

# THERE IS MORE THAN ONE WAY TO LEAD



BY HAROLD & MEREDITH SEARS

Whenever our round dance teachers bring up the subject of leading and following, we assume that the man will lead and the woman will follow. But you experienced dancers have discovered that other styles of leading work well, too. The traditional man's lead can yield wonderfully smooth dancing, but a more collaborative style, where both partners contribute to the lead can work well, and even a woman's "back" lead can give very good results. We would like to examine these three styles and perhaps bring the possibility of collaboration and woman's lead out of the shadows and into more serious consideration.

## MAN'S LEAD

The traditional, modern style of lead and follow expects the man to direct the movements of the couple, much as a conductor directs the playing of an orchestra. I like this metaphor, because the orchestra knows perfectly well what it will play, just as the woman round dancer knows what she will dance. The orchestral players have the scores right in front of them, and the woman dancer hears the cues just as the man does. But as an orchestra must not play until the baton rises, so must the woman not dance until the man leads.

Curt and Tammy Worlock's image is compelling: Curt says that the woman must assume her position, poised and responsive, and then she must simply "wait for something good to happen." Of course, that "something good" is the man's clear and unambiguous lead. (But as Tammy occasionally quips, "Sometimes it's a long wait.")

The man's lead comes from throughout both dancers' frames. In closed position, the arms are up, and both man and woman have their muscles well toned. When the man steps forward, he lowers a bit in anticipation of the move. She begins to respond. He doesn't push with his left hand, but his toned frame maintains its shape, so she feels pressure at her right hand and hip, and she feels a release of pressure at his right hand. She moves to

regain that pressure in his right arm and to maintain her position on his right hip. She feels the movement along her left arm. Especially in the smooth rhythms and in closed position, your frame is a single, integrated unit, and the lead is transmitted at many points of contact. Such a lead can be very clear.

Again, don't try to steer your partner by pushing and pulling with the left hand. Don't pull or shove with the right hand. Don't lift or drop a shoulder. These sorts of local or focused movements break the frame and move you out of position with respect to the other. They destroy the smooth lines of your dance position. They are often jerky movements and impediments to smooth flow. A strong lead comes from the legs, hips, torso, and both arms, all at the same time; it comes from the whole frame moving as one.

As the man takes his first step forward, the woman's step back should be long and from the hip. The man lowers and begins to step forward with his left foot. The woman follows by lowering and stepping back with her right. Reach back. Allow the tip of your toe to touch the floor, but don't transfer weight until you feel the man transfer his weight. You might think to yourself that you must not commit until he does. Otherwise, you may cut his step short with a bump, or you may get your toe stepped on. If he is taking a long, flowing stride, you can let your right toe slide along the floor. When he begins to shift weight, you do, too. If he shifts sooner, you will be in position to shift as well, and you will remain together, your movements smooth and not jerky.



"I'll start dancing like Fred Asraire, when you stop dancing like Nellie the Elephant!"

If the lead tends to be noisy, then a look to reverse could mean anything or nothing. The man may just be checking out the refreshment table. But if the lead is relatively noise-free, then a glance to reverse does mean something: it means, get ready to go that way. It might work something like this:

#### Avoid "Noise" --

It can be especially difficult to avoid extraneous movements as you dance. An extraneous movement is any movement, from head to toe, that might be a lead, but it is not. Extraneous movements are "noise" in your lead/follow communication system. Men, I know you are groovin' to that music, and it is telling you to shake your bootie. It is saying, "get down!" But don't do it. Don't shake. Don't bounce. Don't look around the room. Your partner will assume you are communicating with her, but she won't understand, and in truth you're not talking to her; you're just talking to yourself. You must stay toned and quiet. Each movement must be smooth, conscious, a clear signal, a clear lead.

You are in butterfly, and you are doing a side, close, side, touch; cucaracha; (notice that I am using punctuation to describe timing: a comma marks the end of a beat and a semi-colon marks the end of a measure). These step cues can come fast. Tone in the man's left arm leads the side step, and continued tone there helps insure that we both close and step side again. As you begin your "touch," relax that tone, turn your head slightly to reverse, and strengthen the tone in your right arm. All this primes the woman for the change in direction. Then your cucaracha to reverse comes as no surprise, and she is smoothly with you. These little movements and glances work only if your lead is noise-free.

### Ladies, Ignore the Cues --

Perhaps you can tell that the cues we so enjoy in round dancing can really interfere with good leading and following and therefore with smooth dancing. If the woman hears the cues, if she knows the figures perfectly well, and if she steps off into what she knows she is supposed to do before the man leads her to do so, then they will go bump, bump, bump, down the ballroom floor. She steps producing a little separation, he steps to catch up, and they bump. The next cue comes, and they do it again.

Women, you must learn to wait. Confidentially, you may know that you are the smarter one with the better sense of rhythm. You hear a cue, and you know that you must step back, but don't do it. Wait for your man. Wait for him to step forward. Wait until you feel his lead through your frame, and only then take your step. In this way you will be dancing as a couple, rather than as two dancers, each responding to the cuer. Yes, you do hear the cues, so you are forewarned. You know ahead of time what you will do. But let your man tell you when to do it.

Finally, if you are really good, you will even let the man tell you what to dance, as well as when to dance it. Imagine a dance in which the cuer cues a Reverse Fallaway, and somehow your man hears "Reverse Turn," and he dances and leads a Reverse Turn. What will you do? Will you jerk him into that fallaway position, where you know you're supposed to be? If you do that, it won't look pretty. Instead, dance the Reverse Turn with him, and do it with a smile on your face. He will know something is wrong by now. You don't have to tell him. The Reverse Fallaway is a one measure figure and the Reverse Turn is two, and the cuer is telling him to do something he can't do from there, and he is dancing and trying to hold this partnership together. The woman's job is to follow. Eventually, a cue will come along that you can do from where you are, and you will be back on track. Those on the sidelines might not quite recognize what you are up to, considering what is being cued, but mostly they will see how smoothly and pleasantly you are dancing together. Once, years ago, Mickey Moore confided that Brent, "liked her to dance a little fuzzy," a little compliant: You want to turn left, hon? Sure, I'm with you.

## COLLABORATIVE LEAD

There are several, separate steps or skills that a dancer must use in responding to round dance cues:

- he must hear the cue

- process that cue and get a mental image of what is to be done
- actually execute the move, with appropriate movements in the right direction
- lead your partner through that same figure
- hear the beat of the music; count the time, either consciously or subconsciously
- of course, move to that beat

In an ideal world (see "Man's Lead" above), the man is supposed to do all this, and the woman is supposed to follow. In the real world, the man and woman are not so one-sided, not so specialized, and not so focused at every moment during the dance. Sometimes he misses the cue, but she hears it. Sometimes he is momentarily bewildered, but she understands. Sometimes he does not have as good a sense of rhythm as she has, and all this can create a more collaborative style of leading.

In the collaborative style of leading, he leads when he can, and she leads when she can. Both are sensitive to each other and are prepared to follow, and the dance becomes more of a balanced conversation, back and forth, a give and take, a discussion, maybe even a civilized debate between colleagues; rather than the more one-sided or even autocratic relationship in traditional lead and follow. When he is sure of himself, he strengthens his lead, and off you go. When he is not so sure, he softens, and perhaps she is able to step into the breach and carry on.

But if the woman is to lead, then the man has to learn to follow. Following is a discreet activity, a unique skill, just as leading is. While the leader has to visualize the figure and communicate clearly what he wants his partner to do, the follower has to interpret that communication and then execute the request. It's like speaking and listening. Being a good listener is a rare skill. If you both want to lead and follow, then you both will have to work on both skills. Neither comes automatically.

## **LADY'S BACK LEAD**

And finally, carrying the suppositions in collaborative leading a good bit further, the man may be tone deaf and the woman sharp as a tack. This doesn't mean that he doesn't have many, many fine qualities, but on the round dance floor, it is she who has the skills listed above. She may routinely hear, process, and remember better than her man. She may be more attentive, more interested in the whole activity. It may be her "thing" and not so much his. Perhaps he is indulging her passion, and it is good of him to do so. In these circumstances, certainly let her be more assertive. Let her step out firmly and guide the figure.

Sometimes, male dance teachers will joke that on the dance floor is the one place where he is the boss, where he has the final say. I'm sure that such a comment is just a humorous exaggeration, but even so, the man's lead is only one style of leading. Other styles, other relationships between partners work well and yield smooth and graceful movements. Each couple should work out what works best for them.

# PITFALLS IN LEAD & FOLLOW

In the smooth rhythms, such as foxtrot, waltz, and tango, a good lead comes through a well-toned and stable frame, such that the intentions of one partner are communicated through many points of contact along the hands, arms, shoulders, and hips.



If the leader can control all of the parts of his body so that his frame moves as one unit, controlling every individual part and changing only those parts pertaining to the necessary movements of the figure while avoiding conveying false leads with any other part of the body (wow! 😊), and if the follower can skillfully interpret that signal, then the couple will move as one.

Traditionally, the man leads and the woman follows, but in that previous essay, we recognized that a woman's "back" lead can work well. Some couples are even able to shift the lead from the man to the woman, in a collaborative way, depending on who knows what's going on at any given moment.

So, in the first essay, we talked about some of the things we **should** do in our leading and following. This month, we would like to think about some of the things we should be careful **not** to do in leading and following. If we can become aware of potential threats to smooth dancing, then we can be alert to avoid them.

## CAVEMAN—

If the man is trying to lead, one risk is that he will try too hard—he will lead too forcefully. He might pick her up and put her bodily wherever he wants her to be. He might twirl her through an Alemana Turn or Ropespin with great sweeping swings of the arm. Her experience is breathtaking, but not really in a good way.

Gentlemen, do not force your partner to do what you intend. Instead, invite her to dance a particular figure. Provide guidance, provide the suggestion, 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.

If you are using a woman's back lead, then she could be overly forceful, too. A caveman or a cavewoman can become rough or impatient. You might ask, "but what if she (he) doesn't do what she is supposed to do?" Then you should try to adjust and dance through the error, the misunderstanding, or the miscommunication as smoothly as you can. As we have probably quoted before, "Lead what you want, but dance what you get." (Brent Moore) As we also hear so often, this is our recreation—smile—have fun.

### LOOSE CANNON—

If the woman is trying to follow, to respond to every lead, another risk is that she will respond too energetically. Responsiveness to the lead is good, but don't overdo. Yes, you have to get yourself over to the other side of the man (for instance), but don't do it in a rush and then have to strain to put on the brakes when you get there. Keep your movements as small and as light as you can, and still get the job done—get the figure executed. Stretch your body up; rise a bit onto your toes. Make your arm and body movements slow, smooth, and graceful. Maintain your own balance and support your own weight. If the man steps away, the woman should be able to remain standing.

(Please excuse a little biology here—) Smooth and fluid dancing results from a balanced combination of both isotonic and isometric muscle activity. *Isotonic* is "equal tension," and these contractions give you your movements—the reaching steps, the turns, the stretching upward. *Isometric* is "equal length." Here, two muscles pull against each other so that neither changes in length and there is no movement. These contractions give you tone, frame, line, and control. Smooth dancing very much requires both, and Meredith and I are coming to believe that the isometric control is actually more work than the isotonic movement. Often, we seem to expend greater effort during a slow controlled waltz or foxtrot than during a faster but looser cha or jive.

So, if you are following and you feel that you might be a bit of a "loose cannon," work on the isometric side of your dancing.

### WALKING—

A pitfall associated with a more collaborative lead could consist of just plain walking. The body is straight up and down, with no sway, no stretch, no softening of the knees, no rise and fall at all. The dancer might put his or her feet exactly where they should go and execute each figure with precision, but there is no feeling or emotion in the actions. There is no music. A walking dance could as well be done to a simple drumbeat, on a rough concrete floor, and in sneakers.

The walking style of dance reminds us a little of square dancing. We haven't square-danced for several years, but isn't it true that good square dancers simply walk deliberately and flatly through the patterns? We did begin as square dancers, back in '88, and Harold enjoyed the music, "got into" that music, and tried to dance with "feeling." Actually, he mostly came up with a sort of unsophisticated bouncing, but he was kindly told to settle down: "This is squares, not ballroom."

Well, round dancing is cued ballroom. Let's not just walk—let's dance.

### NO LEAD—

In Round Dancing, we do have the option to dance with no lead at all. Singles certainly do it. Usually a woman, but occasionally a man will not have a partner but will enjoy a beautiful dance to beautiful music, dancing by him- or her-self. On returning to his seat, he might be congratulated "on not stepping on anyone's toes during the whole dance," or she might be complimented on how smoothly she followed — the cues, that is. For the cues can do all the leading that is necessary, even for a dancing couple. He can master his movements, and she can master hers. In dancing the figure, he could do his part, and she could do hers, each simply responding to the cue. It won't be as smooth. You won't be dancing as a couple, as a coordinated unit.

This is probably just a theoretical category, in that no matter how loose the frame or how little the contact, information would still be communicated between partners, and so some degree of leading would occur. Even with no body contact, there would be the visual lead. I suppose a couple could dance with no body contact and with their eyes closed. As I perform that little "thought experiment" here at my desk, I see clearly just how rarely it is that "no leading" occurs on the round-dance floor.

### CLUELESS—

But there is a dark side even to no lead at all, and that is the clueless style of dance. You don't hear the cues, or you hear but don't understand. You don't have much of a lead. So your dancing completely falls apart. Is there any of us who has escaped this particular state? Meredith tells me that she certainly knows when I am clueless. I lose my frame. There is no lead. My arms lose all tone and might even fall to my sides. She has been washed up onto the beach, and the wave has receded, leaving her high and dry. The cues just don't mean anything, or they are coming too fast. I can't process the information and get it to my feet. I don't know where I am or where I'm going. An unfamiliar sequence of step cues is the worst. Give me a cue every four measures, or every two, or even every measure, and I might have the time to figure out what to do, but a cue every beat is just too fast.



"Diamond Turn." Ah, I can dance that. Stretch the left side; now the right. I'm ready for the next cue. "Two left turns." I've got that too. Rise and fall. "Open Telemark." I understand it. And then he cues, "thru, hover transition to shadow, fence, recover, touch, fence, recover, point. . ." Wait a minute! Who transitioned? Which way am I facing? What did you say? And there I stand, and the wave recedes from the beach.

The very best dancers are clueless at times. It's okay. One good way to deal with an attack of cluelessness is to develop three skills:

- a simple freestyle sequence
- a quick "change/point" adjustment
- some sort of anti-panic response

So when you lose it, instead of stopping in confusion and allowing traffic to pile up behind you, simply continue with some simple forward waltzes or left turns, until a recognizable cue appears. If the proper foot is not free, do your adjustment, and you're back with the choreography.

No, it is not easy. The panicky confusion of cluelessness does not lend itself easily to the cool decision-making necessary to move you out of the cued choreography, through a few measures of freestyle, and then back into the cues again. Meanwhile, your partner is wondering what is going on (hopefully with a smile on her face). "Just bear with me, Hon. I'm doing the best I can." All we can say is that most of us will have plenty of opportunities to practice and to get used to this strategy. If you can do it, onlookers will never even notice that you have been clueless.

So, what pitfalls should we try to avoid in our leading and following?

- Rough, overly enthusiastic, or overly authoritative leading,
- Overly responsive or uncontrolled following,
- Inexpressive walking through the routines,
- Little communication between partners—no lead, and
- A loss of understanding of the cues, or if that happens, a calm strategy to carry on until the cues once more connect.

Good luck!

