

**ASK DIANE 07-18-08 “How do I teach my student not to muscle around his pivots?”**

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*Ask Diane is a regular advice column in which Diane will offer solutions for common problems and challenges confronting ballroom dance teachers working in the industry today.*

*This month Diane tackles a beautiful and dramatic dance figure that bedevils Leaders and Followers alike: the dreaded and adored pivots.*

**Dear Diane,**

I have been working with a gentleman student for two years, and cannot seem to teach him how to lead pivots correctly. While he does not have much natural ability, he is very dedicated and goes out social dancing several times a week. His progress up until now has been steady, but we are stuck on those darn pivots.

He loves pivots and is constantly trying to lead them by wrenching his partner around, never making anywhere near enough turn on each pivot and possibly hurting her back in the process. He is fine with me “back leading”, but cannot seem to initiate or control the movement himself.

I feel for his social dance partners and am tempted to forbid him from leading pivots unsupervised. Still, it is his favorite dance figure and I feel it is my responsibility to teach him the correct way to dance the figure. Please help.

Sincerely,

Vivian in Minneapolis

**Dear Vivian,**

Thank you so much for this excellent question.

Pivots are beautiful and dramatic, and, if danced correctly, a lot of fun. However, more often than not the man tries to get the lady to turn by muscling her around with his arms and upper body. This leads to sore muscles, an under-turned pivot, and an angry partner.

Pivots are deceptive. They appear relatively simple to execute, but nothing could be further from the truth. The only way to have your student master leading pivots is to be sure he understands the mechanics of the dance figure, from the ground up.

Here is a basic “**Pivots Primer**” to help both you and your student understand the elements of what is going on.

1. The broadest definition of a pivot is “a turn on the ball of the foot without changing weight.”
2. There are *natural* and *reverse* pivots. It is the natural pivot (turning to the right) that is used in succession to travel around the line of dance. Reverse pivots (turning to the left) are more often danced one at a time to change direction or just to travel a short distance.

Now it’s time to concentrate on the nitty gritty mechanics. Here are some important points to remember as your student becomes the Prince of Natural Pivots:

- In natural pivots, a “true” *pivot* occurs on the *left foot back step*. The right foot is held forward in CBMP (contra body movement position). This means that the right foot is held in the same track as the left foot without weight. The right knee is straight and the left knee is bent.
- A *pivoting action* occurs when the right foot steps forward and the left foot is *not* held back in CBMP; in fact, the left leg swings around to make room for the partner’s right leg to step between. *Pivoting actions* always occur on the right foot.
- The left foot provides the power for both Leader and Follower. This occurs by pulling back through the “center” as weight is taken onto the left foot. Partners must turn from the base, not the top, using strong foot turn to propel the turn.
- The right side stays forward (right side leading) throughout the entire pivot.
- To initiate natural pivots, the Leader steps *back* on the left foot (rather than starting the series of pivots on the forward step).
- It’s important for both partners to maintain good posture, as there is a natural tendency for the shoulders to creep up, and to lean too far leftward (especially for

the Follower), and for the Leader to hold the Follower too tight causing the Leader to lean forward and to break from the waist.

- The partners should maintain a strong “right to right” connection. Sliding across each other is a very common problem. Remember that the right ribs, waist, and hips must stay connected.
- When the Leader is on the left leg, pay close attention to lining up the head, left shoulder, ribs, hip, and foot. This is the *axis* of the turn. The left side should turn in “one piece” in an unbroken line. Same is true for the Follower on the left foot pivot, except that there is more of a diagonal stretch leftwards.
- When stepping forward on the right foot, the axis of the turn is through the right shoulder, ribs, hip, and foot, but the head will stay leftward with the swing of the left foot.
- Here are some excellent practice holds to use while you are learning the pivot.
  - Each partner places the right hand on the partner’s left shoulder blade. Then connect left hands so they meet in the center of the partnership, palm to palm, with fingers closed, thumbs on the bottom and pinkies on the top. This will help both partners (especially the Follower) to keep the left sides of the back “up.”
  - Another option is to start with normal hold *except* that the Follower releases the hold with the right hand and places the right arm straight over the top of the Leader’s right shoulder, next to the Leader’s neck. The Leader places the left hand on the top of the Follower’s left shoulder. This creates the correct “separation” of the heads and gives a sense of maintaining that same distance throughout the pivots.
- Keep reminding your student not to turn the upper body faster than his feet on the left foot. It should all happen in one continuous line.
- Try using a pivot arrow. Draw an arrow on a piece of 8 ½ x 11 paper and place it under your student’s left foot with the right foot in CBMP. Have your student turn the arrow clockwise. This will help teach him to turn from his base, instead of his upper body.
- You as the instructor should keep in mind that the Leader and the Follower have slightly different footwork and rise and fall:
  - As the Leader steps back on the left foot, the footwork is “toe-heel-toe” (the left heel lowers and skims the floor during the turn) and the rise and fall is “up, then lower.”

- As the Follower steps back on the left foot, the footwork on the back step is “toe” and the rise is “up.”
- When the Leader steps forward on the right foot, the footwork becomes “heel-toe” and the “rise is at the end of the step”.
- As the Follower steps forward on the right foot the footwork is heel-toe and the rise and fall is “up, then lower.”

Whew! That’s a lot of technical information and a lot of hard, technical work for you to do with your student. As you are trying to put the pivots together bit by bit, let me troubleshoot with you. There are many reasons why pivots don’t work. Here are some of the most common problems:

- Your student does not have a solid understanding of the terms “pivots”, “pivoting action” and “axis of turn.”
- Your student is jumping in too fast. He is trying to do pivots with a partner before he has a firm understanding of all the technical components that make up that figure and before he is able to execute it alone.
- Your student is trying to force the Follower around with his upper body instead of turning from his base. You may need to bring in mechanical aids. Have him try the figure with a pivot arrow under his left foot. Have him place a dollar bill between his upper legs while holding his right leg forward in CBMP. Now have him initiate the pivot, being sure to turn the pivot arrow and at the same time not dislodge the dollar bill from between his legs. This little exercise will get him turning from his base!
- Make sure your student is making a complete *half turn* with each step.

Above all, Vivian, be sure your student knows he is banned from attempting pivots with a partner before he can execute them perfectly by himself!

Thank you so much for this terrific question and for the opportunity to examine pivots in depth. I wish you and your student the best.

Warm Regards,

Diane

*Diane Jarmolow welcomes your teaching questions. Feel free to contact her by email at [diane@teachballroomdancing.com](mailto:diane@teachballroomdancing.com). For more information about teacher training,*

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