

## Harmonious Movement – Refining Closed Position

Please see the document **Harmonious Movement – General Principles** (at <https://home.csulb.edu/~kwest/wido/wi-do.html>> Improving Dance Knowledge) which includes helpful cautions and knowledge which dancers should understand.

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When first learning partnership dancing, students are taught that in “dance position” the **Lead** places his right hand on **Follow’s** back (left shoulder blade) and positions his left hand so that she can place her right hand in it at about her eye level; her left arm extends so that her left hand is on his upper right arm. They both should be holding their own elbows up, out away from the body (the **Follow** should not put too much pressure on the **Lead’s** arm because it compromises his energy since the added weight makes it very difficult for him to keep his own elbows elevated). They also should know that their bodies are offset so that their right foot can extend between their partner’s feet so that they need not fear that they will step on their partner’s toes.

Such descriptions are sufficient at the beginning because dancers are just becoming accustomed to moving in close proximity to another person, so additional information is likely too much. But since dancing is a partnership activity where dancers desire to harmonize their movement as much as possible, refining their dance position can be key to improving their dancing. The human body has many places and ways that it can move and the position dancers use initially allows many joints to operate independently. Procedures below provide guidance for eliminating extraneous movements and enhancing dancers’ ability to move as a single unit.

In the International style Standard rhythms dancers must remain in Closed Position (and/or Semi-Closed). Closed Position is also common in the American style Smooth dances. So, understanding ideas to improve the ability to dance harmoniously in Closed Position is essential. Comments below relate to the basic position used in the Waltz, Foxtrot, Quickstep, and Viennese Waltz rhythms with variations for other rhythms noted.

### Basic Assumptions

Often dance coaches prescribe positions for the unique bodies of a specific couple or their level of dancing. Because of this, caution is advisable in simply passing along information other dancers were taught. It is essential to realize the *purpose* for what is done and to apply *principles* related to one’s own level of dancing, the relative heights and arm lengths of the partners, and to account for specific idiosyncrasies of their partnership such as physical limitations and body shapes.

As a general rule, positions are taken so that they allow dancers to harmonize their movement by being as connected as possible while also allowing both dancers to move freely. This is accomplished by good **tone** in their arms (creating a reliable **frame**) in all dance rhythms, and at the higher levels of dancing the Standard/Smooth rhythms by achieving **body contact** extending from the bottom of the ribcage to the hips (recognizing that there are times the connection is only higher and sometimes only lower, and there are even times when the connection shifts from one side of the body to the other).

In achieving a maximally-effective dance position, the goals include:

- Stabilizing various joints (shoulders, elbows, wrists, fingers) which is often described as “**tone**” to create a dance “**frame**” as well as positioning the body so that partners can dance with effective leading in all rhythms and as *one unit* in the Standard/Smooth rhythms,
- Achieving stability while simultaneously allowing both dancers to have maximum freedom and fluidity of movement to interpret dancing *to the music*,
- Allowing both dancers to feel comfortable and relaxed, with the **Lead** providing *indications for movement* instead of actions in which the **Follow** feels pushed or pulled harshly, and
- Creating an artistically pleasing, joyful, and “effortless” appearance for themselves as well as observers.

## Closed Position and Its Variations

In the ballroom world Closed Position includes the positions that in round dancing are called Banjo and Sidecar. So, while some treat these as three different positions, they remain modified Closed Positions which in ballroom are named “Outside Partner” or “OP” (analogous to Banjo) and “Partner Outside,” “Left Outside Partner,” or “LOP” (for Sidecar). Some round dance teachers have referred to Banjo and Sidecar as “shapes” rather than separate positions to reinforce their close relationship.

As the basis for all three, this document discusses the basic Closed Position. Banjo and Sidecar as well as Semi-Closed (called “Promenade” in ballroom), Butterfly (also called “Two-Hand Hold”), and Open Position are treated in other documents.

Pertinent elements to consider to improve Closed Position include posture, the connection on the **Lead’s** right and **Follow’s** left sides, the connection on the **Lead’s** left and **Follow’s** right sides, achieving helpful body contact, and the **Follow’s** head.

## Posture

Dancers should stand with their bodies erect. Though erect, the bodies are not stiff or rigid like a plank with their upper and lower body constantly facing the same direction, though often new dancers treat their bodies this way. On the occasions when that does occur, the body is said to be in a “**neutral**” position. More often, however, the upper body (think: *shoulders*) and the lower body (think: *hips*) are **not** on the same vertical plane. In other words, the body twists at the waist so that the shoulders and the hips face different directions. When bodies are twisted in this manner, it is said they are in “**contra body**” which means that one part of the body is *against* the other part, or they are not aligned vertically, or not in a neutral position.

Dancers stand in a way that they attempt to make the *front side of their body* as much like a vertical flat plane as possible so they can achieve the maximum amount of body contact with their partner. Admittedly this is more difficult for women whose shape tends to be like an hourglass rather than a flat plane. Consequently, ladies must change their shape more than men do; men might be quite flat initially. To achieve it, female instructors have sometimes encouraged their male partners to “give me your body” or female partners to “give your partner your heart.” They are not talking about a romantic relationship. These figurative expressions are intended to encourage **Follows** especially to *use the muscles in their back to (1) push the lower ribcage toward the partner and (2) rotate the upper body slightly to the right*. Doing this:

1. Makes the shoulders go back and down which helps dancers keep their bodies erect and their head away from their partner’s head,
2. Allows large back muscles to help elevate the elbows to be able to keep them held outward away from the body more easily than using only the muscles (deltoids) on the outside of the shoulders,
3. Makes the lower pelvic bone also go back which moves the waist forward and makes the front side of the body as straight as it can get from bust to hips so that the flattened torso can match the partner’s flattened torso as closely as possible, and
4. Allows the **Follow** to be touching the **Lead’s** body in order to be very responsive to changes as he moves forward, back, or side and even to slight changes in his body as he rotates his frame or changes from one dance position to another.

The result is that especially the **Follow’s** body intentionally curves in the shape some have likened to a banana with the shoulders and lower torso curving away from partner creating the main part of the body to be as straight as possible against her partner, instead of caved inward in the natural human posture.

That posture is one way to pull the stomach in and is very different from how many people stand “naturally” or the pose of “Pull your stomach in,” which women are sometimes encouraged to do. The latter action makes the

shoulders and lower pelvic bone round *forward* and creates a *hollowed out midsection* which cannot connect with the partner's body. It is exactly the opposite of the necessary posture for a good connected dance position.

It makes sense that dancers strive for maximum contact without interfering with the partner's movement. In order to meld any two objects together by welding or glue, for example, the more places they are joined, the more stable the connection. It is the same in dancing!

## Connection at Lead's Right and Follow's Left Sides

The position of the arms and hands in relationship to one's *own body* constitutes the "**Dance Frame.**" So, this section and the next fully describe an effective dance frame.

While the **Lead's** hand on the **Follow's** back is fine initially, it involves two nearly flat surfaces, so it is easy for the hand to slip or slide out of position. Also, the **Follow's** left hand might be placed in a number of ways on the **Lead's** upper arm, with some more advantageous than others.

A better connection would include more self-conscious contact points which remain stable or more difficult to slide out of position and which allow for more points where the **Follow** can sense changes in the **Lead's** body movement or alignment, so it enhances leading and following.

The **Lead's** right cuff (wrist area) is placed snugly beneath the Follow's shoulder joint (her armpit) with slight **upward pressure** *which stabilizes her shoulder joint*. His fingers extend toward her back and are held with fingers together. Adjusting to partners of varying heights, the **Lead's** elbow remains at the same elevation, and his *forearm only* changes elevation to accommodate partners of varying heights.

How much is slight pressure? Very little. Place your hands together in front of your body with a piece of paper between them. Very little pressure is the amount needed so that the piece of paper doesn't fall.

When partner is shorter, his forearm slants down, changing from the elbow only; when she is taller, his forearm slants upward, again changing only from the elbow. There is an obvious straight line from his elbow to his wrist with a very slight downward angle of his *hand* which also assists in keeping his elbow elevated. These days his hand otherwise does not play any significant role in leading (i.e., the fingers or palm do not press significantly against the **Follow's** body and can even not touch her back at all).

The **Follow's** *left upper arm* ideally has some contact with his *forearm* (another connection) with an extremely modest amount of **pressure downward** created from her deltoid (the shoulder muscle) which helps keep her left shoulder down and her elbow up. Her left hand ideally is placed so that her **thumb** is on the *front of his upper arm* in his natural muscle indentation between the deltoid and bicep (the muscle on the outside of the upper arm), and her **middle** (strongest) **finger** is at the *back of his upper arm* to enable her to remain stable and readily sense changes as his upper body moves forward or back or rotates side to side. Her other left fingers need have no connection to his arm at all.

If the **Follow** is considerably shorter, her hand placement can be lower on his arm so that she has a comfortable posture instead of straining to reach a higher position. If her arm is considerably shorter than his, her elbow may even be above his arm, possibly nesting in the crook of his elbow. The generalization is that on this side of the body there is *one* elbow (generally the **Follow's** since she is further to the **Lead's** right side so it is more prominent) and the **Lead's** elbow is not noticeable.

When dancers have good **tone** in their own frame (which means that they maintain the same shape of their arms *in relationship to their OWN bodies* so that there is little to no change in the angles of their shoulder joints and elbow joints while in Closed Position), it is possible to effectively lead from this side of the body even without contact on the other side of the body!

### International and American Tango

Since in International and American Tango there are often very abrupt changes of the body (such as head flicks), dancers **lock their arms** on this side to produce an even stronger connection. Consequently, dancers adjust their position so that in addition to the contact and slight pressure of his forearm and her upper arm, the **Follow's** forearm and hand extends outward and lower then moves back **under** the **Lead's** upper arm so that a portion of her hand and her thumb can have slight *upward pressure* allowing his upper arm to have a *slight pressure downward*. Her **forearm and hand** make *one straight line* from elbow to fingertips.

Changing from “normal” Closed Position to the Tango Closed Position requires a more acute (narrower) angle at both partner's elbows which usually causes the **Follow** to be positioned more to the **Lead's** right side. In turn, this creates the sensation (or reality) that his arm extends further around her back. Additionally, it causes their feet to be slightly offset from each other with the right foot of each further back from one's left foot (so the ball of the right foot is adjacent to the instep of the left foot), which in turn causes each dancer to step on **one track** (a position called **Contrary Body Movement Position or CBMP**) on one step and a following step with **same side lead** with feet again on **two tracks** (and then alternate those two track patterns with repeated steps in the same direction in the Tango Closed Position).

### Argentine Tango

Argentine Tango has yet another hold for Closed Position (aka “**Close Embrace**”). The **Follow's** left arm can extend to the **Lead's** shoulder and her hand can even extend behind his neck; the **Lead's** arm extends further around her back which often causes the **Follow's** head to look to the right or press against his chest or head. The hold may even change from one figure to the next for comfort. Their hold can change as they make large leg and body movements. Generally, their hips are further away from the partner to accommodate dramatic leg movements (resulting in a slant of their bodies).

### Paso Doble

The “Paso Doble hold” is also different on this side of the bodies: the **Follow's** left hand is somewhat lower on the **Lead's** right arm (closer to his elbow), and his right hand provides a “cradle” for her upper arm approximately above her elbow.

## Connection of Lead's Left and Follow's Right Sides

Dancers' elbows are held so that they are approximately parallel with the **Follow's** elbow on the other side of their bodies (or about the same height above the floor). Their forearms extend outward so that the hands are approximately at eye level of the **Follower**. If there is a great deal of difference in their heights, they adjust the height of the hands to a level which is a reasonable compromise for both of them to be comfortable.

There are personal differences in how dancers hold these hands, though the common **purpose** is to present a comfortable and *compact hold*. One method is that the **Lead's palm** is vertical with a straight line from his forearm through his wrist (however, his hand can bend back at the wrist to create large body sways in the new style of dancing with three dimensions of their upper bodies rather than the more traditional two). The **Follow's** hand is placed against his so that their thumbs are adjacent to one another and hands rotate out slightly so four fingers of each wrap around to the back of the partner's hand with the angles of fingers at the **second joints** greater than at their knuckles (in other words, attempt to minimize the prominence of the knuckles and show as

flattened of a hand as possible from the wrist to the middle finger-joint). Both have a slight upward pressure, and the **Follow's** hand generally bends back at the wrist. (In large sways of their upper bodies, if the **Lead's** hand bends back, the **Follow's** wrist straightens.)

Other choices are used when dancers find them more comfortable, such as intertwining one finger (the **Lead's** index finger between the **Follow's** ring finger and little finger) or even intertwining all of the fingers beginning with the **Lead's** index finger between the **Follow's** index finger and thumb. Note, however, that this hold is particularly conducive when dancers *remain in Closed Position*. When they do open work, including Underarm Turns, intertwining fingers can inhibit a rapid transition of the hands to comfortably and effectively lead and follow the turns.

Regardless of the choice of this hold, both dancers should have just a slight pressure toward the partner's hand with neither of them gripping so hard that the partner's hand feels trapped and uncomfortable.

### Latin and Rhythm Dances

In the Latin/Rhythm dances the forearms on both sides of their bodies are generally more vertical so that one's elbows are closer to the partner's elbows than in the Standard/Smooth rhythms. This stance is created to provide extra room for Cuban hip motion.

### Argentine Tango

In Argentine Tango, dancers often have contact with their upper bodies while keeping their hips away from their partner in order to be able to move their legs freely. This creates a definite slant of their upper bodies toward each other. Their nearly straight arms can also extend downward near the sides of their bodies.

### Paso Doble

In Paso Doble the **Lead** dramatically changes the position of the arms on this side of their bodies (e.g., moving them way up, down, or between their bodies) to indicate changing positions and shapes, which also indicates there is space between bodies.

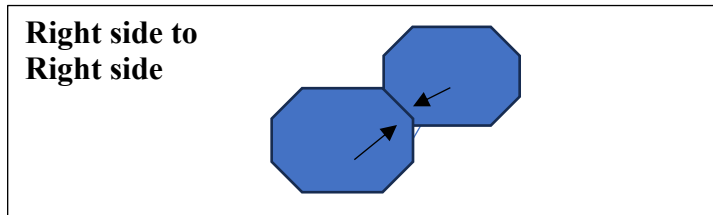
## Body Position and Contact

Initially dancers cannot be expected to dance with body contact; that comes in time if they move to higher levels of dancing, but there are some mechanics they can apply immediately to achieve comfortable and enjoyable dancing.

When dancers are first learning to dance, they should be encouraged to have their bodies offset from one another so that their right foot can point between their partner's feet. The first reason is so that they have a clear place to step without bumping into their partner's toes (and consequently they do not need to look where their feet are being placed). As dancers progress in their dancing and their bodies are close together, *long strides are essential* in the Standard/Smooth dances when they perform turns and advanced figures. When they step well between their partner's feet, the right foot of the person moving forward is near the partner's left foot so (1) they have a common pivot point to make turns easily and (2) they can keep their bodies together. When they dance close together with long strides, the inside of their right thigh has contact with the inside of their partner's right thigh.

When they choose to achieve body contact, they are instructed to place "right sides together." But caution is necessary here, because "**side**" *does not mean* the point where a vertical plane divides the front of one's body from the back. Rather, "**side**" is a *vertical line* which extends from the most prominent part of the *lower ribcage* to just *inside the front of the hip bone*, which can be imaged as aligned with a vertical line at man's

suspender and a woman's bra strap (or *midway* between the naval and the vertical line demarking the front and back of the body). In Closed Position, the **Lead's** right "*side*" and the **Follow's** right "*side*" are adjacent to each other. If the **Lead** has buttons down the front of his shirt, they might be seen by observers.



Again, to achieve body contact with one another, the **Follow** elevates her lower ribcage (by pushing it forward with back muscles which simultaneously lowers her shoulders, makes her head move slightly back, and elevates her chin slightly) in a position described as a "**body stretch**" which is one of the four ways that "**rise**" is accomplished in standard/smooth dances. Then she rotates her *upper body* slightly to her right to make contact with her partner at their right "**sides**." He elevates his ribcage by pushing it forward and rotates it slightly to the right (though generally not to the same extent as the **Follower**), providing a counterbalance for the weight shift of their upper bodies. Round dance pioneer Eddie Palmquist described this action of both dancers as "**spiraling up to your partner**." Curiously, as they do this, they also can sense a bit more pressure of their lower body toward the floor (some say they feel "**more grounded**").

This action flattens their bodies as much as possible, since their waist comes closer to their partner, which allows them the opportunity for maximum body contact and creates what is described as a "banana shape," especially for the **Follow**, because her change is more extreme and she rotates a bit more. Her head and lower pelvic bone are back further from her waist. Obviously, dancers with varying body types and shapes must adjust how they each alter their own posture in order to achieve maximum body contact.

This "**side**" is somewhat prominent on a human body, so it feels as if that area "*points*" toward the partner, which is needed to keep them together. If a more "flat portion" of their bodies are adjacent, their bodies can too easily slide toward the right out of position. Because of body shapes, some dancers alter the slants of their bodies very slightly, generally so that the **Follow's** body "*points*" toward the **Lead's** body.

## Follow's Head

Dancers are told that in Closed Position the **Follow's** head is "to her left," so if she turns her head to the left initially, that is fine. However, as dancers improve their Closed Position, refinement of this concept is needed.

Her head in space *is left* of the **Lead's** head because their bodies stand offset from each other. However, she *does not* (1) rotate her head (turn her face toward her left), (2) tip her head back (so her chin is elevated), or (3) tilt her head (slant her head back so that the top of her head is closer to her shoulder)!

Instead, *she keeps her head aligned at the top of her spine* (as normal) *and also aligned with the front of her body* (as normal). The head "change" occurs *because she elevates her ribcage and rotates her body to the right*. In other words, she moves her **body** out and away from her head, and because the head is connected to her torso (creating the "banana" shape), her head does in fact *look* to the left, is *slanted* in space, and is slightly *tilted* back! It is an *illusion* that the **Follow** simply moves her head; the change is a **result of her body changing**, not a manufactured change of the head itself.

In other words, if she is looking in a specific direction in the room prior to "spiraling up to her partner," she continues to be looking in the very same direction after *her body rotates from underneath her head* to create the described appearance. Her head and her spine continue in their same alignment with each other, but their *orientation* changes because her **body slant** has changed.