

# Smooth Your Dancing

by Harold & Meredith Sears

What is our goal in dancing? To move through the figures that are cued, in time with the music, and to come to the end, three minutes later,

1. still together on the floor,
2. unbruised, joints intact, and
3. smiling with some measure of affection for our partner.

The enemy of this goal is **rough dancing** -- tugging, pushing, bumping, *man-handling* -- I don't want to be unfairly sexist, but I suppose it usually is the man who is most guilty of roughness in dancing. By tradition, he is the leader, big and strong. But ladies certainly can be rough, too. So, let's both of us think about smoothing things out.

## Dance Position --

One way to smooth out your dancing is to stay in good dance position. As we dance, we have a lot to worry about. We think about taking the proper steps, turning the right amount, keeping time, getting where we need to go . . . But staying in position, relative to our partner, is important. Most of us need to make that **a higher priority**.

In the Smooth Rhythms, such as waltz and foxtrot, we need to stay close at the hips and more apart at the shoulders and head. The closeness connects us and helps us to dance together. The somewhat flaring top line keeps our heavier upper body out of each other's way and allows us room to move. We need to maintain muscle tone to further support our connection. A floppy, sloppy posture encourages a randomness in our movements that will not be smooth. And we need to stay a little bit to the left of our partnership, the lady on the man's right side. Again, we will be connected but out of each other's way.

For instance, in semi-closed position, keep your lady on your right hip, a little bit behind you. From this position, when you step through, the man steps first and the lady follows. If you are dancing a Maneuver, it will flow smoothly. If she is up even with the man or a little ahead of him, then he'll run into her. She'll feel pushed out of his way.

In closed position, again, keep her a little on your right side. All your feet will pass near your partner's feet but not bump into or onto them. During a Reverse Turn, stay in closed position. If you drift apart or to one side or the other, the lady will not be able to do her Heel Turn. The man will pull on her, and she'll step side instead. Her third step should be forward R between his feet, in closed position -- not outside partner in banjo. That's an Open Reverse Turn.

We were dancing a foxtrot Shadow Reverse Turn recently. There are no Heel Turns here. Both the man and the lady are dancing the man's Open Reverse Turn: forward L toward diagonal line and center, side and forward R turning left-face, and back L to end in Shadow Position both facing reverse line of dance. But here's the key: Keep your dance position. Stay in

Shadow. The man must stay behind the lady's left hip. If he drifts away, you can be sure he will be tugging and pulling, probably roughly.

In general, the farther out of position we get, the farther around we will have to go, the more inclined we will be to push our partner out of the way or pull on her in order to get around, and the more likely we will be to shove her to "help" her get around. Stay in position. The distances will be shorter, easier to travel, and our passage will be smoother.

### **Responsiveness --**

Smooth dancing is also a matter of quick reaction times. Does this sound backwards? Do "quick reactions" sound fast and jerky? Ironically, quick reactions, heightened responsiveness, lead not to fast jerkiness but to slow smoothness. What are we responding to? In a successful dance, we respond to the cues, to the beat of the music, and to the movements of our partner. These are the triggers that drive our next step or movement. The sooner we register these triggers and begin our response, the more time we will have to shape the response and to dance it, and the smoother our movements will be.

A specific thing we can do, to be more responsive, is to dance on the balls of our feet. Think of a boxer in the ring. He doesn't stand there flat-footed. He is up, a little springy, ready to move in any direction. He is responsive. As dancers, we need to be up and ready to move, too. When the cue comes, and then the downbeat, we want to respond. If we are standing flat-footed, rooted to the floor, it'll take some time to overcome the inertia and get started, and then we'll have less time to actually dance the step or figure. We'll be rushed and jerky. If we can get started sooner, we'll have more time, and we'll be smoother.

Now, this is not to say that we never make use of our heels. Especially when we are traveling, moving down the hall, the dancer going forward will lower and reach out with his heel, roll to the flat of the foot, and onto the ball, and the dancer going backward will reach back with her toe, roll to the flat, and over the heel of her foot. This kind of footwork gives great distance to our steps. But we don't want to spend time on our heels. If we dance flat-footed, our movements will be cumbersome, clumping, and jerky -- not smooth and flowing.

### **Mental Focus --**

When your mind is elsewhere, everything is delayed: first your comprehension of the cue, then your intention to move, then your preparatory movements such as upper-body rotation, and these preparatory movements are your lead, so your lead is late and rushed, and the flow of the figure becomes rushed and ragged. Each delay in this sequence feeds and magnifies the next and therefore the roughness of the performance.

So, what are you thinking about when you dance? Are you watching other dancers or checking out friends on the sidelines, wondering what they are talking about? Not only does this pull you out of dance position, but it distracts your attention and slows your reactions and your flow. Are you enjoying the lyrics of a fun jive or delighting in the romantic tones of Julio Iglesias? Well, that is a part of dancing, but keep a balance between attention to the music and attention to your partner and to the dance.

## Lead and Follow --

Ahh . . . Does it always have to come down to lead and follow? It seems that every dance issue or problem takes us here. Maybe not every one, but if we want to dance smoothly and *as one*, then we need to use this tool -- lead and follow. Here is our mantra: **"Good lead and follow yields smooth dancing."** Repeat it to yourself. Mull it over in your mind.

What is lead and follow, and how does it smooth out the jerks, tugs, and roughness in our dancing? Lead is simply maintaining a toned frame and dancing the figure properly and cleanly. Don't move an arm independently of your frame or without a specific reason. Don't look right when you should be looking left. Don't let your shoulders or torso collapse. Clean movements support your partner and convey information about what and when we are dancing. Messy or extraneous movements distract and confuse your partner.

Follow is just as simple. It, too, is maintaining a toned frame and feeling the movements of the leader, clearly and at the moment when those movements are made. It is responding to these unambiguous movements. In closed position, when he steps forward, she feels his left hand and right arm move. These are not independent movements. He is not pushing with his left hand. His frame is moving, and this happens well before he "takes a step." She feels his hips move forward, and she begins to step back. She feels his right hand release pressure on her back, and she moves to maintain or regain that pressure. In semi-closed position, when he steps forward, she feels the movement at all these points of contact and she begins to step forward too. Follow is dancing into the space that is opened by your partner as he dances and out of the space that he is closing off.

Round dancers especially ask, why use lead and follow? We both hear the cues. We both know what to do without any lead from our partner. Some might go further and say, I know the cues *better* than he does; I don't need a lead from him (said most affectionately, of course). But, again, ladies, you do need a lead. Lead and follow can fine-tune our timing and help us dance together. If you listen and respond to the cues on your own, you can dance the dance, but you can dance it smoothly, gracefully, and "as one" only if you sense and respond to your partner, and that means lead and follow.

A second aspect to lead and follow is that it indicates what you are going to do *before* you do it. You can think of these indications as "intention movements." Just as the cuer tells you what to do ahead of time, so should the leader indicate his intentions just a little ahead of time, with body rise, upper-body rotation, a small turn of the head, or other movement. For instance, the first action in dancing a foxtrot Three Step is not the forward step with the lead foot. You'll run her down, push her over. Or she will have to leap to get out of your way. This is not smooth. The first action in a Three Step is the lowering at the end of the previous figure, the forward movement of the dance frame, and the slight stretching up through the torso, all *before* beat 1 of the measure. These actions tell her that we are about to step, well before his left heel hits the ground. They allow your partner to gather herself and be entirely ready to step when you do. Then, simply "dance the figure properly and cleanly."

The first action in dancing a Forward Lock Forward is not the forward step either. It is the man's left-shoulder lead as he blends into a tight banjo position, and this right-face upper-body rotation occurs before the downbeat. It is the shoulder lead that tells the lady to step

back and then lock in front. Without the shoulder lead, she will dance back and then close left to right, or she will have to force the lock herself. It is your choice, men – you can lead her locking step with shoulder lead, or you can leave it for her to do by herself, but only with the lead will you dance it smoothly and together.

I'm sorry, I don't really mean to say that the use of lead and follow is a simple "yes or no" proposition. We all use lead and follow to some degree. What I'm really trying to suggest is that the more we can incorporate clear lead and follow into our dancing, the smoother our movements can be.

One more example: Let's suppose you are in closed position, facing wall, lead feet free, and dancing rumba. The cue is New Yorker. Men, your "early lead" is to release your right handhold on her back, begin to take your right shoulder back, and begin to take your gaze out of your window over her right shoulder and turn your head to your right. Head movements are powerful. She will feel it. She will feel all of this, and if you do these things a bit early, then you will be primed to open up and step through *together*.

There is a second mantra related to lead and follow: "**Lead what you want but dance what you get.**" Again, repeat this phrase to yourself (like any good mantra). Go to your partner, take a cuddle position, rock left and right, and chant it together. Repeat.

Actually, this principle is the more important of the two:

- Good lead and follow yields smooth dancing.
- Lead what you want but dance what you get.

If your focus is on the simple ideas of "lead and follow," it is easy to fall into the ideas of "boss and servant." The man is in control, has the authority, and makes the decisions -- and the lady obeys. There is even a little joke that you can hear now and then at clinics and festivals. The male dance leader will sheepishly admit that "here on the dance floor is the one place where I am the boss."

No, not even there – not a Boss. Good lead and follow is *two-way* communication. The man gives his signals. The lady is sensitive. She reads those signals and responds. But the man is sensitive, too. He is aware of where she is and what she is doing, and he adjusts his subsequent movements accordingly. In that moment, she is leading and he is following.

So, an important feature of good lead and follow is sensitivity to partner. The man needs to know what the lady's part is in any given figure. He needs to be aware of her progression through her part. If she is not where she "should" be or where he expects her to be, he must not muscle her over. That is rough. Instead, he must adjust and adapt. He must be willing to compromise. If the next step is back (lady forward) but she is not on balance, not moving forward, then be happy with a closing step or a side step. Our goal is smooth partner dancing, not rough. Gentlemen, do not force your partner to do what you intend. Instead, invite her to dance a particular figure. Provide guidance, provide the suggestion, even open the path so she *can* do it, but let her dance the figure. Remember, one of your responsibilities is to make your partner and your partnership look good. To have a woman jerked, hauled, pushed, and slung about the floor does not look good.

So, another feature of good lead and follow is a willingness to wait. Don't rush an action to get where you need to be. Instead, be patient until you arrive there and then adjust the next figure in order to catch up. This is simply the idea of borrowing time, which is a valuable idea in many contexts. Let's compare the Spin Turn and the Spin Overturn. The basic Spin Turn (phase III) usually begins in closed position, man facing reverse line of dance, with lead feet free. He begins right-face upper-body rotation (an early lead) and steps back L (W forward R) pivoting  $1/2$  RF to face LOD. On the second step, he steps forward R between the lady's feet and rises to the spin, continuing to turn RF but only  $1/8$  more. Finally, he steps back L to CP DLW for a total turn of  $5/8$ . This is not a big turn, and the three steps can easily be taken on the beat: 1, 2, 3.

The Spin Overturn is the same figure, but it turns  $7/8$  to end in CP DRW. The difference is entirely in the second step, where the man steps forward R between the lady's feet, rises, and this time spins  $3/8$  RF. This amount of turn might take a little longer, and you have a choice. You can force the spin. The man – or the lady – can jerk and rush so that the three steps fall exactly on beats 1, 2, 3; or the man can step forward on beat 2, rise to the spin, allow the turn to happen smoothly, and only when he is facing DRW will he then step back L. The lady waits, too. We are borrowing time from beat 3. We maybe don't take the step until the second half of beat 3, not on the beat but on the "&" of that beat. Then a little more quickly than in straight "waltz timing," we step back – maybe the next cue is Back Side Close to face wall. In cue-sheet notation, our steps would be: 1, 2, -/&; 1, 2, 3; There is a little pause at the first "2" as we rise and overturn the spin. It is graceful and luxurious, a kind of soaring. And then there is a bit of a rush at the "&," as we dance "&1" into the back step, "ba-bum," a kind of happy, skipping step as we lower from the rise of the spin. The contrast between the hold of the spin and the rush as we come out of the spin is delightful, and you absolutely cannot do that smoothly without lead and follow. With lead and follow, we communicate back and forth through the sense of touch in little twinklings of time. A waltz beat is only  $2/3$  of a second, and we are making little adjustments of maybe  $1/3$  of a second, maybe less, but she can feel the spin being drawn out that little bit. She can feel when to begin to move forward and when to take weight, even though it is not exactly on the beat. We are one combined mind controlling the partnership in a smooth flow. Without lead and follow, two separate minds are making the decisions, and it's just not going to be together in the same smooth way.

As we begin to learn a new figure, a new amalgamation, or a new dance, most of our attention has to be focused on steps, patterns, actions, facing directions . . . . But as we learn these basics, we can divert more and more attention to our posture, our position, our reaction time, and our relation to partner – and our dancing will become smooth.