

## **ON LEADING AND FOLLOWING:**

"If you don't lead me ", my sister announced, "I'm not going to move." Fifty years later I still remember her words. Since that time I have considerably enhanced most of the social Country Western dancing that I first learned from her, however two things that she emphasized have held up throughout the years... "IF YOU DON'T LEAD ME, I'M NOT GOING TO MOVE!" and "DON'T DANCE ME INTO THE FURNITURE!" Leading and following that takes place between two people out on the dance floor can be analyzed down to the tiniest detail and is probably the most complex form of communication that takes place between two human beings..... at its best and most highly developed level, it is exhilarating and immensely gratifying to the couple that achieves it, especially in improvisational/spontaneous dancing when you meet a partner who can lead (or follow). Leading and following are skills that require true intelligence and cognitive abilities such as learning, pattern recognition, and non-verbal communication. Watching a champion Jack & Jill couple is like watching an improvised composition of a piece of art.

There are many misconceptions about lead and follow, expounded by both men and women. Untrained dancers sometimes seem to think that the lady is just supposed to go limp and the man bends her to his will. This is grossly mistaken. While some people may be willing at a beginning social level to tolerate this, it cannot last long - it is too exhausting for the man and too painful for the woman. A woman without good posture, correct body/foot positions and body tone is simply not leadable. The man cannot be expected to position every part of the woman's body. A man without these qualities is not followable because the woman cannot distinguish the signal from the noise (and may be physically prevented from doing the intended figure). Leading should not be tiring - it is only tiring when the follower isn't following. Leading is not pushing or pulling. It is communicating an intention. Dancing is an art form, despite the fact that it requires the prowess of an athlete. A good lead/follow is like a good conversation - you don't have to yell, you only need to talk. As you get better, all you really need to do is whisper. Leading is not to be misinterpreted as "pushing or pulling". Though poor followers often say, "If I have a strong leader I can follow", they would need the force of an "Arnold Schwarzenegger" (after he's properly warmed up) to move them across the floor. Equal sympathy goes to followers who encounter a leader who hasn't the foggiest of what he's trying to lead and can't move rhythmically to any music, doesn't know a slow from a quick and has no conception of what misery he is inflicting on his partner. It's not a leader's job to "haul" the follower around the floor every second, nor is it the follower's job to just hang there like a sack of potatoes and be dragged.

Leading and following is a dynamic process that requires a great deal of effort on the part of both members of a partnership. It is readily possible to lead a woman through a fairly intricate step that she doesn't know without apparent force. Possible, though it is not within the powers of most men. If you want women to vie with each other for the opportunity of dancing with you, this is what you must learn to do. It is skill, not force, you are seeking, (Grasshopper)! Men who claim they can lead anyone to dance well are not giving their partners enough credit. Women who say they can follow anything are not giving truly good followers enough credit. Experienced dancers never say such things, because it is simply not true. John Wood would not be world champion with just any woman - Anne Lewis contributes every bit as much to their success. To say that all any woman needs is a good leader unfairly detracts from the many very talented female dancers. It also places too great a responsibility on the man - it implies that all errors are his fault. Sometimes women say, "I just follow." This demeans following as a trivial thing, which it most certainly is not. Partnering skills are vital to good Country Western dancing. It is very difficult to cover the technique in classes since this is probably the most complex element to couple dancing and takes many years of coaching to perfect. It is not a matter of simple 'cueing', but an understanding of the entire body and how to make 2 people move as one around a common center.

Competitive dancers must work extremely hard with this and it is actually tougher with couples who are 'used to each other' than with perfect strangers. For example, when I have just had a coaching session working on my technique, the slightest change (such as a minute timing delay in a weight change) will totally throw my partner. She starts fussing that I don't feel right anymore, or she will interpret the change as a lead to some other move that I used to do with her. However, I apply the same new technique to other competent dancers whom I rarely dance with and, voila!, it works beautifully! Apparently, a longtime partner can get very used to the feel of their partner, and it is tougher to practice any improvement or change. Even competitive routines are led/followed. Any competitor taught "dance your own part and let your partner dance theirs, you don't have to lead/follow" has been taught wrong! The judges can tell the difference between a couple with a real lead/follow "connection" and a couple that is just going through their routine. One competitor writes "Country Western is social dancing - it is dependent on lead and follow, even in competition. My competition partner and I have a few pre-choreographed "amalgamations" we use in competition, but I still always have to rely on his lead to know what we're doing, where we're going, what timing he's going to use this time, how he feels like expressing it this time... Without even dancing with them you can tell the competitive dancers who can't lead and follow; just look for the couples who keep running into others on the floor. Because they dance their own parts, they have not developed and practiced the dynamic process of leading and following (floorcraft) required to negotiate around obstacles and unexpected incursions into their line of dance. Even with a routine, there is still a need to change directions unexpectedly, or

completely alter a routine to deal with the fact that other couples are also dancing. In competition, there is *\*never\** a place in the routine where lead-and-follow are not taking place. Most of the steps you perform in competition dancing require a special attention to lead and follow; you see this aspect where good competitive couples can make the dancing appear to take no effort, and therefore appears that no lead-and-follow is happening. That is an instance of good dancing, not no lead and follow. There is lead and follow happening, even when the couples are dancing side-by-side and not touching. It is just not typical; it's often done with body placement and eyes. During side-by-side "solo" dancing the man has to watch for on coming couples and possible collisions so that he can adjust them or readily change the routine. In Jack and Jill Competitions, when you draw your regular partner you may not do very well since the judging is very highly directed toward lead and follow. It's pretty obvious when regular partners are doing a routine w/o lead/follow. You can tell that a couple try to do a routine: they do the same steps but since no lead/follow takes place they will look like two individuals rather than a couple!

I often test my regular partner by altering our routine on the fly. If other couples are on the floor you can never be sure what will happen. You may have to avoid a collision or simply forget what comes next! Men, to truly lead well you must know the lady's part to every figure you do. Leading and following are very different skills, and following well is every bit as difficult as leading well. Recognizing figures in a noisy, moving environment is a complicated task that is certainly equal to figure transmission. Of course there is one thing the leader does that the follower has no analog for - floor craft. The leader has primary responsibility for obstacle avoidance, and this can be a difficult task, especially on a crowded floor with couples moving at widely differing speeds. The leader truly has to do everything at once; he's got to listen to the music, decide what to do and how to do it, think not only about his own movements but about his partner's and those of all the other couples, etc., etc. And to make matters worse, when beginning his dancing career the man has to learn how to do everything at once, at once. Yes, the follower has to be able to perform a lot of actions, but the leader has to be able to perform and initiate them. In addition, there are many variations that differ only in detail matters of raising an arm or not, or something subtle like that, and the leader has to be aware of the differences, and has to indicate clearly where the movement is going. Of course as a pro, he'll manage to hold a conversation in a foreign language while leading a gold level sequence! Following skills are as equally important as leading skills.

A dance is much more enjoyable when the leader need only give firm, not forceful, leads to his partner to indicate what is wanted, and when a partner senses body movements that serve as leads. For this to work, the lady must become sensitive and responsive to the feel (and sometimes sight) of leads, and not expect that her partner will (literally) carry her through the dance. The skill of following is greatly underestimated. Whenever I am trying to teach beginners about leading and following, I always have a hard time conveying the idea that dancing is a PARTNER sport--each person has to carry his/her load, or the whole thing fails. Leading/following implies a one way connection (man to lady) but in really good dancing both partners are putting various different energies into the dancing at different times, and even though the leader is (usually) in control of things like floor direction, timing, and choreography, his awareness of the actions of his partner (how far did she go...is she finished with her line yet...is her weight over the foot I'm about to turn her on, etc.) are vital. Women follow, but men must lead and follow; i.e., men must watch to see what the women are doing and compensate. The leader, who is in creative control, needs pattern-based thinking, with frames of reference that can include the whole dance floor, the space occupied by the couple, the spatial relationships between the two dancers, and the patterns of connection between the two. It seems that followers are mainly concerned with the last frame of reference, i.e., they react to the patterns of connection. Following is more fun than leading, because you (a) have much less responsibility for navigating and (b) don't know what's going to be lead next, so each dance is something of a "magical mystery tour". I think the best part about being a follower is being led in patterns or syncopations that I don't know! When led well, good followers execute moves that are totally unexpected or unpredictable but incredibly fun. Some leaders complain about how boring it gets to only do the same repertoire over and over all night long.

They say followers have more fun because they're doing different dances all night. But another leader writes: "A good leader never dances the same way with every person. The way you do the same dance changes from one partner to the next. Were you to see me dancing with a beginner, it would be difficult for you to tell that I'm other than a good beginner. Also, there is an added dimension for the follower, which is that you must have in your head the *\*entire\** menu of movement possibilities at every point, not just the one you're going to use. Since you don't know what the guy is going to lead, you have to be ready to do *\*everything\** and very rapidly react to the situations and signals you get to eliminate the things you're not being asked to do. This is a skill that relies as much on spatial or "pattern-based" thinking as floorcraft, albeit in a less linear way. Note that the lady does not "lead" when she is stepping forward. The lady does not change the direction of a step unless a collision is imminent (and not always then), and the gentleman is then responsible for getting out of whatever position she got them in to if she does take control for a moment. Rather than saying that the lady 'leads' when going forward, it might be better to say the gentleman 'follows' when going back. The man always initiates direction of movement, but the person moving forward dictates the size of the step. They always step on the floor before the person going backward, therefore leading the way. And, while the 'lead' that determines the length of the stride is different from the 'lead' that determines what figure to do, the 'follow' associated with each of these is the same.

The Country Pride Dance Club is a non-profit society whose objectives are to Promote C/W dancing through teaching, demonstrations, competitions and workshops and to support a dance team. The country pride dance team would be pleased to perform and/or teach at your next event. For more info call 342-5111.