

How to improve your Dancesport Partner



Just a few days ago, I was teaching a couple a Waltz lesson. The lesson started with the gentleman telling me what figures were not working well. He asked if I would dance the figures with his partner to see what **she** was doing wrong. I started the music and invited the lady into dance position. We danced the first side of their Waltz routine before stopping. When we finished, the man said, "That was lovely; why don't you dance that way with me?"

With few exceptions, most of the couples I work with have a partner that is quick to point out their partner's problems. Sometimes it's the man, sometimes the lady; rarely is it both. Gender doesn't matter. The partner that perceives him or her as the better of the two is quick to point out the mistakes and shortcomings of the other. Sometimes this occurs tactfully; sometimes the partner gets downright nasty. But either way, it rarely leads to an improvement in their dancing. More often, it leads to frustration.

The partner receiving the information is frustrated from his/her lack of skill as well as the constant reminder that they are not living up to their partner's expectations. Their performance suffers even more due to the stress; they become rigid, tentative, and self-conscious. Even worse, they shut down completely, a **defensive mechanism**. (Read that word again!) They have to defend themselves against their partner.

The partner giving the information is frustrated and doesn't understand why his/her partner has to be reminded or told what it is their doing wrong. I often hear this partner say, "I'm only trying to help with our dancing." They firmly believe that by criticizing their partner, they will help them see their mistake and correct it. Their frustration often escalates from a socially acceptable comment, to an all out screaming assault. They've got to get that last comment in before their partner shuts down completely.

I know that many of you are saying, "He's not talking about me!" And I must admit that I've seen this problem handled with so much tact, that you really had to look hard to spot the symptoms. But as I said earlier, with few exceptions, most couples do experience this problem, and it seems to worsen under the pressure of preparing for a lesson, performance, or competition. I am not advocating silence or not communicating with your partner. A couple should communicate areas in their routines or figures that doesn't work or doesn't "feel" quite as it should during practice. Next time that happens to you try a different approach. When you both agree that a figure isn't working right, allow one of you to make a suggestion to fix the problem. Without further comments, try the figure with those suggestions first. If you both agree that the problem is solved, continue with the practice. If the other partner isn't quite pleased with the results, then they make a suggestion on how to fix the problem. Without further comments, try the figure again with those suggestions. If you both agree that the problem is solved, continue with the practice. If either one feels that the problem is not completely solved, then make a note of which figure it is and allow your teacher or coach to fix the problem. Obviously the two of you do not have the answer, so there is no need for further discussion. Move on with the practice. This approach levels the responsibilities placed on the couple. Both partners are responsible for the couple's performance and no one person is constantly making the corrections and no one person is constantly receiving criticism.

Some of you may say that this approach is too simple or that you are doing some form of this in your practice sessions now, but to make a real change you will need to change your attitude. In the first paragraph I gave an example of what I experience quite often. How many times have you watched your partner dancing with a teacher, or coach, or another dancer and thought to yourself how much better they look? How many of us would turn down the chance to practice with a world champion for a year or two? Would we not become better dancers from the experience? Of course we would. The fastest way to change the look of a couple is to become the best dancer you can be. Instead of focusing on what your partner isn't doing right, focus on your own dancing. Take lessons on your own in addition to the lessons you take with your partner. Practice the techniques and figures by yourself when your partner can't make a practice session. There are countless examples of two really great dancers partnering for the first time and making the final rounds of a Championship event. Change your focus from the couple, to being the best dancer **you** can be. **That's the way to fix your partner.**