

ASK DIANE 02-01-2008

Diane Jarmolow is the founder and director Ballroom Dance Teachers College, the first comprehensive vocational training program for ballroom dance teachers in the country. She is the former owner of the Metronome Ballroom in San Francisco and is widely regarded as the nation's foremost expert on ballroom dance teacher training. She has trained hundreds of dance teachers including United States and world champions. She consults regularly at ballrooms across the country and around the world on a variety of issues concerning teacher training and teacher support at all stages of a teacher's professional career.

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.

Dear Diane,

I have three gentleman students who all share the same problem. No matter how many times I correct them, they constantly look down while they are dancing. These gentlemen have been studying for a long time, but this one problem will not go away. It's becoming tiresome to repeat "Look up! Look up! Look up!" as we glide across the dance floor. Often they will continue to look down even as I am verbally correcting them! I don't like getting frustrated at my students and I know they are working hard. We are all at our wits' end and are looking forward to your advice.

Sincerely,

Laura in Florida

Dear Laura,

Thank you for this great question.

This is one of the most common problems, especially for leaders. Everyone starts out as a beginner looking at the floor. Leaders are always afraid they'll be stepping on their partner's feet!

The problem can persist however, as you've discovered, even after your students have mastered the basic steps. When a dancer looks down, his head moves down as well. This breaks the line of the spine and causes problems with a dancer's posture and with his floor craft. Remind your students that the head is the crown jewel of the spine.

It sounds like what you have is an *awareness* problem. You keep telling your students to look up and they keep looking at the floor. This is because they aren't aware that they are looking down. Men are used to looking down because they are generally taller than their female partners. It feels natural and courteous.

Your job is to make your students aware of the feeling of their head in the correct position. The best way to do this is visually. Have them identify something at eye level on each of the four walls. For example, on Wall 1 there is a clock, on Wall 2 there is a mirror, on Wall 3 there is a door and on Wall 4 there is an Argentine Tango poster.

Next, have your student stand with his back to the wall and his heels touching the wall. Tell him to bring the back of his head against the wall. This is the perfect alignment for his spine—but the feeling can be a shock for many students who are used to looking down.

Keeping this ideal position, have your student begin to dance a left turning box step in the Waltz, where the leader makes $\frac{1}{4}$ turn to the left on each measure. Have him start with his head in the correct position and say out loud what he sees—e.g. “Now I am looking at the clock. It is 3:30.” As he dances through the step, have your student keep up a running verbal commentary of what his eyes are seeing.

It might sound something like this “Now I am seeing myself in the mirror. I am looking at my brown hair and can see the stereo in the background. Now I can see the door and the shade is pulled down over the window at the top. Now I am looking at the Argentine Tango poster and the lady’s red dress. I see again the clock on the first wall. It is still 3:30; I close my feet and complete the step.”

By encouraging your student to be mindful and describe out loud what he is seeing, you are forcing him to circumvent his natural, subconscious tendency to look down and see only the floor. In my experience, this is the best exercise to fix your students’ problems.

It can also be fun, however, to bring in some props. For example, you can take a yardstick and attach one end under your student’s belt. Have him hold his head against the top end, and then dance a left turning box, making sure the back of his head stays in contact with the yardstick at all times. You can also have your student wear a cervical collar or neck brace, which will hold his head in the correct position. Have him dance like this for an entire lesson and he will begin to master the muscle memory for his correct head position.

Good luck, Laura! Thanks again for this terrific question. Let me know how things work out.

Warm Regards,

Diane

Diane Jarmolow welcomes your teaching questions! Feel free to contact her by email at diane@teachballroomdancing.com. For more information about teacher training, support, and professional certification, visit Diane’s web site at www.teachballroomdancing.com