Dance Position and Connection Between Partners

by Harold & Meredith Sears

First in dancing is the dance position and the connection between you and your partner. Before you can move as one, lightly and smoothly around the floor, the gentleman's lead clear and unambiguous, and the lady's follow responsive and precise, you have to get a good hold of each other.

Closed Position—

The fundamental dance position, and the one in which you can feel most connected, is Closed Position. Good connection and smooth lead and follow come from a toned frame in the upper body and contact at the hips.

In the Smooth Rhythms, such as Foxtrot, Waltz, Tango, and Quickstep, you face each other, offset, each to the other's right and each looking to the left, over your partner's right shoulder. Think of the space between your partner's head and right shoulder as your

"window," and try to look out of that window at all times. You will be tempted to gaze into your partner's eyes. After all, you are in each other's arms, the light is low, and the music is romantic—but don't do it. Keep your eyes left. If you look right, you will drift right and invade your partner's space. Then you will start to bump and step on each other's toes. Stay in your own space, and look out of your own window. A forward step with your right foot should slide neatly between your partner's feet.

Now, stretch the right side of your torso a little, without crunching or collapsing your left side, and so move your upper body (not your hips) even more firmly into its own space. Arch back just a little, not by leaning away at the waist, but by filling your lungs, lifting your chest, and rotating your shoulders up and back. Be careful not to lift your shoulders stiffly and tensely toward your ears.

In Closed Position, your upper bodies should be well apart, but our theme is connection between partners. How can we have both separation *and* connection? Our first level of connection is through well-toned arms.

The man's right arm is around the woman with his wrist high under her shoulder and his right hand on her left shoulder blade. The fingers are together and pointed somewhat down. Don't spread the fingers—such a hold looks a little "gropey." Don't let the arm droop—you won't have connection, and she won't be able to feel your lead. The woman's left arm lies gently on top of his right with her left hand resting softly on his shoulder, like a little bird perching upon a branch. The hand is arched. Her finger tips are a little behind his upper arm or shoulder, and her thumb is a little in front, but don't grip. Don't let the hand climb up toward his neck, and don't hang on him. Each of you must support your own weight.

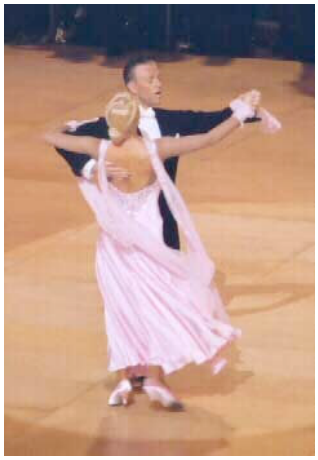
The man's left arm should similarly be raised and extended out to the side. The upper arm slopes slightly down, and the forearm slopes upward. The woman will place the palm of her right hand into the palm of his left, resting her fingers in the cradle between his thumb and forefinger. Both of you fold your fingers softly over the hand of your partner. Don't bend the wrist back. Again, don't grip tightly. Each of you must support your own arms. This is what muscle tone does. If you release your hold and step back from each other, you should be able to maintain your position

comfortably. You should not feel suddenly unsupported. Your arms should not flop to your sides. Your own muscle tone should still provide firm body support.

Frame—

It is so easy to let your elbows fall to your sides and to let your shoulders droop forward, leaving you hunched over your partner like a vulture over its prey. So keep your arms up and your toplines up. You must make adjustments if you are of significantly different heights or girths, but the ideal that you strive for is a horizontal oval described by the arms and shoulders. His left hand is above this plane, and his right hand is below it, but this oval is your "frame." Keep tone in all the muscles of your upper bodies so that this shape is maintained.

Now, notice what a toned frame does for partner connection. When the man steps back, his right arm maintains its position—you maintain your frame—and the woman feels the movement at the fingertips of her left hand, throughout her left arm, through the pressure on her back, and through a release of pressure at her right hand. Men, don't *pull* her toward you by bending your elbows. Simply move and so *draw* her toward you.



When the man steps forward, she feels this movement at the pad of her left thumb, along her left arm, and at her right palm, and the pressure of his right hand on her back releases. The woman is maintaining tone in her upper body and should be maintaining gentle pressure into his right hand, so she feels not only the movement but the release too, and she automatically moves to recover or reclaim the pressure. If he moves right or left, or if he turns one way or the other, his frame moves as a unit and conveys this movement at many points of contact.

Ladies, you must maintain tone throughout your frame, too. A conductor cannot direct an orchestra with a piece of cooked spaghetti. Neither can a dancer lead a limp partner. Stand up tall. Arch a bit back. Look left. Arms up. Maintain your muscle tone, feel

his movements, and be poised to respond. With toned upper-body frame, you are connected and dancing as a single unit.

Hips—

Well, we need at least one more component before we can be a single well-oiled unit. Our second level of connection is at the hips, and this point of connection is simple and direct—keep your hips together. In the upper body, the idea of connection is a little subtle. We want the upper bodies apart, and we want connection at the same time. We are using overall muscle tone to accomplish this. In the hips, the connection is not subtle. You simply(!) stay close.

Remember, we are dancing offset to the left, so we are not dancing "belly-to-belly." Instead, the slight rise of your right hipbone should fit just inside that of your partner. Can you hold it there as you dance? No matter how fast you are moving or how much you may be pivoting or turning, can you keep your hips up to your partner? (No, we can't either, but it is a goal we can shoot for.)

Hip contact tells you where your partner is and where he or she is moving, relative to yourself. We have a powerfully direct line of communication in that contact. If you want to turn right, men, don't push with the left hand. Such a push will only move your upper bodies awkwardly out of dance position. Instead, anticipate the turn with a little lowering in the knee and a little lower-body rotation, and she will be forewarned. In a way, you will turn her with your hips, not your arms. The results will be smoother, and you will remain continuously in dance position.

Men, pay attention to this contact. As you listen to the cues and think about where you have to go, it is easy to dance away from your partner. But your job is to lead her and to go there *together*. So, don't turn, spin, or pivot away from your partner and leave her behind. Keep her on your right hip. Often, this simply means stepping through her, rather than past her. Think of the second step of an Open Telemark. If you make that a side step past the woman and down line of dance, you will next turn away from her and leave

her way off to your right, sort of hung up under your right armpit. Instead, if you step forward between her feet toward line and center, you will both turn on about the same spot, and you will stay together.

Ladies, keep your hips up to his. If you feel your right hipbone leaving its spot just inside his right hipbone, then make any adjustments you can to reclaim your position. Maybe the most valuable thing you can do is to let the free foot follow the man's movement and not take weight until he does. Then you can take weight in such a way that your hips are in position.

So, good connection results from contact at the hips. As this contact becomes more comfortable and automatic, you can soften it and focus more on a gentle connection at the lower ribcage. Also work for a well-toned frame that allows the upper body to remain apart but in communication. Good connection leads to clear lead and follow and from there to smooth dancing.

Banjo and Sidecar Positions—

Banjo and Sidecar are also considered to be closed dance positions, in that the upper body frame is toned, shoulders remain parallel, and the hips remain in contact. We strive for all the points of connection that we had in Closed Position. Our goal is the same clear lead and follow—the same smooth dancing.

Banjo is a closed position with the upper body turned just a bit to the right. You can think of turning so that your belly button no longer points in the direction you are going, but your left shoulder or left side leads your progression. Or you can think of "swinging" or "slicing" the left shoulder forward (woman right shoulder back). Having made this upper body turn, your hips are still together, and your shoulders are still parallel with those of your partner, but when the man steps forward with his right foot, he can slide his foot to his left of her right foot. He steps not between her feet but outside. The step has a strong crossing action, in front and high, at the thighs (woman crosses behind). Similarly, if he stepped back with his left, she would step forward with her right,

crossing in front, and to the outside of his right foot. Any body turn that causes the opposite side to lead as a step is taken (e.g. left side lead as right foot steps forward) is called Contra Body Movement (CBM), and the position therefore is often called Contra Banjo.

It might even be helpful to think that your legs are in Banjo, progressing down line, but your hips and upper body are in Closed, facing line and wall. Your hips are together, your right hip bone is in that pocket just inside your partner's right hip bone, your frame is toned, your upper body is stretched up and left, you are in your own space looking out of your own window. You have good connection. The thing to avoid is simply stepping to the side, with no body turn, and placing right hip to right hip ("banjo"). Such a shift in position certainly allows you to step outside of your partner, but you will have lost your connection, you are farther away from your partner and so will have to travel farther and faster as you turn, and your dancing will be less smooth.

Sidecar is a closed position with the upper body turned a little to the left. You lead with the right side forward (woman's left side back) so that his step forward with his left (CBM) goes outside or to his right of her left foot. Contra Sidecar is a more difficult position to maintain than Contra Banjo, because it is still a closed position. That means you will step outside of your partner to your right, but your upper body is oriented to your left. This is accomplished by turning as much as possible at the hips, not higher up. Your goal is to have your upper body in Closed Position, maybe facing line and center, as your steps progress down line. Your step forward on the left will cross in front at the thighs (woman cross in back).

Open Positions—

Of course, we make use of many more dance positions than the closed positions. In Butterfly, we remain facing but we are apart. In Semi-Closed, Half Open, and Open, we turn more and more away from each other. Especially in the Latin rhythms, the man's right hand might move to the woman's upper arm. The man's left hand might come down to waist level. In Hustle, an L-shaped Closed Position is used. But in all of these looser and more open positions, muscle tone, frame, and body connection remain important.

For instance, in moving from Closed to Semi-Closed Position, don't pull your left side from her right side, hinging your partnership to a partially open and unattached position. Simply stretch your right and her left sides a little and keep your hips together. Her head will open and look down line, and your lead shoulders will separate only the slightest bit more. You might swivel a bit on the balls of your trail feet (man to the left and woman right), and your lead feet will be pointed down line and ready to step down line, but your bodies will be together and connected.

In Half Open, don't simply turn 90º apart, as though you are mad at her. Maybe look half-left and (ladies) half-right, but orient your bodies a little closer. You mustn't let your heads turn toward each other, but your center can be focused on her center; your belly buttons can look at each other. In leading a Cross Body, point your foot half-left, but turn your body less. Remain aware of your partner, centered on your partner, and with as much tone and contact as is possible.

Someone once said, you aren't really *dancing* together if you aren't dancing *together*.

BALLROOM DANCE POSITIONS

Closed Dance Hold	**Promenade Position**

Left Outside Partner Position

Right Outside Partner Position

Fallaway Position

Right Side Wrap

Cape (Shadow) Position

Lower Cape Position

Challenge Position

Hammerlock Position

Forward Open Promenade

Reverse Open Promenade

One Hand Hold Open Facing Position

Two Hand Hold Open Facing Position