

Dance Etiquette – Part 3

SPECIAL ADVICE FOR LEADS

- When starting a dance, especially with someone you don't know, take it slow. Everyone dances differently, so take your time and get to know the other person by starting off with less complex moves.
- Do your best to avoid leading moves that might hurt your partner. Do not push or pull your partner too hard. If she is not following something, try leading other moves. Make sure you pay attention to where your partner is and where she is going. The social dance floor is like the ocean and can be choppy and rough by no fault of your own - make sure she is safe on the sea.
- Blues dancing and other close dances have recently become popular. The Syndicate does not wish to discourage close dancing, however, as a lead, be aware of whether or not your partner wants to dance close. If she pulls away or appears uncomfortable, give her more space. Just because the blues dancing workshops teach a snug closed dance position does not mean that every follow wants to dance that way. Additionally, not every lady has taken a blues workshop. As a rule of thumb, when dancing blues style with a new partner, ask her she minds dancing close.
- Dips are acceptable, but only when you are confident that you can execute them without causing your partner discomfort, fear, or pain. Contrary to what you see on the dance floor, it is not a requirement that you close out every song with a dip. Only lead a dip if you feel that you can execute it successfully. This is true for even the most basic dips. If you are going to lead more complex dips, please ask her first. This is especially true if is somebody that you do not dance with regularly. Some follows do not like dips of any sort, either for personal preference reasons or for health reasons (back issues, etc...). If a follow resists at the start of a dip, take that as a sign that she does not like to be dipped.
- Aerials and drops (Trick Moves) are generally not acceptable on the social dance floor. In fact, many venues ban them outright. They are rarely done at Austin Swing Syndicate dances, with the only exceptions being controlled circumstances such as a jam circles or performances or among partners who have worked on aerials or drops prior. Remember that injuries can happen with even the most basic aerial/drop moves. For those who may unfamiliar with the terms, aerials are moves where the partner's feet leave the floor; drops are moves that cause your partner's head to be below your waist. If you are in the position to lead an aerial or drop, we strongly encourage you to ask for your partner's permission first.
- If you bump another couple, try to immediately look back and apologize. If another couple bumps you, apologize even if it is their fault. The experienced dancer knows that toes will be stepped on and people will bump into one another. Don't let the occasional accident get you down. If you happen to be dancing near an erratic lead, relocate to another part of the floor.
- There is a split opinion regarding the practice of walking your partner off the floor. Some people believe that it is a very respectful thing to do. Others feel that is unnecessary and too formal. A good compromise is to understand that the best course of action will vary from situation to situation.

Teaching On The Dance Floor

The following section is the most controversial portion of this document. Some people avoid the practice of "teaching on the dance floor" at all costs; others religiously seek out the chance to share their knowledge with new dancers. We would like to present a balanced view on the subject.

Asking for Instruction

Be careful about asking others for quick lessons on the dance floor. Many people are reluctant to criticize people that they are dancing with, since it could be taken negatively. Additionally, there are teachers who do not like to be asked to teach while they are social dancing. This is not true for all teachers, but it is true for a certain percentage of them.

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Volunteering Instruction

An often followed rule is to only give advice if the other person explicitly asks for it. Sometimes unsolicited advice puts your partner on the defensive. However, if a lead is hurting you, please speak up. In contrast, if the lead is only leading steps ineffectively, without any real harm to you, be more cautious with your commentary. Remember, that leads have a lot to concentrate on when dancing.

Giving Feedback and Constructive Advice

Before commenting on your partner's dancing; it is a good idea to think about what you can do to improve your dancing. Obviously if someone is doing something dangerous to themselves or to others you should say something, but otherwise it may be more harmonious to withhold comment. Just because you can criticize, does not mean that you should. If you feel compelled to say something, attempt to phrase your comments politely so as not to make the other person uncomfortable. It is nice to offer a compliment prior to offering constructive criticism. It is usually a good idea to assume that half the problem is on your end (your lead skills/your follow skills) and remember that if you are offering advice, be prepared to receive it. One effective phrase used by dancers is, "I don't think the move worked out right, what do you think we can do to make it work better." Use statements that allow for honest feedback on both sides. Don't let the other person think it is entirely their fault.

Handling Unsolicited Advice on the Social Dance Floor

If your partner offers you advice, you can handle the situation in a variety of ways depending on the situation. First, you can accept the feedback and be open to instruction. By doing so you express that you want to hear their advice and wish to have a dialogue about what is and is not working in regard to the dance. If you do not desire advice or feedback at the time, you can politely say "thanks, but I don't feel like discussing technique right now, I just want to dance." If you don't want the advice, you can say very little and let it go. Whatever you do, avoid blaming each other, which may lead to an uncomfortable and antagonistic situation. Remember, in the social dance world, having fun is more important than being right.

Dealing With Difficult People

If somebody at a Syndicate event makes you feel uncomfortable, please speak with a Board member. If you don't know a Board member, tell the DJ and he or she will get you in touch with a Board member. We will be glad to deal with them in a respectful, non-confrontational manner.

Make Your Partner Happy

The single biggest secret of success in social dancing is to make your partners happy. Once you succeed at this task, your popularity will soar and you will never have a shortage of willing and enthusiastic partners to dance with. Realization of this fact is an important first step. Then, one needs to master the skills needed to actually implement this policy. There are many ways you can make your partner happy, among them:

No uncomfortable leads: Cranking your follower's arm to make her turn, pushing and pulling to bring her into position, and other forceful leads will not be appreciated. If she is not doing what you want, then probably your lead was not skillful enough. Unless you know a pattern well, do not execute it on the social dance floor. Keep it for classes and practice time, until you have mastered the pattern, and then bring it on the social dance floor. If the lead is good and the follower is still not following, again the leader is at fault, because he is leading a pattern too difficult for his follower.

No back-leading: When you ask or accept to follow someone in a dance, you implicitly agree to let them lead. While this doesn't mean you have to be a perfect follower, or even a particularly good one, it does mean that you should not try to lead *them*. It is disrespectful and disturbing to your partner when you steal the lead; you are rejecting their contribution to the partnership.

Protect your partner: For the leader this has two aspects. The first is floor craft. Anticipate the movement of other dancers, and match your figures to empty spaces on the floor, so that you do not run your partner into other couples. Secondly, if there is imminent danger of collision, pull your partner close and turn, so that you absorb the

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blow. The follower can also protect her partner by keeping an eye out behind his back. If a couple is approaching from his blind spot, a small pressure on his shoulder or hand can warn him of possible collision.

Entertain your partner: You are there not only to have a good time yourself, but also to entertain your partner. This means, among other things, making him/her comfortable, dancing at a level that is enjoyable for both, and maintaining a good sense of humor if something goes wrong. If you are a perfectionist in your dance studies, leave it behind in social dancing. Own up to mistakes if yours, but do not dwell on them either way. Playfulness and lightheartedness in dancing also goes a long way. Look at your partner and smile (except in dances one is not supposed to). Focus not on yourself, but on your partner.

Make your partner feel appreciated: The most popular dancers are not necessarily the most skillful, but rather the ones who make clear to each partner how much that person's company is appreciated and enjoyed. Most people would rather not dance with someone who acts bored or put upon, no matter how amazing their dancing is.

The annoyance factor: There are many things that may be acceptable in everyday situations, and yet can be very annoying when done at very close proximity, as one has to be while dancing. In particular, avoid humming to the music, counting the steps, or chewing gum while dancing.

It is worthwhile to repeat once more the cardinal rule of social dancing: *You are happy when your partner is happy.*

Who is Popular?

At this point you are a considerate social dancer who always puts his/her partner first. But building a reputation takes time. What makes someone popular at first sight? If you look around a dance hall at the start of a song, you will see dancers going around, scanning the crowd, looking for their next partner. Surely, you think to yourself, they don't all know their potential partners. Then what are they looking for? Here are some answers:

Good dancers are in demand: This is by far the most effective way of becoming popular in the dancing circles. Regardless of everything else, good dancers are always in demand. This should serve as a powerful incentive to try and improve your dancing. There is no need to know a million patterns; but one needs to have good technique and lead/follow. Practice, practice, practice! Then practice some more.

Dancers seek dancers: Dancers are more likely to seek those they see dancing on the floor. Only as a second choice do they turn to those sitting on the sidelines. Maybe this is due to a feeling of confidence that someone seen on the floor is actually a dancer, or a pleasant dancer, or is less likely to decline a dance. Whatever the reason, if you are seen dancing on the floor, you have a better chance of getting the next dance. Think of it as a form of dancers' inertia. Getting over this inertia will help you have a pleasant night of dancing. Do your best to get the first few dances once you arrive at a dance event; it gets easier afterwards.

Dance shoes: Dancers look for dancers, but how does one spot a dancer (unless you see one dancing)? The answer is: dance shoes! At a dance event where people don't know each other, you will see experienced dancers scan the crowd, not looking at faces, but rather looking at the feet! Making an investment in a pair of dance shoes is a sign of enthusiasm for dancing. Dancers know that, so wearing dance shoes will increase your chances of getting asked to dance.

Dancers seek those who say ``yes'': Being turned down for a dance is never fun. Besides, it is a waste of time: with only a few seconds between songs, if one gets turned down once or twice, the next song is a loss. If you decline dances, or if you look stern, or hard to please, your chances of being asked to dance will be reduced, which brings us to the next point.

Eagerness, willingness to dance: Stand close to the edge of the dance floor. Watch the dancers on the floor; tap your foot to the music. Smile. Dancers will be attracted to you if they feel you want to dance. Better yet, don't wait

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to be asked. Go ask someone to dance! What is the worst that can happen? Even if you are turned down, you have demonstrated your willingness to dance.

Sense of humor, pleasantness: Be nice to your partner. He/She was certainly nice enough to ask you to dance, or agree to dance with you, so return the favor. Remember, you are there to have fun, so have fun! Have, or at least emulate, a pleasant demeanor. Most importantly, smile!

Physical attraction: This is the one factor that is somewhat out of our control, but it is undeniable that in dancing, as everywhere else, good-looking people have an advantage. Men, especially, will gravitate to pretty women. Women, while lamenting the shallowness of men, generally behave no better. That said, for the most of us who are not endowed with movie-star looks, there is good news. Good looks might help in getting the first dance, but in the long run, personality, sense of humor, and most importantly good dancing skills, trumps good looks (at least on the dance floor).