

FROM FOOT POSITION TO DANCING

By Barbara and Jim German

A new dance or figure has been presented. If we had some difficulty with it, then we head to the detailed description of the cue sheet or reference material to find out why. We study the material to identify where our foot goes on the first step, then the second step and so forth. After some practice, we have our feet going in the right place and begin to relax since we now know what to do.

Ever wonder how dance was taught or learned before cue sheets - even before Arthur Murray or Betty White identified foot patterns? Did the identification of foot placement on dance figure come first or was it something else? I guess we might say in modern day dancing that the foot patterns came first. But, before the foot patterns were written, couples would dance and move across the floor with no thought to a foot pattern or the name of a dance step. Their bodies just move together as one and people enjoyed watching. Others wanting to learn to do what they saw and asked the couple questions and took notes. Since they did not have foot position charts or cue sheets, they probably talked about body movement. From the man's prospective the explanation would relate to his movement, rotation, sway or action that would indicate to the lady the special body line, poise, syncopation or movement she should take. From the lady's prospective, it was a response of what the man's action indicated to her.

Today when we see a dancing couple who look attractive at a party or other social gathering we tell them how nice they look and perhaps ask how they did a particular movement. The man will tell what he did and the lady will amplify by saying I felt he wanted me to go in this direction or he wanted me to change my head position when his hand pressure changed on my back or his body moved in this way. We listen and try to execute the figure. It didn't quite work and we receive more information on what to do. In learning how to recreate the figure, the man will keep changing his body or hand action until the lady's response creates the look we are after. To remember how to do the figure, we begin to document all of the information we can, such as foot placement, left and right hand actions, head action, amount of turn, and everything else we may need in order to recreate the figure and look. We'll call this the technical data and with this data we can now teach another couple how to create the same figure and look. But the body flow and action, which preceded the technical data, has not been communicated. Since body flow and action preceded the documentation of technical data, should we not use this data to verify that the body actions were correct for achieving the look we wanted. That is to say we do the body action then check our position with the technical data to verify proper movement.

Maybe an example would be useful. Let's look at part of a basic turn in Waltz and assume we are in good dance position. The man's body action for the first step is forward and the lady responds by stepping back. The man's second step is also forward with a swinging movement and a turning action at the end. This causes the lady to take another step backward and also turn toward the man. (We can check the technical data and see that the foot placement of step two did result in the feet being apart and parallel (i.e. a side step)). On step three the man brings his feet together which causes a movement for the lady to bring her feet together. The man also changes weight to the other foot and does a lowering action near the end of the third step. The lady feels the man change his weight to the other foot and also changes her weight to the other foot. She also lowers with the man in response to his body movement and both are now ready for the next measure.

Round Dancing can be very foot placement oriented. Yes, the teaching couple will show the figure or routine more than once and discuss some action(s), but in order to complete the teach in the time allotted, the man is told where to place his foot and the lady is also told where to place her foot. At the end of the two hour teach, we can get through most of the dance and have the cue sheet so we can figure out where our feet should go for the hard spot or two. The concept of body movement or action to create the foot placement described on the cue sheet is lost. But in the beginning before the technical data was documented, it was the body action that caused the figure and look to be executed. Maybe we can spend more time on the use of body movement and action to create the figure described by our technical data and foot placement. To better understand the movement of the body to create a figure is to move **from foot position to dancing**.