

DON'T FIGHT WITH YOUR PARTNER!

BY HAROLD & MEREDITH SEARS



As we have danced in various clubs, near and far, we have gradually come to feel that one of the most important techniques in round dancing is not really a "dance technique" at all. If you really want to look GOOD, don't criticize your partner.

First of all, this is recreation. It's supposed to be fun. Take it easy and be forgiving. For some couples, dancing might be the one activity outside the home that they share. He has his job, and she has hers. He plays golf, and she plays bridge. But on Tuesday evenings, they round dance; they do this one thing together. They hold each other in their arms; romantic music is playing. Now especially is no time for criticism, condescension, impatience, disgust, anger, irate blows, shouting tantrums . . .

Second, just because the man is the "leader" doesn't make him the boss. He doesn't have the right to order his partner around, to lecture, to reprimand, or to do any other "boss/subordinate" or "superior/inferior" thing. And just because she is the "queen of the ball" doesn't give her royal privileges. Dancing is a partnership. We are working (playing?) together. If there is any activity that calls for cooperation, it is round dancing. Even the idea of a partnership doesn't quite give us the feel of what is required, because dancing is more like a warm courtship than a cold business deal. Dancing is refined and stylized, but you are courting your partner out there. Even if you are not otherwise a couple; even if you have only just now met your partner and asked her to dance, the smooth moves apart and together, the soft gliding down the hall, make up a gentle love-making. No, this is not an efficient partnership trying to manufacture widgets. It is an affectionate courtship. Keep it sweet.

Third, just as a practical matter, if something does go wrong on the dance floor, it is probably the man's fault. So he has no call to criticize her, and she has no need to criticize him. We already know he messed up. He is the leader, and although this doesn't give him much in the way of authority, it does give him a lot of responsibility for the success of the couple. If she doesn't go the right way or doesn't dance smoothly, then the man probably didn't lead clearly. Certainly, the woman has responsibility too, and she can roughen the flow of the dance through bad following, but I think it is generally agreed that leading is harder than following. If a couple begins to learn together, the man will probably learn more slowly than the woman; he'll be behind, and at any given time will be more likely to fail than she will. Consider that a good male dancer can take a less accomplished female and make her look good. A good female dancer can help a beginning male a little, but this second couple will probably not look as good as the first.

Many of us have been in round dance classes where the male teacher has taken a female student and led her through a new figure. Her face brightens: "Oh, is that how it goes? That was so easy." But now we

need some real self-control on her part. She must not go on to say, "Harold, why can't you lead like that?"

Gentlemen, don't say things like,

- Hey, what are you doing back there? You're supposed to be on my right hip.
- Why are you going that way?
- We're supposed to be turning this direction.
- You're blocking me; holding me back; dragging me down . . .

Ladies, don't tell him,

- You're doing that all wrong.
- Don't just clump along; c'mon, dance.
- What was that supposed to be?
- That felt awful!

Don't stamp your foot, smack him or her on the shoulder, and walk off the floor in a huff.

And don't go over to a friend after a given tip and sadly confide, with a shake of the head, that he/she just doesn't know what he/she is doing.

You will say that you just want to catch the mistakes so you can learn to dance better. If you don't tell him when it's not working, how will he improve? If you don't tell her about her errors, how will she correct them? Part of the answer lies in the sheer number of "mistakes." If you are dancing something that you have danced well many times, then you can probably honestly say, "There was one little spot in there that felt rough. How does that go? Let's just run through it again." But in the dances that you are learning now, the dances that are making you reach, there are probably uncountable rough spots. You can't tackle them all. It makes me think of the advice given to parents: pick your battles. I don't like to use the metaphor of a battle here, but the wise strategy with your 14-year-old and with your dance partner is to let most of those little problems go. It wasn't perfect, but it was a fun dance. Leave it at that. At most, pick one figure to work on a little more. Yes, this is a dance class. We are here to have fun and to learn.

The other part of the answer to this question of how we correct our mistakes is simply to do it diplomatically, with sympathy, and with a smile. There is just no need to say, "You didn't do that right." even if that was exactly and truthfully the case. Instead, say, "Let's try that one sequence again. How is it supposed to go? What exactly is our second step?"

See the difference? We're learning together. It's not you versus me. We're a team.

I've seen a few couples who end every dance with a kiss. I don't know if that is a conscious strategy on the part of one to shut up or disarm the other, or if it is truly and simply an affectionate thank-you for a lovely dance, but it certainly looks better than criticism and recrimination. Again, a number-one rule: don't criticize or pick on your partner. If you can smile while you dance and smile as you walk off the floor, your dancing will look so much better.

