



Southern Illinois Dancer

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Beginner's Guide to Group Class

February 2010



A lot of people interested in learning to ballroom dance are a little shy and self-conscious about how they think they'll look, and that's perfectly understandable. As beginners, we think people will be carefully scrutinizing our every move and judging us with numbered paddles behind our backs.

This simply isn't true- well, for the most part. Your teachers care very much about your learning process and wish only the best for you. Their observations and perspectives on your dancing are intended to

help you, not hurt your feelings. If anybody else says anything critical, they've likely not looked at themselves in the studio's mirrors lately, nor do they remember what it was like for themselves as beginners. Dancing is about fun and friendship, and we consider ourselves so lucky to finally be able to introduce others to the joys of dancing socially that we want your dancing experiences as a beginner to be enjoyable and productive. We appreciate each of our students and friends we've made, always, and hope that dancing is something they can enjoy throughout their lives.

Beginners need the support of friends to motivate and encourage them, and that's why I encourage 'safety in numbers', meaning, invite a friend (or even better, friendS) to come with you to group classes. If you bring a partner, you have something to share with them. If you invite a group of friends, you now have another new common interest besides Netflix and Pillsbury.

Group classes are designed to introduce you to a particular dance or dances. There will be one or two dances taught per session (usually an hour)- one at a time, of course. During beginner group lessons, you will learn basic ballroom class and social dance etiquette, basic footwork for the dances, and also things that make the dance unique- timing and musicality for example. To make the footwork easier to perform, lead, follow, and remember, technique will be taught as well.

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Upcoming Competitions:

*March 11—13,
2010 at the
Renaissance
St. Louis Hotel*

stlouisstarball.com

**USA Dance has a
YouTube
account!**

Visit

**[www.youtube.com/
usadanceinc](http://www.youtube.com/usadanceinc)**

to check them out.

Next USA Dance Event

Where: Corner Dance Hall, Whittington, IL

When: Saturday February 27, 2010

Time: Lesson at 7:00pm - Dance at 8:00pm

Cost: \$8.00 non-members; \$5.00 members

Refreshments provided

Performances

This month, George and Neth will be performing a Bolero they've been working on.

If you'd like to show off your talents at an upcoming monthly dance, just ask Gayle, Liz, or any other officer.

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A lot of people ask "Well... can't I just take private lessons until I get good enough for group lessons instead?" That's actually completely counter-productive. If you're going to be a social ballroom dancer, it's best that you get the gist of things in a social setting- the group class- first, to familiarize yourself with other people sharing a dance floor with you. You can pick and choose things which interest you, those which need work, and learn proper partner-to-partner communication. After the basics of those are covered, then you might want to have 'homework'- or enlist the services of a dance teacher to help you expand upon things you like, work on and improve things which need help, and so forth in a more focused environment.

Those differences being addressed, group classes are fun. People laugh and joke, learn and support, and can also discover a new way to interrelate and communicate not just with their own partners, but with one another. Private lessons hone those things and personalize the material being covered more to the needs of each individual and their partnership.

There are several things to consider when taking a group class to optimize your learning experience. One is that, while the teachers aren't 'in charge' the way one might view their old grade-school teachers, they **are** the only ones in your group with the dance experience necessary to teach **you** how to dance, too. It's important that you remain able to hear and watch them as they teach, but also keep them accessible if you have a question. Never hesitate to politely request clarification, 'show me that again', or 'can you do that differently?'. Teachers want you to enjoy learning to dance, so they'll generally try to accommodate reasonable requests.

Intra-couple teaching is inevitable, but it's also counter-productive. Statistics indicate that, at least in the beginning, females learn more quickly than males. That's **not** necessarily because they're smarter. Sometimes it's just because the females are more motivated and interested in dancing, and their partner was unwillingly dragged along. That being said- It's important to encourage and support your partner instead of criticizing, correcting, and otherwise devaluing their efforts. If dancing becomes unpleasant to them, you might find yourself without a partner. Another reason for not "teaching" at them is that you might not actually understand what their problem with a particular figure is or how to correct it. It's one thing to say "do this"- but if you don't know why they can't, you don't know how to solve the problem. Instead of saying "just do this- you're doing it wrong", you might ask "What does the wrong part feel like and where?" If you two can pinpoint the problem, the teacher can help more quickly and effectively. It also helps neither of you to be "the bad guy"- you can blame it on the teacher instead! :-D

You might hear "Would the ladies form a line behind my partner and the gentlemen form a line behind me" and wonder "huh? This here a lahn daince?" First of all **eyeroll** NO. Secondly- to be a properly-connected, communicating couple, one must first understand his or her own role within the partnership. Two parts to form a whole, yes, but it's best for each part to be as completely and properly formed as possible before contributing healthily to the creation of a new whole- the partnership. This applies in a lot of relationships, too, actually- if you can't understand and accept yourself fully, it's not fair to assume someone else to do that for you. I'm not a counselor, I'm a dance teacher, so enough about that, right?

Anyway. Separating the partners to form a side-by-side line behind their respective representatives allows them to learn and practice individual parts of footwork and technique without having to worry about their partners just yet. The more familiar and comfortable with one's own role he or she is, the better they can contribute to working with another instead of being a hindrance.

The next time you hear "Ladies on this side, gentlemen on that side", you'll know you're not going to play Red Rover, you're going to learn something important. You might also be asked to separate and dance with the teachers- this frightens people for some reason, we've found, but it's something we sometimes need to do to feel what you're doing wrong, or to show you how something feels in order to correct a problem.

Some students will naturally pick up their parts better than others. This isn't Harrison Bergeron's world where we

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intend to stifle and handicap you to equalize and level, nor is this is Darwin's world, where survival of the fittest and natural selection prevail and those who try and flounder a little just can't make some invisible cut. When put in the context of dancing- those who can learn to adapt and adjust by learning when to compromise the ideal basic guidelines of dancing and when not to will pick up dancing more naturally and quickly than others who are bound to rules and order, black and white. Dancing is about joy and expression fundamentally- later, it's about your interpretation of each respective dance's character, which is still fun. If it wasn't, it wouldn't be dancing, it'd be synchronized miming, and mimes are so last-century France.

People naturally want to help one another- just like the "teach to you" person in a couple mentioned earlier, but sometimes it transcends that. we've experienced students who distract other students by interrupting the class to single out and 'teach' other students while the teachers are trying to instruct, or are going around during the 'divide and conquer' segment- where students are asked to practice what they've learned and the teachers will come around and help each couple for a minute or so individually. To a degree, this is fine, but when your 'teaching' holds the class up until your and your 'student-student's' attention can be gotten, or what you're teaching isn't in accordance with the material discussed by the teachers, it's poor etiquette, disrespectful, and socially awkward. It's perfectly natural to look over to a struggling couple and go "Oh- it's to the right- watch..." or "what helped me was to think of this or that..." because that's what good neighbors do. When someone has to go "Hey- shh, I wanna hear this" or "If we could have *everyone's* attention please...", it takes teaching time from the class to play lunchroom monitor.

That being said, if the class is buzzing with conversation and the teachers request everyone's attention, it's best that, frankly, everyone zip up and tune in. What's the point of having a class if you're going just to chat with your friends? You can do that before, during a break, or afterward. Also, any time you're talking at the same time a teacher is, you're missing something you'll wish you'd learned later when that time could be better spent on learning something else.

If you're tired, a little frustrated, need a drink of water, or for some other reason, you need to step aside for a quick break, there's no harm in that. Your partner can work with one of the teachers or another unpartnered person if they don't mind, until you return. If for some reason you do not wish to dance with a particular individual, please address the teachers with your concerns prior to dancing, somewhere discreet. "lcky" vibes with a person aren't generally an issue, but once in awhile, someone comes in that isn't that pleasant, either because they're using the opportunity to cruise for a date, but also because of the aforementioned "student teacher students", body odor, or whatever. Most problems can be remedied, but if you find *yourself* on the wrong end, re-evaluate what makes others uncomfortable about dancing with you. Unfortunately, people like this are, in their own minds, without fault and quick to blame others. Natural selection (translation: Being overlooked as politely as possible) usually *does* get these types. Nobody wants to feel bad, so they should try to be aware of when they are making others uncomfortable, and dancing helps things like these.

Now that you've learned all the do's and don'ts of group-class, all that's left is for you to enroll in one and begin learning to enjoy dancing! We hope to see you on the floor soon.

This article is an original work by our very own Crystal Hodges. She formerly wrote a weekly article for the Metropolis Planet while in high school, and wrote for Shawnee Community College's monthly student newspaper, The Tempo. More recently, her articles on dance have been published by area periodicals, including Heartland Women.

