

“Finding Solutions”
For
Common Problem Figures In Smooth Dancing

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Definition: Problem, a question posed for solution.
---Webster's New World Dictionary

We all have our own list of figures that bring on a degree of anxiety when we hear them cued. These are “problems” in your dancing because that anxiety has made you tighten your muscles, stiffen your hold with your partner and hesitate instead of continuing a smooth flow from one figure to the next. The solution usually requires breaking down the problem into some basic concepts you may already know.

Developing your dancing is like building a house. Engineering is required to make it all fit together, starting with a solid foundation. Only then can you build walls and a roof and later decorate it with style. When problems occur, look first at the foundation: Good posture. Line up your major blocks of weight—hips, rib cage, shoulders, head. Feel like each is a large ball stacked together with a rod down through the middle of each of them (call it your spine). Each ball has freedom to turn around the rod but each ball has to stay in line with the spine. This will allow for “opening the door” (see below) or turning to semi-closed position without opening the shoulders too much.

Then look at your balance, both individually and as a partnership. If one person is off balance, the other will feel tugging, leaning or hanging, and react in a way that further impedes movement. This will contort the frame, resulting in painful knees, shoulders and backs, not to mention being out of position to execute the next figures.

Beyond posture and balance, we need some all-purpose phrases to remind us HOW to move in specific instances. We'll use terms such as “turn early, turn a lot” on most rotations; “early rise” to put Lady onto a heel turn; “set the base” before attempting to shape and make pictures; and “open the door” to encourage partner to swing through. (Others may say the same thing but with different words.) Most of what follows applies to foxtrot, waltz and quickstep. Tango has its own rules, as does Latin dancing.

I. Occupying Space, Maintaining Balance And Other Laws Of Physics.

This elegant art form we call dancing relies on scientific principles. Dancing can be defined as creating shapes while moving through space and time. We understand that music gives us time parameters; but we need to think more about gravity and three dimensional space as we move.

As beginning dancers, we were concerned about the floor (where to put the feet) and somewhat about line of dance (where we are going), a form of two dimensional thinking. As we progressed, we took on the third dimension, our relationship with our partner. Consider three dimensions in all your figures: Standing straight (vertical alignment), your frame from elbow to elbow which

remains solid (your width), Man's arm on Lady's back that is allowed to "breathe" from the elbow down to follow Lady's shape (your depth).

Newton gave us at least two of the physical laws we deal with:

1) Two bodies cannot occupy the same space at the same time. For instance, when moving forward in semi-closed position, a dancing couple can only do a "chair" comfortably if the partners are in proper position to each other (Man's right leg ahead of Lady's left leg) and he moves first. Her leg then follows behind his and comes out first on the recover. Likewise, to accomplish a turn, two bodies cannot move in the same direction, at the same speed, with matching steps. Even in standard closed position, moving forward down line of dance, Lady has to move first to get out of the way before Man can dance forward. Think about two cars at a stop light. The light turns green, and the second car in line cannot go until the first car starts out.

2) Remember Newton's falling apple? It fell straight down due to gravity. We can take a lesson from that. As dancers, we can fight gravity on every step or we can allow the gravitational pull to work for us. Balance is achieved by controlling where you place your center of gravity; strive to center your weight (your center of gravity) over the standing foot at the beginning and end of each step.

II. Applying Those (and other) Principles

CBM, otherwise known as contra body movement, is used to initiate every turn.

This is a small signal from leading partner that a directional change is coming. It has nothing to do with placing the feet but is a body action, an impulse. If you don't use this signal from your "center," you will have to use your arms to direct the partner. The impulse will be imperceptible to a bystander but your partner will react to a minimal amount for initiating a feather step, greater for a curving or turning figure and a powerful impulse to initiate a pivot.

Turns occur between feet, not on a foot

Turns are a rotation of the body *between* steps, starting with a forward step, not a curving step or one that cranks the Lady off track (misapplied CBM). In a waltz left turn from DLC, the proper sequence is Man forward L on a straight line with CBM fcg DLC, side R making a 1/4 turn between step 1 and 2, close L to R facing RLOD, having made 1/8th turn between steps 2 and 3. *Spins* are rotation on a standing foot (Double Reverse *Spin*) with the body in balance over it. Spin turn, as the name implies, has more than simple rotation between steps.

Open the Door

The person on the inside of a turn needs to get out of the way so partner can dance through with his or her part. This means moving a hip out of the way to be as thin as possible so it isn't square across partner's line of dance.

Early rise

Ladies will never have to think about doing a heel turn if her partner gives her early rise. This means that he will cause her to move onto a straight leg on step one, which draws her free leg under her and voila the heels are together. Man is said to "rise to the heel" or stepping and straightening his leg to get the rise accomplished on step 1, rather than gradually reaching full rise over all steps of a measure.

Swing into a figure

In the manuals, figures start on count 1, but in flight preparation begins during the last step of the previous figure. When starting from a standstill, we will "count you in" with "...5,6,7, 8" to give

you time to feel the music, to give you some warning when “1” is coming and to allow time for some preliminary body movement to be ready for beat “1”.

(We are not saying that the foot falls on count 1 of every measure; things can happen in beat 1 before the foot hits the floor, such as lowering, turning the upper body, giving the CBM to start a turn. The beats in a measure of music are like fence posts in a field. In a four-beat measure, we have four fence posts (beats) with fencing (melody) in between. The period of time from one “post” to the next is part of the beat. What you do from post #1 to #2 to #3 to #4 is where “dancing” occurs. Beginners will step as soon as they hear the first beat and wait, then step on 2 and wait, step on 3 and wait and step on 4 and wait. Advanced dancers know that stepping at any point during the gap from the start of beat 1 to the start of beat 2 is to have stepped ON that beat.)

Both feet on the floor

Balance requires both feet to be on the floor to give you control. The amount of weight in each foot will change as you move from foot to foot and may briefly be only 2% on one foot, but this gives you the balance to start to engage the next activity (generate power, swing or turn) for the next step as you are finishing a figure.

III. Some Specific Problem Figures

Some figures consistently crop up when we ask dancers what they consider to be a problem, and they generally always involve rotation. We will look at some of those, approaching them from their families of (easier) related figures. Use the Technical Advisory Manual for specifics about timing, footwork and foot placement. We’ll apply some of the general principles we use, suggest some new thoughts where appropriate and reference Hall of Fame dances and others currently popular to illustrate the figures.

A. Telemark family: Early rise for heel turn, opening the door

1. Telespin: [Foxtrot: SQQ& QQS Waltz: 123& 123] This is a two-measure figure beginning with a telemark entry. Generally it starts facing DLC, Man steps forward L with CBM and early rise, side R opening the door for Lady to swing through, and he points L LOD on 3, staying on his R as Lady runs past him. On “&” he shifts to L as she passes in front of him and they finish the figure. Partners stay in closed position throughout, usually ending in banjo DLW but the figure can end in semi-closed position or even closed position. Problems: Man turns his shoulders away from Lady, Lady does not do her part assertively enough to assist Man’s rotation.

a. Mini-telespin: A telespin with the same timing that turns 1 1/8 to 1/4 ending DRC because of the spin on step 5, then feet close and hold. Often followed by a contra check. (*Lovely Lady*)

b. Double telespin: [Waltz: 123& 123&] A two-measure figure consisting of two telespins, ends in CP fcg LOD. (*I’m Still Me* adds another measure for mini-telespin ending.)

2. Telefeather: [Foxtrot: SQQ &QQQQ] This is a telespin with a feather ending. Lady has two heel turns. Man: Fwd L trng LF, fwd & sd R, point L twd LOD; on “&” transfer full weight to L trng as Lady runs by, sd & bk R trng, sd & fwd L trng to banjo, fwd R in banjo. Lady: Back R, bk L (heel turn), run fwd R, “&” fwd L past Man trng LF, sd & fwd R cont. trng, cl L (heel turn), sd & bk R trng DLW, bk L in banjo (Not in the manual; see *Smoke Gets In Your Eyes.*)

3. Double reverse spin: [Foxtrot: SQQ (SQ&Q or SQQ&) Waltz: 123 (12&3)] Man puts Lady onto her heel turn, she opens the door, and he swings past her past her onto step 2

staying in closed position to give her a launching pad around him, then spins bringing his feet together. (Lady ends it with side R, cross L in front.) It has been said to think of Lady as a sack of groceries he is carrying so he keeps her in front of his front. Problems: Loss of balance on Man's spin (remember, a rotation over a standing foot), incomplete rotation, Lady cannot get in front of Man for her last step. (For two of these in a row, see *Sam's Song*, *London by Night*, *Riviere de Lune*.)

a. To overspin: [&] A one-step addition using part of the last beat of the double reverse spin. Both stay on toes (not lowering at end of double reverse); Man has small step fwd L on toe pivoting 1/2, Lady steps bk & sd R with toe turned in, turning LF 1/2 to face LOD (usually). (*Autumn Nocturne*)

b. To split ronde: [Foxtrot: SQQ (SQ&Q) Waltz: 123 (12&3)] Also called a bombshell, it should be cued with the double reverse to allow dancers to set up for it. End the double reverse on toes, both lower on count 1 and push their R knees fwd turning slightly left to be outside partner's knee. Both ronde L keeping toe on floor for balance. Man crosses L in back of R, does a twist turn 1/2 to fc DRC in CP. Lady rondes and moves around Man crossing behind, side and crossing in front. To start this figure, Lady has two options at the end of the double reverse spin: 1) From the standard end of the double reverse, she steps back and side (like an overspin), then rondes CCW or 2) on the last step of the double reverse spin, she touches L to R without taking weight, then lowers on R with Man and rondes L CCW. (*Autumn Nocturne*, *Smoke Gets In Your Eyes*)

B. Other left turning figures

1. Tumble turn: [Foxtrot SQ&Q Waltz: 12&3] (*A Lovely Evening*, *Serenade*) This has been called an overturned feather finish with lilt pivot. Man has rise and sway change to cause Lady to rise and tumble. Lady needs to keep looking for the wall behind the Man as she swings across for the tumble; Man has to wait while Lady tumbles. Problems: Men lean over and lose upright poise, and try to help Lady to tumble.

2. Top spin: [Foxtrot: & QQQQ Waltz: 12&3] Created by accident by someone dancing a natural hover cross, getting blocked coming out and needing to check and go another direction, which should give you some idea of its movement. In foxtrot (*Maria Elena*, *Orient Express*), it is a half turn beginning in feather position with the spin—a 1/8th turn LF on toe of standing foot—occurring on the last beat of the previous measure (&) and 1/8th turn on each of the next three steps, ending in banjo (outside partner). The less-used waltz top spin is totally different; the spin occurs on step 3 (*Adagio*).

3. Big top: [Foxtrot SQQ Waltz: 123 (1&-3)] From semi-closed position fcg DLC, long step thru for both starting LF trn, Man cross L in back of R with right side stretch continuing turn, finish LF & slip R back to CP fcg DLW. Lady steps sd R past Man cont trng taking step 2 before Man, she keeps body turning brushing L to R and slips fwd L to CP. Think “she go-he go” and remember she is turning on one foot (R). This is one of the few steps where Man waits to step (his second step) until after the Lady steps, designed to get her going and out of his way.

C. Natural (right) turn figures: Maneuvers (or half-naturals) are natural turns. This involves turn (CBM), Lady on the inside of a turn (open the door) and Man swinging straight through (not thinking about reaching *around* Lady). In foxtrot, Lady steps back, does a heel turn and steps forward. In waltz, Lady steps back L pointing R where it will go to the side on step 2, then closes. Man's left hip and shoulder swing forward as his right foot starts forward (called “early turn”).

1. Natural hover cross: [Foxtrot: SQQ QQQQ Waltz: 123& 123] Generally a foxtrot figure, meaning from closed position, Lady will have a heel turn. The first three steps make a $\frac{3}{4}$ RF turn (*Send Her Roses*, or see *Orient Express* for natural hover cross followed by top spin.)

a. Continuous hover cross: [Foxtrot: SQQ QQQQ QQ Waltz: 123 123 123]
In spite of all the quicks, don't hurry. Begins like a natural hover cross except Man brings his feet together, Lady steps side across in front of him, then forward. Body stretch needed to keep frame.

b. Extended continuous hover cross: Add more Qs (as many as you can justify) before the feather ending.

c. Checked/interrupted continuous hover cross: Add a check & recover in sidecar before Lady crosses in front of Man. Popular modification because it adds two Qs to the timing, filling out the third measure and avoids split timing.

2. Double natural telemark: [Foxtrot: SQQ QQQQ Waltz: 123 &123] (Not in the manual, see *A Lovely Evening* and *Papillon*) From SCP, Man has fwd R comm. RF trn, sd & fwd L trng, sd & fwd R; fwd L outside partner's left side, fwd R to CP LOD cont. trng, fwd & sd L DW cont. trng to fc COH, tch R. Lady has fwd L, fwd R between partner's feet, sd L, bk R, bk L, cl R (heel turn) trng, sd L, ready for same foot lunge. Lots of rotation; maintain frame with shaping.

3. Spin turn overturned to right turning lock [Foxtrot: SQQ Q&QS Waltz: 123 1&23 or 12&3] We will talk about the "spin" and "turn" of the spin turn. The standard spin turn ends DLW but overturning it to end RLOD sets up the lock. Think "flight" in the lock—Lady moves forward on toes with left shoulder leading, with energy. Man backs with right shoulder lead, being careful not to outstride the Lady, who is on the outside of the turn, into SCP. (*Apassionata*)

D. Fallaways: Fallaway position is semi-closed position, backing to line of dance.

1. Fallaway reverse & slip pivot [Foxtrot QQQQ or SQ&Q Waltz 12&3] Works better with Lady's head closed. That helps to "feed" the man through and allows her to look strongly over her left shoulder, keeping the rotation continuous.

2. Three fallaways: [Foxtrot: QQQQ QQQQ QQQQ Waltz: 123 123 123]
(*Symphony*) A linear figure, NOT rotating around each other. Do a fallaway three times, with the second being a counter fallaway. Usually goes into a feather ending. Upper body shaping aids the continuous changes of position, no time to pose for picture figures going through this. Stay low; Lady will open her head on the first fallaway facing RLOD, slips to fc LOD to dance like a feather finish, then backs into the third fallaway.

Note: We want to thank our professional coaches for their contributions to our understanding of these concepts: Victor Veyrasset, several times United States Professional Standard Champion and NCDA recognized judge; and Dennis Lyle, owner of Imperial Ballroom in Fullerton, CA, a former Fred Astaire national professional champion and accredited judge.