

Dance Tips

Folk dancing is a 'contact sport' and individuals will find themselves interacting with both male and female dancers of all shapes and sizes during the course of a dance. These people may be young, strong, fast, fit and healthy or more sedate, older, maybe injured in some way. They may like fast swings and twirls, be unsteady on their feet, or not be able to raise an arm above shoulder height.

A key part of dancing well is to recognise any particular characteristics of the next person you are meeting and adjust *your* dancing to *their* needs, not force your own style on them. Some examples of dos and don'ts are:

DO LISTEN TO THE CALLER

Dancing is a social get-together, but please respect the caller, and try to avoid too much chatter whilst a set is being formed and during the walk-through.

Remember, you may know the dance but others may not and they may be harder of hearing.

Often the experienced will 'skip' bits of the walk-through. That's fine if all in the set are experienced, but do participate if you have relative beginners amongst you – or if the caller particularly wants to demonstrate, say, the flow from one move to the next.

DO LISTEN TO THE MUSIC.

The music played is in phrases, usually of 8 bars (typically = 16 walking steps), with moves fitting say 4, 8, or 16 bars sequences to fit the dance; get used to listening to the music and how it fits the moves. If need be, count quietly (1, 2, 3,, 8 steps – start of next move) – it will greatly help your dancing.

DON'T BECOME THE CALLER

If the caller makes an error, leave them to sort it out, or if needed, go up and offer quiet advice. Everyone shouting from the floor can just add to any confusion.

If things are going wrong in your set, resist becoming the caller – strictly, it is their roll to sort it out. Only act if you can do so unobtrusively – 'too many callers on the floor' can lead to further chaos.

HELPING OTHERS

Experienced dancers should all do their bit to help newcomers and the less experienced. Please, ask them to dance early when the next dance is called and lead them to the top of the hall – don't leave them all to 'flounder' together at the bottom, away from the guiding eye of the caller.

By all means offer to split up a couple who are having problems – but only if they are happy to so.

If needed, give quiet guidance and encouragement during the walk-through and dance, but avoid shouting or overly physical guidance. Some may object to being too firmly guided or 'pushed' in the right direction.

Whilst it is normal to 'encourage' a partner into the next move – say from a ladies' chain into a reel – do not be too physical about it, which may cause offence.

EXCESSIVE HOLDING

Dancing can involve all sorts of holds: hand, arm, waist, ballroom.....

The appropriate hold to lead your partner onto the floor and back to the seat is a hand hold.

All other holds should be used only during the walk-through and the dance itself; once the move/dance is through the hold should be dropped, switched to the appropriate hold for the next move or maybe to a hand hold whilst waiting the next instruction.

Dance holds are not 'cuddles' and should not be used as such nor turned into anything which may be considered unwelcome and inappropriate, particularly by a new partner or newcomer.

EYE CONTACT and FLIRTING

Much of our dancing dates from an age when it was the only time the sexes could get together, un-chaperoned on the dance floor, and 'suss' each other out. Eye contact and mild flirting is thus quite appropriate, a norm and should not be disconcerting.

Look at whomever you dancing with, during a swing, chain, pass-through, do-si-do, etc – and particularly 'balance-the-wave' and 'mad robin' where it is all but obligatory.

The trick is to do this with a pleasant smile, a mild glint to the eye - and not an excessive leer.

You should leave that person wanting more, feeling cheered and amused by the experience – not something else.

HAND and ARM HOLDS

- Do not grip too tightly in any hand or arm hold (a common mistake of beginners);
Why? – pain can be caused to arthritic or damaged fingers/wrists/shoulders
- Do not bend/twist your wrist in 'allemandes': - for the same reason
Some men are particularly prone to do this, as if they were arm wrestling. *Don't!*
- A flat hand-to-hand 'hold' is best in 'allemandes',
or with a gentle wrap of the fingers over the other's hand: do not engage the thumbs
- In low arm ('elbow') holds, hold close to/under/behind the elbow but tuck the thumb under with the fingers, not gripped on top of the arm.
- Do not grip with bent fingers in hands across moves (stars, turns, etc); (long) finger nails can make for an unpleasant experience.
- Let go of all holds promptly when moving on to the next.

CLAPPING

If a dance involves clapping a partner, neighbour or opposite's hand(s), remember it's dancing – not combat; be gentle unless you know the individual welcomes a firmer clap and can/will reciprocate similarly.

Excessively hard clapping can be painful if the 'opponent' has finger/thumb/wrist or arm problems.

BASKETS

These usually involve 4 individuals in a close hold (around waists / shoulders) with the right feet in and the left turning the group by a 'buzz' step. Some people like to

turn the basket as fast as possible, but be aware that this can be an issue for those with foot, knee or hip problems. Turning so fast as to lift the ladies' feet off the ground is a display of excessive testosterone and should be discouraged.

A good alternative for this figure is the cross-your-own-wrist hold with both your neighbours doing the same.

SWINGS

The usual swinging styles are in ballroom hold, or the 'ceilidh' hold, in combination with the 'buzz' ('scooter-riding') step or a walk step. A bouncing sideways step is not recommended. If in doubt, ask someone to demonstrate the holds and steps.

Some ladies prefer not to adopt these two holds, particularly with people they do not know (or maybe because they just consider them too 'close' for their comfort). In such cases offer them the cross-hand hold but with the elbows bent so the arms are 'v' shaped, which helps keep the couple a bit closer together. Otherwise, this hold is not recommended; a low arm / wide stance may encourage excessive, often uncontrolled, swinging, particularly in the young/boisterous/macho, and can be dangerous to other dancers on crowded dance floors.

During a swing, each dancer should mostly be supporting their own weight and moving round a pivot point between them; a couple should be able to swing quite fast with no hold at all. Therefore:

- do not lean back excessively during a swing - in ballroom or ceilidh holds it puts undue force on the 'man's' forearm or wrist
- also, ladies, do not lean in the direction of the swing; this increases the force on the man's arm, is very uncomfortable and gives him an un-asked for and undue 'armful' of your left bosom.

A swing should last just the length of the music allocated to it; do not end it too soon or too late. Good dancers will time their swing to end on the last beat of the music phrase to be just in the right place for the next move.

Some ladies (and men) often put the brakes on too early, which can be ungainly, uncomfortable and frustrating (impetus interruptus?).

Dancers may like to show off their prowess by swinging far too long, which usually means the couple is late for the next move. This indulgence is inconsiderate to others in the set.

TWIRLS

It is common for experienced dancers to add twirls as embellishments to swings, ladies' chains, end-of-line- and some waltz- moves, etc. When both dancers are experienced that is fine, but they should not be forced on the unwilling or inexperienced.

Ladies, if you don't want to add a twirl, say so, keep the relevant hand low, or drop hands to signal your preference. Conversely, if you do, make your intention clear, raise or keep the relevant hand high.

Again, any such addition should not impede being in time/place for what comes next.

DANCE MOVES

This is not intended as a detailed description of dance moves and their variants; these can be found on the web, for example at <https://round.soc.srcf.net/dances/elements>