

POISE

A word not often heard in today's lexicon and hardly ever mentioned in square or round dancing. The word, poise, may get a few raised eyebrows from those who consider poise only relegated to the ballroom dance world. Some folks may roll their eyes, as if to say "here we go talking about some historic square dance oddity again". Friends, the term may not be engaging however the mechanics that define poise in square and round dancing is what creates dancers who are successful and stay in the activity longer. Poise has been part of my personal lesson plan in all programs for many years. In my opinion, it is more important to teach poise in a beginner's class than it is to teach extended applications or what some call "DBD". When poise and styling (dance technique) are part of learning a new call, dancers are better able to dance the calls without breakdowns. Anytime square breakdowns can be avoided, it will reduce frustration (dancers and caller) and start to build the dancer's self-confidence.

1. Poise is control of your body's movements – the difference between a good dancer and one who is bumping into others in the square, lagging behind the pace of calls, or just plain rough. In square dancing we teach "shuffle" steps, which is where your body weight is shifted forward over the balls of your feet. Heels rise off the floor and steps are made by sliding forward on the balls of your feet. Make sure that both feet are in constant contact with the ground. This adds stability. When someone is shuffling (sliding with both feet on the floor) it is difficult, if not impossible, to push them over. By contrast, a person simply walking lacks this stability and is very easy to push over.

The shuffle step in time with music has the forward slide on the downbeat of music, also known as the "boom". In shuffle rhythms where the beat is "boom, boom, boom, boom", the shuffle step should feel like a sliding march. Practicing this step can be done just by clapping your hands and shuffling forward on every clap. Clap fast and you won't keep in time with the beat for very long. The speed of clapping – the tempo being too fast is what causes dancers to stop shuffling and simply walk, out of time with the music. Callers who teach dancers how to shuffle should also slow the music so they may enjoy shuffling.

Dancers should have hands at waist height and shoulders relaxed. Keep elbows pointed down and at their side, especially when dancing calls in ocean waves. When elbows come up, dancers build torque in their shoulder muscles and often, without realizing, are bearing down on the adjacent dancers. Sometimes the force is great enough to hurt adjacent dancers. When the elbows come up, dancers will find themselves reaching in front of them and often for the wrong dancers. As a caller, I see when dancers do "casting" calls like "Cast Off", "Spin The Top", "Relay The Ducey" and when elbows come up, dancers will reach out and grab anyone causing the square to break down. Finally, elbows up are a hazard to shorter dancers, where the risk is an elbow to the face from a dancer lacking control of their body movements.

2. Poise is physical balance – the difference between being a good dancer and one who stumbles or falls in square. For many years we have taught dancers to stand up straight, sucking in their "dining room". This simple act allows dancers to not only look good, but also keep their square from breaking down. Aside from a physical disability that may preclude good posture, a dancer who slouches will not be able to properly execute "pull by" calls like "Square

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Thru", "Right & Left Thru", etc. Their hands are too low because of poor posture, almost like they are dragging their knuckles on the ground. It is not lack of understanding the definition, it is lack of good dance posture that cause many breakdowns.

The first time many of the dancers in my beginner program hear me talk about dance posture is when the call, "Swing" is taught. A slouching dancer will not only be incapable of smoothly executing the call, but will also fall behind causing the square to breakdown. During my years of calling, some of the most graceful "Swings" were executed by dancers in their 80's and 90's. They had learned physical balance and were not encumbered by the slowing down of aging.

At the same time, dancers are taught to "tuck in their sitting room". A polite way of saying "tighten their gluteal muscles" and this action keeps their feet directly under their moving bodies. Sadly, we've seen the dancer who trips other dancers by getting their feet into another dancer's path or becomes tangled up in their own feet. This is more than not looking good, it is a hazard and one that can be corrected.

Becoming a dancer with poise is not accidental. It is learned and it is not difficult to learn. Poise is taught by the experienced caller, cuer, or dancer to help other dancers become smooth dancers. Poise and styling are the difference between being the dancer that others model themselves after versus someone who others may avoid.

Please send your questions or comments to buddy@buddyweaver.com – I am here to help you become a better dancer or caller.