

THERE IS A SYSTEM

Try Thinking About Families of Figures

By Dan & Sandi Finch
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We have many ways of grouping concepts together to help our dancers learn new figures. One of our primary tools is our manual, which groups figures by rhythm and to some extent by difficulty, by virtue of the phase system.

When we look only at teaching waltz, we have nearly 120 figures in our manual, each with its own footwork, alignment, timing, degree of turn and use of body—meaning there are at least 600 bits of technical information to be learned in that one rhythm alone.

Wouldn't it be nice to learn a figure once—and be able to apply all or some of its elements to a related figure? Once you know a waltz telemark, it should be an easy transition to do it in foxtrot or to carry on with its family of heel turn figures, such as double reverse or Man's impetus.

There is such a system—one of organizing figures by families. A family is a group of figures related by common elements. Get to know one and you'll probably find it easier to get along with the rest.

There is no published system of teaching by families, so you are left to create your own "All In The Family." If you can see the relationship between a basic figure and one that is more complex, you can help your dancers make the connection as they progress into new rhythms or more difficult choreography.

When we are preparing to introduce a new or infrequently choreographed figure, we clinic a group of figures similar to it that logically build on what the dancers know.

If dancers know a chair in waltz, they can probably find the similarity to help them do a fence line in rumba. Ladies can probably relate the use of their feet in a spot turn with the turning action in an underarm turn and an alemana.

West Coast Swing is known for its families of figures. Every time we teach a new west coast swing, we remind our dancers of that rhythm's families: Passing figures, sugar figures and whip figures. No matter how modified a figure they encounter, if

the dancers can see the basic figure in the combination, they will absorb the new material easier.

If we were teaching a modified whip turn in west coast swing to our advanced group, we would first make sure the basic two-measure whip is an old friend. If our new figure is, say, “inside turn double whip with inside turn ending,” our teaching progression would be:

- Basic whip
- Basic whip with inside turn ending
- Double whip
- Double whip with inside turn ending
- Inside turn double whip
- (finally) Inside turn double whip with inside turn ending

Some Typical Families

The two most basic families are linear figures and turning figures, which would include the whole family tree. Some purists will point out that ALL figures are linear because feet generally move forward, backward or side, not around a corner. When we talk about “turning” figures, we mean a turn that is the result of multiple steps taken together as a unit.

Linear figures in a family context are those that have little or no turn, or only one partner has turn while the other does not. Turning figures are those that have rotation, generally over three steps and require CBM (contra body movement) to initiate turn.

Some typical figures and how they can be grouped by families are:

- A. Left turning figures
 - Left turning waltz
 - Open reverse turn
 - Full reverse turn foxtrot (incorporating a feather finish)
 - Reverse wave
 - Reverse turn check & weave
 - Quick open reverse
 - Fallaway reverse
- B. Right turning figures
 - Natural turn
 - Open natural
 - Hesitation change
 - Natural telemark
- C. Heel turn figures (focus on “early rise”)
 - Telemark
 - Double reverse
 - Telespin
 - Natural weave

Man's impetus

D. Rotational figures (spins & pivots):

- Spin turn
- Outside spin
- Natural pivot
- Tipple chasse & pivot
- Outside spin
- Slip pivot

E. Feather family:

- Feather
- Feather finish
- Back feather
- Left feather
- Curved feather
- Weave ending in waltz
- Feather ending in a great many steps

F. Linear figures:

- Waltz box
- Closed change
- Forward locks
- Thru chasse to banjo (turn for Lady only)
- Whisk (turn for Lady only)
- Feather (no turn, as measured by the feet)
- 3-step

G. Picture figures:

- Hinge & throwaway
- Right lunge & promenade sway & oversway
- Contra check

Tango is its own family and doesn't relate well to the rest. Although some of its figures are the same as in other rhythms, as such basic figures as "walk 2" and "telemark," the execution of the steps is so totally different that they have to be taught separately. It does, of course, give you a head start if the dancer knows the starting and finishing standard alignments for a telemark, which will be the same through all the rhythms.

For tango clinic purposes, we create families within the rhythm. We might teach a group of advancing dancers the family of "promenades": Closed promenade, double closed promenade, basic promenade, then back open promenade. We might add to that a "promenade link," and show the difference from a "progressive link." The more they understand the similarities between members of a family, the better they will be able to distinguish the differences when the figures are cued.

When we get to a jive curly whip in our advancing class, we go back to the basic whip turn, walk them through a double whip, then a link whip and finally the curly

whip. They should grasp the basic starting and ending steps and only have to program two or three steps in between.

The goal of this type of system is to cut the actual memory work involved in learning technique so the dancer can be free to pay more attention to developing a love of dancing and a feel for the distinctions that give each rhythm its individual character.

Note: We want to thank our professional coaches for their contributions to our understanding of these concepts: *Dennis Lyle*, owner of Imperial Ballroom in Fullerton, CA, a former Fred Astaire national professional champion; and *Tom Hicks*, United States amateur Latin champion, United States professional rising star champion, organizer of the Gold State Challenge amateur competition, owner of The Regency Ballroom in Lomita, CA, and NDCA world certified judge.