

The Virtues of Good Swinging!

Swinging with your partner is a key part of modern choreography, especially in American contra dances, where most dances will have lots of swings with your partner, and with your neighbours all the way down the set. Meeting a dancer in the line who swings well is a real joy. There are countless different ways to swing, including walking swings, hornpipe swings and travelling swings, but the most popular by far is the simple buzz-step swing, done on the spot.

Two of the biggest challenges with swinging are:

- 1) Dancers who have misunderstood words like lean and tension and are using far too many muscles to push, pull, drag, lift, squeeze, strangle, clamp or grip their partner – it should be relaxed and effortless. Make sure you are in control of your own balance so that you can relax and enjoy the swing!
- 2) Dancers who lean sideways to try to make the swing go faster. This pulls your partner off balance, and makes their arms ache from supporting your weight. Again, you should have your own balance so that if your partner were to let go you wouldn't fall over! To go faster you just move your feet further and faster.

I was always taught that rule number one is that everyone is entitled to have a good time on the dance floor without getting hurt. Sadly the way some people swing can leave their partner with aches and bruises. Cherish your partner and hold them as gently as you can! I've been dancing for 45 years now, but I still love learning new ways to improve my dancing. So here are some ideas that you might find useful.

The Buzz-Step Swing:

Put some music on and start by standing by yourself and just walking on the spot (not turning), but with your right foot flat and your left leg slightly bent so that only the ball of the left foot is touching the floor, with the heel up in the air. The left foot should be trailing so that the left toe is roughly beside the right heel. It is just right-left-right-left – walking on the spot – no hopping or jumping. The objective of a swing is to rotate – any energy you use to go up and down is wasted! The motion is very like riding a scooter; in fact scooting up and down the hall with one foot trailing is good practice! Your feet should only barely leave the floor.

Now turn clockwise on the spot by yourself, making sure that your feet are close together and the left foot is trailing slightly. This is where the rotation comes from, from your feet, not from the angle or direction of your body! Your body should be perfectly upright to ensure that you maintain a good balance.

For the next step you will need a partner. Once you both have the basics of turning on the spot smoothly, link right elbows and turn together, preferably with some steady music in the background. Practise turning smoothly together with your right feet close to each other. Your feet should be outside your partner's feet – it is your right little toes that are near each other.

Once you can step smoothly around on the beat together try switching to the "ballroom" hold. Now, for a good swing you don't really want a formal ballroom hold; rigid or extended arms are uncomfortable. The most effective place for the man's right hand is high up, on the lady's left shoulder-blade, giving good support across a wide area, thus reducing the pressure on any particular point. (If you hold her lower than her shoulder-blade then centrifugal force will make her upper body move away so that she bends uncomfortably at the point where your hand is.) The lady's left hand just rests lightly on the man's arm. The man's left hand just holds the lady's right hand loosely.

Now, that is the start of a good swing.

But to get high speed up you need to form a single entity that is well-balanced and as symmetrical as possible. You also need to avoid dizziness. So a really key point is for both of you to turn your upper body so that it is facing your partner's. This also allows you to look into your partner's eyes; looking at your partner instead of the room stops you getting dizzy. If you aren't comfortable with eye contact then focus on somewhere slightly above or below your partner's eyes (but not too far below, gentlemen!).

The feet, of course, remain unchanged so that your bodies are twisted slightly at the waist. A good exercise for this, and a beautiful swing in its own right, is for the man to place both hands on his partner's shoulder-blades and for the lady to relax her arms completely – leave them in space, or rest them on the man's arms. Try swinging like this, and smile!

Control of body-weight is critical for a good swing. If you are too close together swings don't work well. Practise standing by yourself and taking your upper body back very slightly from the hips, without falling over. That is all you need to do to make the swing better – you don't need to lean back – centrifugal force will take you both backwards slightly so that you get a good connection between the man's hands and the lady's shoulder-blades without making your partner support your weight.

Relax, look into each other's eyes and enjoy the swing.

Once you have that working well, go back to the ballroom hold – but without changing your relative body positions – keep your upper bodies facing each other! Foreshortening the hold between the man's left hand and the lady's right hand works really well – the man loosely cups the lady's elbow and the lady loosely cups the man's arm just above his elbow. Apart from saving space on a crowded dance-floor, it makes it easier to keep your bodies parallel to each other.

Hopefully, ladies, you will have had a good experience in the double-shoulder-blade hold and will now realise that you don't need to grip, pull, press, clamp, dig in, hang off the man or anything else. If the man can get the lady to trust him, by being supportive and gentle (swings don't need strength!) then hopefully she will relax. Both partners must be responsible for their own balance.

To increase the speed of the swing make sure that you have a relaxed symmetrical coupling and then move your feet faster and further; keep them close to the ground – energy spent lifting your bodies up and down in the air is wasted – keep it smooth. The right foot steps forward further around the circle, reaching behind your partner's feet; the left foot just steps where it is.

A good swing should seem effortless – just cradle your partner and move your feet smoothly.

Now that you can swing beautifully, step two is to learn how to get smoothly in and out of the swing, timing it so that you are exactly on the musical phrasing, making the moves flow seamlessly from one into another, and giving your partner a great experience!

Practise! Enjoy your swinging and make your partner smile!