

Dance Practice – “Step One”

It seems that squeezing extra time out of everyone’s already jam-packed life is becoming more and more difficult every day. We are all so busy! This being said, we all want to get the very most out of each and every practice session that we have. A bit of preplanning can go along way in this area.

For a start, make sure that your practice session starts with as little stress as possible. Having all of your dancewear, shoes, notes, etc. gathered together and ready to go, will keep you from scrambling for last minute items just before you run out the door to meet your spouse/dance partner. In addition, plan to have an energizing snack about 30 to 45 minutes prior to your practice time. This will allow you to be mentally sharp and physically charged for the exercise that you are about to undertake. You do not want to be 15 minutes into a great practice and then have your blood sugar drop because you are hungry. You will not be able to concentrate, nor will you be able to dance to your fullest. (Also, being hungry will make you fussy with your partner, and we KNOW we don’t need that!)

Upon arriving at your practice location, both partners should plan to stretch out and limber up. Taking 10 to 15 minutes for this, is a very important use of your time, and should not be underestimated in importance. In addition to helping limit dance related injuries, being warm and limber when you start dancing will allow you to dance better sooner. This will therefore prevent those early, very frustrating moments that occur when you start to dance and you both are still very stiff from the day’s tensions or from simply having driven to the practice location.

One of the very best ways to begin your practice together is, believe it or not, by practicing apart. I will go into solo practice in more depth in a later article, but I want to mention it’s great importance here. It is vital that both partners know their part. We can all dance better if we know what is expected of us. So, after each partner has stretched and warmed up, I would suggest starting the actual dance practice with the gentleman going through his part of the couple’s routine, and the lady going through her part. If as a dance couple, you don’t really use set routines, then each partner can work through their individual steps and figures.

Once you have completed your stretching, warm-up and solo practice, you are then all set to begin dancing! Gee, didn’t think it would take this long to get together, did you? Now a big question for most folks is: how long should we practice? This varies greatly, depending on the couple. A couple that dances for social pleasure may practice an hour at a time, maybe 3 days a week. A competitive couple that competes in only a few categories may practice for 2 hours a day for 4 or 5 days a week. A ten-dance couple may practice for 3 to 4 hours at a time, 6 or 7 days a week. Or it could be anywhere in between for any couple, depending on their drive to improve.

If you start looking at your practice with these ideas in mind, it will help you make the most of the time that you have. We all have to look at practice time with a bit of an overview that will help us reach our dance goals, whatever they may be. In next month's article, I will go into more depth regarding ways to improve the practice itself. Until then, go into your practice prepared, nourished, warm, stretched and ready to...

DANCE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Dance Practice – Part Two

Last month we went over some of the essential elements necessary for a successful dance practice. Preparedness, eating before working out, stretching and warming-up, are all important items for your “practice check list”. But now comes the big item! Knowing one's part. I cannot over emphasize the importance of each partner knowing his or her part. When thinking about ballroom dancing, it is assumed that the man leads and the woman follows. This is true, but this kind of thinking can lead many folks to feel that only the man need know his part, as the woman will be following him. But there is a much better way. If both partners, man and lady know their parts equally well, the couple will be so much stronger for the effort.

The best way to go about doing this is to take each individual figure within a couple's routine, and break it down. The man doing his actions, and noting exactly what he is trying to accomplish, what alignment that he is using, his footwork for the figure, what type of rise and fall that he may be trying to achieve, etc. In the same turn, the lady must know all of the figures in the routines, and be able to execute them by herself. This can seem a little frightening at first, but that fear can be overcome by trial and error. The lady must know the alignments that the couple is striving to achieve on each figure, and she must assist in helping the couple reach these alignments as the couple moves through the figure. The better that we are able to perform our routines alone, the better we will be able to dance them together.

Some questions that you can ask yourself as you work through this process are:

What alignment do I start this figure on, and on what alignment do I end?

This will give you a much greater sense of direction, and you will dance the figure much more confidently when you truly know where you are going.

What is my footwork on this figure?

In other words, how am I using my feet as I maneuver through this figure. Do I start with a heel lead as I come forward? Am I sure that I am up on the balls of my feet while doing a chasse? At what point do I lower my heel on that closing step?

What is the timing of this figure?

Both partners must make sure that they know the timing of each figure that they use. Much of dance practice should be carried out with no music at all. Just the sound of two people, counting their parts out loud as they go around the room. And here again, it is so helpful to do this both together, and separately.

Your instructor will be able to assist you with any questions that you have as far as the figures and the information regarding the proper way to execute them, but the commitment to practice will fall on the couple. And the fruit of your practice will be more abundant if both partners know their part

Practice – Part 3

In this, the last of my series of articles on practice, I would like to mention two things that are of great importance to any couple that wishes to improve their dancing. Pace and patience. Let's start with pace first.

What I mean by pace is how you work through new material together. When given a new routine by your instructor, or when introduced to a new set of figures at a workshop, you want to begin working on the new items with a certain logic in mind. To attack the material all at once and at full speed would certainly cause a lot of frustration and bickering between the partners. It would serve the couple much better to begin by walking through all segments, slowly, without music. As I mentioned in an earlier article, each partner would want to give great attention to their own part before the couple comes together. Once both partners have worked through their part alone, slowly work through the figures together using no music. This process can take as many days as the couple requires for the figures to feel comfortable to them. Only after the figures are coming along nicely should the couple add music, and even then, it should not be up to the full tempo. Select a piece of music that is slightly slower than what would normally be used. Work with this for a while, and then and only then, move on to music that is up to speed. This should really cut down on the amount of frustration felt by both partners, and will ultimately give the best results.

Patience seems to be a hard thing to come by for most dancers. Be it patience with themselves or with their partners, it always seems to be in short supply. Step back from the situation and look at it logically. When tempers flair, and anger erupts in a dance practice, the level of learning and improvement drops to near zero. It is a proven fact that the mind cannot function at an optimal rate when under the stress of a fight. We all want to improve, and we all have a limited amount of time to practice, so why ruin it with arguments and hurtful feelings? Make a real effort to have patience with your partner. Use kind words to express changes that need to be made. Ask in a nice way when you need something from them that you are not receiving. Make practice sessions as pleasant as possible for both partners, and it will surprise you how quickly you can improve!

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