

EDUCATION, Wilson & Ann McCreary, Chairpersons.

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THE IMPORTANCE OF LEADING AND FOLLOWING IN ROUND DANCING
By Brent & Mickey Moore

Leading and following are important in any type of couple dancing be it round dancing, ballroom dancing, or folk dancing - for two dominant reasons. First, all couple dance figures are created around a physical relationship between two bodies which requires the initiation and/or control of movement by one or the other body in order to be mechanically feasible. Second, it enables the couple to dance on the same timing which gives an appearance of unity that we all admire and should hope to achieve in dancing.

The basic guideline for leading and following is really quite simple. However, the techniques required to meet this guideline can become quite complex and the level of motor skills needed to execute them requires some time to develop. The very basic guide for the lead/follow relationship is that the leader (the man) creates the follower's (the lady's) footwork by positioning or moving her body and/or by creating lanes in which she moves.

Every figure employs a variety of techniques in its execution: however, there are some general techniques for both the man and the lady which will be very useful in all figures.

The fundamental rules for the lady are: One, always utilize the proper body/foot actions appropriate to the rhythm. This means that it is the lady's responsibility to carry her poise (thereby her weight) properly at all times, and her foot actions, which are heel or toe leads, weight transfers and ankle flexings should follow the rhythm guides. An example would be the lady backing in foxtrot. Her poise is slightly forward even though backing and her foot action is toe to heel on all backing steps. Two, the lady should attempt to keep her shoulders parallel to the man's. Please note though, that at all times due to the lane created by the man there will be some angularity created in the shoulder line. Three, when the lady has an opportunity to move forward she should do so aggressively. Four, when in semi-closed position the lady should retain her position slightly to the man's right (except in Latins). There are several other techniques that the lady will need to master, but these four are, as we stated, fundamental.

The prime concepts for the man are: One, always dance his own body. This means several things, among them are carrying his own body weight correctly, using the proper foot action appropriate for the rhythm, and not

trying to manipulate the lady with his arms (except in Latins). Two, in smooth dancing, the man creates a "dance frame" in which the lady dances. He maintains the dance frame by keeping his back line (the curved, level line from elbow to elbow) constant and he turns that frame in ways and at times that make it possible for the lady to maintain her position. Three, the man must develop an understanding of what the lady is to do. This is probably the most difficult technique to acquire - be patient, it will come. Four, the man must assume responsibility for the figure alignments. This is especially important in round dancing since we must constantly compensate for our curved line of dance.

Common problems (especially in smooth dancing) that inhibit good lead and follow habits are as follows. Improper foot action - toe leads when we should be heel leading and vice versa - is a problem common to both man and lady. This poor foot action usually curtails the body flight so important to the mechanics of most figures. Breaking the back line (usually the man's problem) is especially seen in movements to semi-closed position. Allowing the elbow to get behind the hip almost always pulls the lady out of position. Moving the shoulders before moving the rest of the body is again normally seen in men. This action misleads the lady into placing her foot too early and as a result the man steps on her foot when the rest of his body moves forward. Another common fault and related to the broken back line is turning away from the partner when moving to semi-closed position. Mostly a man's problem, but early in dancing this "opening out" phenomena is also seen in the lady. A good concept to follow here is that if you want the lady to move to semi-closed turn toward her and if you want her in closed position, turn away from her. Please keep in mind that these turns are very small and very subtle. A problem common to both man and lady is too much tension or tone in the top line (arms, hands, shoulders). The hold gets progressively lighter as our dance skills improve - or perhaps if we would lighten our tops our skills would improve!! Especially salient here is man's right hand - it should be a decoration only and not used to apply pressure to the lady's back. Also important is the lead hands - support your own arm weight and don't grip or ride the partner's hand. In smooth dancing there is one problem that is universal early in our dancing and that is moving the shoulders independently of the hips. The shoulders and hips are always danced in the same plane. One idea that you may use to overcome this fault is to think of all movement, especially turns, as originating in the hips. There are many more problems that could be detailed here; however, the preceding seem to be the most troublesome.

As we can readily see, leading and following requires an advanced level of body sophistication and awareness. It also asks for a good understanding of the mechanics of the figures being danced. Round dancing, however, is an absolutely marvelous medium for developing and utilizing the techniques of leading and following. Round dancing allows us to dance and enjoy body movement beyond our body skills by having the lady be more aggressive in dancing her role and, as a result, not requiring the man to be so precise in his. So, by concentrating on little pieces we can develop the physical skills in time that are needed to improve our dancing. In the meantime, we can still benefit from the main reasons we dance - we innately enjoy movement and our mastery at whatever level or degree over our own bodies.