

TIPS FOR NEW DANCERS

by Ed Foote

The information given here, while sometimes mentioned in beginners class, is often forgotten by new dancers. Yet this information can be the difference between succeeding or breaking down on a call.

1. Allemande Thar: The center four dancers should hold the wrists of the person ahead – this will keep the set together. Do not just put your hand into the center of the set and hold it upright – new dancers sometimes do this. Also, the dancers on the inside should move very slowly so the outsides don't have to run to keep up.

2. Extend (from 1/4 tag): The handedness of the center wave determines the handedness of the resulting parallel waves. For example, if the starting center wave is right-handed, after the call Extend the ending position will be parallel right-hand waves; if the starting center wave is left-handed, the ending position will be parallel left-hand waves.

3. Grand Square: Use four counts for each four steps of the Grand Square. Don't rush the call. If you see dancers swinging their partner halfway through or at the end of the call, this means they have not danced the call correctly – they have rushed through with no thought for timing. Then they have to make up the lost timing by doing a Swing. If Grand Square is done correctly, there is no time to Swing in the middle or at the end.

4. Right and Left Grand: New dancers tend to hold on too long to each person when pulling by. This is annoying to other dancers and makes for jerky execution of the call. A quick snappy pull by is the correct method.

5. Square Thru: New dancers sometimes turn away from their group of four while doing a Square Thru, which causes an instant breakdown of the set. Solution: Tilt your head slightly toward the center of your group of four while doing the call. This will keep you moving in the correct direction.

6. Star Thru: Girls, do not raise your left hand up too high; bring it straight out from the side of your head. Also, offer some resistance with your arm – stiffen it a little. These things will enable you to do a much smoother and more precise Star Thru.

7. Swing Your Partner: There are two keys to doing this call smoothly. (1) Both dancers should lean back from the waist. This makes the pair a stable unit and keeps them in balance. (2) Look at your partner's eyes or forehead. This will prevent you from getting dizzy and will also aid in maintaining balance.

8. Turn Thru: After the turn half, make a good distinct pull by using a full step. There is a tendency to want to retain your hold with the person you have turned, as though this person were a security blanket; without a good firm pull by there is a good chance to square will break down on the next call, because it will be difficult for dancers to see their position.

9. Wheel Around: This will almost always be called during a Promenade, where the caller will say "heads (or sides) Wheel Around." New dancers often break down here, because they forget whether they are heads or sides, and by the time they remember, it is too late. Solution: Any time the caller says "Promenade, don't slow down," it is almost guaranteed that his next command will be for someone to Wheel Around. Therefore, when you hear "Promenade, don't slow down," start saying to yourself what you are ("I am a head" or "I am a side"). Now you will be able to react quickly if you are the couple told to Wheel Around.

Remember: Wheel Around involves a couple, working as a unit, turning around 180° to the left to face the opposite direction. It is important to remember this, because Wheel Around can be called from positions other than a promenade.

STYLING

1. Take hands immediately after every call: This enables you to see the formation you are in (line, wave, etc.) to do the next call.

Taking hands immediately is more important to your success and the success of the square than knowing the definition of any specific call. This can not be emphasized too much.

When hands are joined, elbows must also be bent. Otherwise the square will be too large.

2. Keep your set small: New dancers tend to form large sets, and then they cannot understand why they always seem to be slow in executing calls. The reason is they are forcing themselves to cover much more ground in doing the calls by having a large set, and this takes more time. Experienced dancers keep their sets small and have ample time to do the calls.

Even if you start out with a small set, it can expand as you do a variety of calls. Be aware that this will happen and always work to close in the set. The best way to keep a set small is to take hands with all adjacent dancers immediately after every call.

3. Be a dancer not a walker: Some people walk all the calls rather than dance them. This looks bad, throws a person's timing off and also throws off the timing of the entire set. The result is an uncomfortable dance feeling, and the square is more likely to break down.

4. Shuffle your feet: Lifting your feet will tire you much more rapidly and will break up the dance rhythm. Remember that you are DANCING and not merely moving mechanically through various figures. Keep the rhythmic beat of the music with your feet while you glide along the floor.

5. Stand erect: There is a tendency for new dancers, especially the men, to lean forward excessively when doing calls. This looks bad and it will also tire a person out quickly. Try to stand erect or even lean back a little while dancing – it makes you look so much better.

6. Offer resistance with your turning arm in doing arm turn calls. This smoothes out the move and also enables one person to exercise control if the other person is unsure how to do the call. Many squares break down without anyone knowing why merely because dancers have used limp arms and have therefore lost their positioning.

On the other hand, new men dancers are sometimes too rough in using arm turns with the ladies, but they never seem to be aware of this. Men: make an effort to analyze whether you are being too strong in arm turns or hand holds with the ladies.

7. Be bold in executing calls: Many new dancers hold back on all calls, even ones they know, for fear of making a mistake. But this results in the square being slow in getting through the calls which can cause a breakdown. In addition, timid dancing hides mistakes dancers are making, and these mistakes could go on for months or years before being detected; then they have become a habit and are much more difficult to break.

8. Compromise if you miss part of a call: Don't try to catch up by racing through all the missed parts – the odds are you won't make it and the set will break down. Instead, forget the part you missed and try to pick up the action where everyone else is – this will keep the set dancing.

9. Concentrate: Because you have not been dancing very long, you probably will not be able to react automatically to the calls for a while. This means you must concentrate on thinking of the definition of each call. Unfortunately, many new dancers do not concentrate, and so every call seems to come as a surprise. If you concentrate and think, you should do well.