

# The Long and the Short Of It

by Harold & Meredith Sears

Competition and professional dancers tend to be of complementary heights, don't they? He is tall and limber, and she is almost as tall. When Fred Astaire went looking for each new partner, he maybe thought more about height than he did about dancing ability. He could teach her the routine, but she did have to fit.

But round dancers are not necessarily of similar heights. Meredith and I certainly aren't. Somehow, that wasn't a major consideration when we decided to pair up, and it probably isn't for most couples.

Sometimes, this size difference is a problem. That six-foot, manly hunk overwhelms his petite, five-foot-two partner. He crashes and bumps, runs her down. He is the bull, and she is the china shop. You may be true soul mates in other respects, but what can you do if you are mismatched physically? Can large and small gears mesh smoothly to produce a "well oiled machine?" Yes, indeed! At least, we can *minimize* the bumping, pushing, tugging ... the thrown-about, crushed, and rolled-over feeling that a smaller person might sometimes feel.

## Come On Down—

At first thought, we might actually eliminate some of our height difference. He can put away those high-heeled boots or high-heeled Latin shoes, and she might take a second look at the one-, two-, or even three-inch heels available to her. Let's not push this strategy too far. Certainly, the tall partner should not be wearing heels. When



Cyd Charisse danced with Fred, she wore ballet slippers, no heels at all, and that just barely brought her height down below his. But the shorter partner can rise on high heels only so much before risking real foot damage.

We can use rise and fall to reduce some of our height difference. We try to use rise and fall anyway, as a gracious component of dance styling. What if the tall dancer rises a little less and the short dancer rises a little more? Men, do dance lightly on the balls of your feet, but let your heels kiss the floor. Ladies, up on the balls of your feet—you can rest during the American-style open work where height difference do not matter. Similarly, he can fall a little more, onto softer knees, and she a little less. We can meet in the middle.

One thing the tall dancer must not do is to settle onto the heels and dance flatfooted. If you're a big person, you don't want to get that considerable mass down into the floor, where great and jerky efforts will be necessary to dislodge it. Stay up on the balls of the feet, but no higher than that to achieve a lightness and responsiveness of movement. Also, don't hunch over to get down to her level. Better to be up in the clouds but upright and balanced than to be a little lower but crushingly down. Size and weight are partly subjective—if your mass is up and in its proper place, it is much less overbearing than if it is too close and in the way.

## Frame Adjustments—

We have tried to make what small adjustments in height that we can, but let's not put too much emphasis here. Posture and frame are much more important than height equalization, and again, he must not hunch over or drop into a Groucho Marx-like crouch. Neither can she dance gracefully on tippy-toes. But we can comfortably fine-tune our frame, and for the most part, the man should adjust to the woman.

For instance, in closed position, we are told to hold the lead hands between shoulder- and eye-level. But if you are much taller than she, don't hold your left hand at *your* eye-level. She will feel as though she is reaching for something on a top shelf throughout the whole dance. Practice holding lead hands at *her* eye level. Find a comfortable compromise.

Be sure to direct your left palm forward, and she will wrap her right fingers over the ridge of palm and forefinger outside the crook of the thumb. If you let your hand roll over, palm down, you will bend her hand back at the wrist and force her down. That's not good—we want her to be able to be up.

Similarly, get your right elbow away from your belt, but put it at about her shoulder level, not yours. Let there be a smooth arc from her shoulder, up her left arm, to your upper arm. Her shoulders and arms should form a letter "C," all on a plane, and close to horizontal. She might not actually reach your right shoulder. That's perfectly okay. Don't make her reach—it will tip her back and off balance.

Don't slouch. Stretch your torso a little back and to the left. A big person especially needs to stay out of his partner's space, or she will feel crushed and trampled. Make a special effort to stay off of her—probably no more effort than is proper for any dancing couple, but be sure to do it. For her part, she might deemphasize her backward arch and focus on stretching the torso up (and left).



"LEYLANDI! THAT'S A PRETTY NAME."

In the Latin rhythms, we spend less time in closed position and more time with only lead hands joined. For a clear lead, our forearms need to be horizontal and the communication directed through those arms toward our centers of gravity. A tall man needs to lower his lead hand so that her forearm is close to horizontal. Then his lead can be aimed toward her hip bone. If he holds *his* forearm horizontal, that pressure will be directed higher on her torso. Pressure directed toward the hips will tend to move all of her. Pressure directed toward the torso or shoulders will tend to tip her over.



### Diagonals, Side Lead, Sway—

We're thinking about body position. It turns out that some of the other standard features of dance styling can be helpful in dealing with size differences between partners. The use of diagonal orientation on the floor can soften the rush of a large person or reduce the distance a small person must go. Do your

Closed Telemark to diagonal line and wall, not to line of dance. Maneuver to diagonal reverse and wall. Outside Change to DLW again. The amount of turn becomes less, is more gentle, less frantic, with less bumping and tugging.

Side lead helps you to dance closer to your partner. Dance your Feather with strong left-side lead. Three Step to closed position with right-side lead, and then Three Step to sidecar position with even stronger right-side lead. Your dance position will be more compact and centered on your partner. You are pointing your belly button toward your partner. We also refer to side lead as "slicing." If you are square to your partner and squarely facing your line of progression, the chances of bumping your partner are pretty good. If you use sliced body positioning, then a component of your forward motion is sliding past her, not squarely into her, and that bumping will be a little less likely.

Sway, too, can keep you close and dancing together. In a Natural Hover Cross, the cross pivot puts you in sidecar position. Without left sway, a tall or large man will be a long way from his partner's center and will therefore tug and maybe pull her off balance, but with the sway, he can put his torso closer to closed position while his hips are in sidecar. He will be less likely to jerk her to the side or clothesline her with the lead arm. Then check, recover, step side to a true closed position, and finally check forward outside partner in contra banjo but now with right sway. Again, the sway keeps partners together.

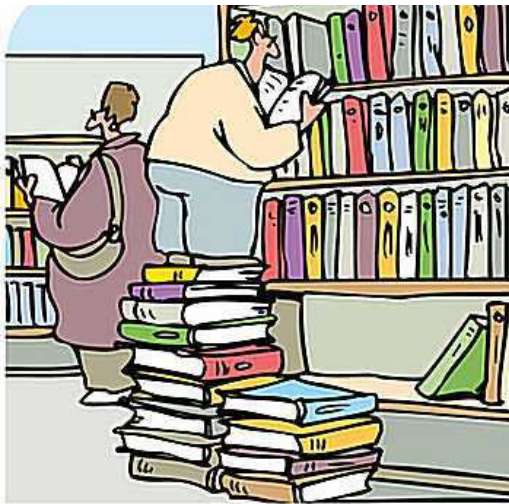
### Talk To Me—

It is helpful to make what physical adjustments you can to your partner's size, but every bit as important is to communicate intention and response as you dance. It may even seem simplistic to suggest that a shorter dancer stretch up onto the balls of the feet, but dancing *up* really does two things. First, you are a little taller. You have risen to meet your partner. Even more important, you are more responsive. Down on your heels, you are into the floor, even attached to the floor. A lead from your partner will more likely feel like a push, and it will take longer to get off the floor and into motion. Up on the balls of the feet (but remember soft knees), you are lighter, a little bouncy. The lead comes, and immediately you can move in that direction. Your toned frame allows you to feel the lead sooner, and being up and light on your feet allows you to respond quicker and more easily.



Soft knees does some of the same things for the tall dancer. He can be down a little more on soft knees, but he is also light, bouncy, and responsive. Frankenstein's monster walked with locked knees, and of course his gait was jerky and lurchy. Soft knees give us a stable suspension system. We are ready to move as soon as our partner is ready. We are poised to use either a little rise or initial lowering to signal our intent to move, just before we take the step.

Either way, the preparation warns our partner and decreases any surprise she may have suffered.



Any dancer who is feeling run down or run over is simply being surprised. She didn't feel what the leader was going to do. Intention movements before the actual step (like rise, fall, or body rotation), a firm frame to convey those intentions, and responsiveness in the legs and feet (lightness) all work to eliminate the surprise, maximize the communication in lead and follow, and smooth out the flow of the dance.

The man needs to have an especially stable frame to better convey his intentions, and she must keep the same toned frame to be able to read his intentions, not to be surprised, and to convey back the extent of her response. The man needs to be as responsive to the extent of the follow as the woman is to the nature of the lead. Men, make your next step appropriate to what she just did. Adjust according to her choices. Don't just execute the figure and drag her along—little thing that she is.

Ladies, delay your response. As he steps out, float your foot and wait to take weight until he does. If he wants to reach out and carry you, let him do it and only then take your step. Ideally, he will restrain his stride a little, and you will float and reach.

An ideal combination is responsiveness to each other coupled with a willingness to delay a step or action until you both are in position and on balance and ready. Let's do a waltz Double Reverse Spin. A small woman will have a little farther to go at the end of the figure, as she steps side right/cross left in front of right around her big strong man. She might run a little late on occasion. The man should be sensitive to her position and willing to delay the subsequent Hover Telemark if necessary.

We might go so far as to think of every waltz measure as 1&2&3&; and we don't have to take our steps on the 1, the 2, and the 3. If the Double Reverse in the previous measure is not quite completed—if the necessary rotation has not been accomplished—then let that figure continue into the 1 of the next measure, and take the first step of the Hover Telemark on the &. A big man who is obsessed with “correct” timing might feel that he has to force the Double Reverse and begin the Hover Telemark on the 1, regardless of where his partner is, but she will end up with her face buried in his armpit.

Dancing—lead and follow—is ideally a two-way conversation. He conveys an intention. She responds according to her ability and preference and conveys information about her response back. He adjusts his next intention accordingly, and so on. He allows their body rotation to continue a little longer if necessary and steps on the &2, instead of the 1,2. Having syncopated the first step of the Hover Telemark, he might even choose to “milk” the second step, holding it through the 2, into the 3, rising during that hovering action, making it a bit of a picture, and finally taking the third step of the Hover Telemark on the & of 3.

We don't have a simple answer to the problem of a big dancer overwhelming his partner, but sometimes, the man, knowing that he is the *leader*, feels that he can dance his dance, and she must adjust to him—she must *follow*. It might even be subconscious, but he will adopt the proper stance (according to his view), take the proper steps, in the proper directions, dance to the beat of the drummer that he hears, and simply expect her to come on along, like a puppy trotting at its master's heels. But if you can adjust your frames to match your partner, tone your frames so that you can both communicate clearly and feel your partner, and finally adjust your movements to those of your partner, then your dancing will feel better.

