



Feathers

by Harold & Meredith Sears

The **Feather** is a phase IV foxtrot figure. It is characteristic of the rhythm. One teacher recently said that she couldn't imagine any foxtrot without the feather. We might begin in closed position (CP), man facing line of dance (LOD). He steps forward R (lady back L) with a little upper-body rotation to the right or left shoulder lead (lady right-shoulder). The second step is forward L (lady back R). Finally, step forward R across the left leg and outside partner to banjo position. The timing is SQQ.

The Feather can begin in other dance positions (and progress in other directions). For instance, from semi-closed position (SCP), the lady would step through L turning left-face, side and back R, and finally back L to banjo (again SQQ). This form of the Feather can feel quite different if you are sensitive to the details. Of course, the lady is turning LF from SCP to banjo, but the man too is already in his "sliced" left-shoulder-lead position, so he feels much less body swing. From SCP, the figure has even been given a different name, a Feather Ending, but for the most part, we seem to be comfortable with the idea of dancing a "Feather" from a variety of dance positions. The cue "Feather Ending," instead, will likely refer to the last two steps of the Feather: quick quick to banjo. For instance, a creative (non-standard) bit of choreography might be a Slow Change of Direction (SSS) to a Feather Ending (QQ).



One weakness that we can watch out for is dancing the Feather with a sideways direction to our steps. All three of the man's steps should go **forward in a straight line**. We might step forward R but then, mistakingly, side and forward L. It is as if we are rushing to get into banjo, and the result will be a side-by-side banjo, which puts us both too far from our partner and no longer oriented toward our partner, either. Banjo, especially in foxtrot, is not a side-by-side position with the man's right hip *next to* the lady's right hip. It is almost a CP with his right hip *in front of* her right hip. So,

gentlemen, make all your steps clean, forward steps. Don't hurry to get to banjo, but drift smoothly into that third step -- light as a feather. And use left-shoulder lead and a crossing third step to step outside of partner. Don't use a side step to get to her right side.

A nice practice exercise to help you feel the swing of the body from CP to banjo position is to dance a Three Step to closed; Feather to banjo; and repeat. In each figure, don't keep your shoulders square, but swing the right side just a little ahead (right side lead) in the Three Step, then swing the left side forward in the Feather. The left side lead turns both of you from a flat, breasting progress to a diagonal, slicing movement. Your shoulders are parallel but diagonal to the line of progression. Given the left side lead, the final step of the feather will be a crossing of the thighs into a cozy banjo position.



It is also helpful to use a little right sway during the Feather (lady left sway). Right sway is inclination of the body to the right or a lifting of the left hip and stretching the left side, and it shapes you toward your partner. Again, one of our goals is to focus on our partner, to dance with our partner, not just next to her. Right sway also keeps the lady's head closed (turned to her left) and in her own dance space. Notice that, although she is sliced and dancing down the line of dance with her right shoulder leading, she does not get to look where she is going. She is dancing with her partner in a close dance position and trusting him to take her along safely.

Finally, we can think about foxtrot rise and fall. The man takes his first step with a heel lead and then quickly rises to soaring height onto the ball of the foot. We use not only foot rise, but we straighten our knees (don't lock them), stretch our torsos, and even raise our chins just a little. The man's second step is on the ball of the foot, and his third step is ball and then flat, as we lower to start the next figure. The lady takes all her backing steps toe to heel. This helps to keep her body moving and allows more freedom of motion for the man. If she did not progress through her heel but stayed on the ball of the foot, her flow would briefly stop or poise there. So, the lady sacrifices foot rise in favor of smooth flow.

In dancing a **Back Feather**, the man takes back steps, and the lady dances the man's part of a standard Feather. In CP RLOD, the man steps back L (lady fwd R between his feet), back R with right side lead and right side stretch (turning upper body a bit right-face), and back L (lady fwd R outside partner with left-side lead to a "cozy" banjo lady facing LOD). Of course, the Back Feather may be danced from other facing directions, such as DRW, in which case we might turn the figure 1/8 RF to RLOD. We might also start facing LOD and progress toward RLOD.



The **Feather Finish** always starts with a back step for the man, and it turns to the left anywhere from 1/8 to 1/2. You might begin in CP DRW. The man steps back R beginning to turn LF (lady fwd L). He steps side and forward L continuing to turn LF but beginning to swing the upper body a little RF to produce his left shoulder lead. Finally, he slides his R foot outside partner, crossing his thighs, to end in our cozy banjo position, maybe facing DLW (SQQ). It may seem odd to have a figure that both turns to the left and includes man's left shoulder lead, but the direction that the feet go is often different from the direction the torso or shoulders face, and we certainly see that difference here. In this example, the man's third step is toward DLW, but his shoulders are aligned parallel to the wall.

The Feather Finish is widespread in foxtrot. Not only is it a figure in its own right, but it is built into many longer figures. *Steps 2, 3, and 4 of the Top Spin and steps 4, 5, and 6 of the Reverse Turn are a Feather Finish, as are the last three steps of a Diamond Turn to banjo and the last three steps of any Weave or Natural Hover Cross.*



The **Curved Feather** turns to the right. In SCP, we both step through with trail feet and begin to turn right-face, with left side lead and with right sway. We are beginning to turn right, but do not make this first step a maneuvering step. Most of the turn is in the upper body, not the foot, and most of the actual turn in this figure will happen on the last step. Second, the man steps side and forward L (lady sd & bk R). On the third step, continue to turn the upper body and step fwd R outside partner to our cozy banjo with crossed thighs, facing DRW (SQQ). Check the last step,

preparing to move back during the next measure. In making this rather tight turn into your partner, you might be tempted to look at her or simply look where you are going. Don't. Keep your heads left in a good "closed" banjo position. As in the Feather, the Curved Feather can begin in CP or in banjo, in which case the lady's first step would be back L.

A closely related figure is the **Hairpin**, a term that to be reserved for waltz, while Feather was reserved for foxtrot, but both are used almost interchangeably in foxtrot and waltz today. Given the name, we might dance the Hairpin with a stronger left-side lead and a sharper curve, to RLOD or even DRC. We can increase the drama one more notch by dancing fwd fwd L with left-side lead but no curve to the steps, finally fwd R outside partner and with up to 1/2 turn sharply RF (SQQ). The idea is to produce a sharp, "hairpin" turn within the figure.



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both

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In a **Back Curved Feather**, the lady dances the man's Curved Feather and the man dances the lady's part. In *Honey On the Vine* by Kay & Joy Read, we begin in banjo RLOD with lead feet free. The man dances 3 back steps, curving to banjo DLC. Notice that the lady dances fwd R curving, fwd L, fwd R outside partner to face DRW, just as the man would do in a standard Curved Feather.

To "feather" is to step outside partner while still maintaining parallel shoulders; in other words, a reluctant banjo or sidecar deviation from closed position. (Roy & Phyllis Stier, *Cue Sheet Magazine*, December 1987)

Let's pause for a moment and see what happens if we distinguish between the various Feathers (capitalized), which all go to banjo, and a "feather" step or a "feathering" action (lower case), which can go either to banjo or to sidecar. As the Stiers have said (above), "to feather" is to step outside partner with strong side lead, shaping toward partner, and in such a way that shoulders remain parallel to each other and angled with respect to the line of progression. We feather to banjo with a step forward R and with left-side lead. We feather to sidecar with a forward L with right-side lead. The value of recognizing this more generic "feathering"

action, that can go to banjo or to sidecar, is that it emphasizes the symmetry of dancing on the two sides of our partner. On both sides, we step outside our partner's feet, but we dance *with* our partner in our upper bodies, in as close to CP as we can get. Admittedly, it is harder to achieve that upper-body CP when in sidecar than when in banjo, but thinking of a "feathering" step there gives us an *ideal* to aim for. It helps us think of shaping left, looking left over the lady's right shoulder, and swaying left (lady right). **To feather is to step into a *reluctant banjo or sidecar***. We are moving outside partner, but at heart we want to stay in a close dance position.

The **Left Feather** is a standard, phase VI figure that spans one-and-a-half measures, uses five steps (SQQQQ), and includes both a feathering to sidecar on step 3 and a feathering to banjo on step 5. We might start in banjo position LOD. The man steps forward L (lady back R) blending to CP, fwd R with right-side lead, fwd L to sidecar position, side R turning left-face to CP COH (lady side and back L), and finally back L with right-side lead and left sway to banjo RLOD. Note that we keep heads left in the same upper-body, closed-position dance frame through the whole figure.



Again, the Left Feather is particularly rich in "feathering" actions. If we begin in banjo position, the man is in a feathered position. His right foot and left side are forward; his sway is to the right. As he steps forward L, R, L, he shifts from the lady's right to her left side. He blends from left-side lead to right-side lead, from right sway to left sway, from a cozy banjo to as cozy a sidecar as we can manage. On step 3, he is "feathered" to sidecar position. I wonder if the name Left Feather came from this feathering to the man's and lady's left sides? On step 4, we blend back to CP, turning left, and on step 5, the lady steps forward R outside partner with left-side lead. She is dancing a "Back Feather End." She is feathering to banjo.

The **Back Left Feather** is the inverse of the Left Feather, with the man backing and the lady dancing the man's part of the standard Left Feather (SQQQQ). In banjo position RLOD, the man steps back R (lady fwd L) blending to CP. Over the four quicks, the man steps back L, back R to

sidecar RLOD, side L to CP wall, and fwd R to banjo DLW. The starting position and facing directions may vary, but the body shaping should be just the inverse of that in the Left Feather. The man begins with right-side lead and left sway. On step 3, he has left-side lead and right sway. At this point the lady is feathering to sidecar. We end the figure in our cozy banjo, and he has left-side lead and right sway again, this time moving forward. Here, the man is feathering to banjo.



There is even a **Four Feathers** (*Popular Variations* by Alex Moore, 2002, p. 40), which is a straightforward amalgamation of a Feather, Left Feather, and Back Left Feather (see components above for details). Many have asked, why is it called *four* feathers? If we count the steps outside partner, we count five. Even if we restrict ourselves to steps outside *to banjo*, we get three, not four.

Frank & Carol Valenta solved this problem of "5" in a neat way. They included the figure in *On a Little Street in Singapore*, but cued it: Feather; Four Feathers;;; By cueing the initial Feather separately, his Four Feathers does have 4 feathers, 2 to sidecar and 2 to banjo. On the other hand, maybe the name simply comes from the fact that we are using four measures, and both the man and the lady are feathering repeatedly.

Yes, foxtrot means Feathers, and if we can pay attention to side lead with contra-body motion as we step outside partner, maintaining snug dance position, those frequent feathers will dance smoothly, comfortably, and together.

