counter-balance. This is movement of the body to compensate for movement of your partner and, in many cases, is needed to keep you from falling. A super example of counter-balance is the lean in "The Music Played" by Duane & Judy Sechrist. In a counter-balancing move, the partners are acting as one body and are moving the body's parts to keep the whole in balance. It is important in counter-balancing moves to avoid either partner forcing movement on the other.

E. PROPULSION

For lack of a better term, propulsion will be used to describe what is the important factor in creating movement, especially movement into and out of picture figures. It is the action of lowering into a supporting foot and then pushing off, or propelling the body in the desired direction through a pushing action.

The propulsion idea is important for maintaining balance and for getting the body to where it needs to be without leaning to one side, forward or backward. As an example, stand in closed position with man's left and lady's right foot free. Now reach behind the supporting foot with the free foot as far as you can and step into a whisk and change of sway. Many people will lean toward the man's left side in order to reach well back into the whisk, but this creates a situation where balance is tenuous, at best. Instead of leaning, try lowering into the supporting foot while reaching back for the whisk. Keep your shoulders absolutely parallel to the floor at all times. Now get that little extra distance by pushing off slightly with the supporting foot to the side and onto the free foot. Your body stays erect with good posture and your balance is easily maintained at all times. As you put weight on the crossed foot, stretch the man's left and lady's right sides to create the sway desired. Everything has been accomplished with no lean, no lost balance and yet a nice long step can be taken. The picture created will be beautiful.