

The Latin Hold

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The following ideas have been collected in order to assist you in comfortable dancing and are not meant to be absolutes. The body alignment for closed position in the Latin rhythms (rumba, cha, samba, mambo...) is all-important in terms of dancer's comfort & confidence. It also extends to their ability to execute some figures.

Let us set the mood for Latin dancing. You are in a dark, smoky dance hall. You see someone across the room that you might like to get to know. The man approaches the woman and from that moment his goal is to seduce the woman, while the woman is 'playing hard to get'.

Latin Body Frame & Hold:

The Latin dance hold is more compact than in the smooth rhythms (waltz, foxtrot, quickstep...). Stand 6"-9" apart with the body & head upright. A simple rule of thumb for the distance between the couple - if the woman is much shorter than you, stand further away from her. If she is much taller than you, stand closer. The general rule is comfort.

Body weight should be slightly forward, centered over the balls of the feet, not back on the heels. Maintain a slight forward poise with your body towards one another.

The man's arms & upper body should create a firm frame in which the woman is gently held. Both partners need to keep some tension (pressure) in the arms. A common complaint heard from the ladies is that the gentlemen are not leading. Well, guys for once it may not be your fault. What essentially happens is that the woman does not allow the man to lead. She interferes with the points of contact (see below) by flapping her arms, bouncing around, faking the hip movement, and not sustaining hand/arm pressure when dancing. The man cannot lead arms of jelly. Man, even if you are a beginner, you can dance effectively, if you stand erect and keep a firm forward pressure on your partner.

Four Points of Contact in the Latin Closed Position:

CONTACT POINT #1 - The first point of contact is the man's left and the woman's right hand. The man's left arm should be held up with the elbow bent fairly sharply somewhat towards the floor. His left wrist should bend slightly to the left side with his palm facing the woman and thumb up. This will cause his fingers to be parallel to the floor. The woman should approach the man with her palm facing his and her fingers up and her elbow relaxed. Her hand should contact the man's at the fleshy part below their thumbs. She should then gently fold/cup her fingers over the man's hand between his thumb and forefinger. The man should gently wrap his fingers around the woman's hand. Partners should gently fold their thumbs over each others hand, being very careful not to clamp down on their partner's hand. The man's left hand is held between the woman's cheek & eye level if she is shorter than him and the reverse if she is taller (hand is held between the man's cheek & eye level).

CONTACT POINT #2 - The second point of contact is the man's right forearm & the woman's side. With the woman's left arm held to the side and slightly forward, the man should place his right lower forearm under the woman's upper arm near her armpit. He should apply slight upward pressure to her upper arm and the woman in response should apply slight downward pressure. Man's right hand is not yet touching the woman's back, but his fingers and thumb should be together and his wrist should bend slightly downward.

The woman should stand slightly to the man's right side.

CONTACT POINT #3 – Folding of man's right hand. The man then folds his right hand around to gently touch the woman's left shoulder blade. Be very careful not to use this point to squeeze the woman, but rather it should be a gentle point of contact. Remember both of you need to be able to breath freely and be on your own feet, not leaning on or dragging your partner.

CONTACT POINT #4 – Woman's left hand. The woman places her left forearm and hand on top of the man's right arm. She should gently hold his biceps with her thumb and middle finger, being careful not to clamp down. Her hand should be turned slightly outward from the wrist. If points 2, 3 and 4 have been made properly and if the partners are holding their arms up, then no light will be seen between the man's right arm and the woman's left arm, excluding elbow overlap due to height differences of the partners.

During this entire exercise keep shoulders relaxed and stand erect not leaning over your partner.

Open Position:

The handhold in open position is slightly modified. The man lowers the hold in a way that he can aim for her waist & hip area (center of gravity). This allows him to communicate more effectively with the woman, i.e. lead. The man also rotates his wrist inward so that his palm essentially faces him, giving the woman a very nice ledge to place her fingers on. This connection will also improve communication between the couple. In open position this is the only contact point.

A Brief Bit on Leading:

In addition to the positioning of the arms & hands, a good lead from the man makes clear his intentions to the woman, who then follows. The first ingredient of a good lead is for the man to dance clearly & confidently. Clarity from the man is important, as it enables the woman to detect the speed, direction, and feel of a figure early enough to respond appropriately. Second, leads are a subtle, but clear, communication coming from the man's body, radiating down his arms, and then to the woman. Thirdly, the man should have "tone" in his arms, using the muscles in the upper arm to keep the arms in position and thus allowing the woman to feel his body movement. Avoid the notorious "spaghetti" (limp arms) and the "ram rod" arms (arms held too stiffly and generally with a straight elbow). The woman should not try to anticipate the man's intentions, but should wait to accept & follow the man's lead.