



Edinburgh University Swing Dance
Society notes on:



Balboa: 1) the basic

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Stance: Balboa has neither the ‘get down’ of Savoy-style Lindy Hop, nor the exaggerated upright bearing of ballroom. Stand normally, but with knees just bent (so little that you know they are, but someone looking at you will not).

Rhythm: The Balboa basic is 8-count; “step, step, some-thing, step, step, some-thing”. In the classical basic, the step step bits are on 1-2 and 5-6 and the ‘something’s are on 3-4 and 7-8, but later on you will sometimes change this.

The basic steps: there are various versions of the ‘basic’ from the old days, but the one now called the basic almost everywhere uses a ‘hold-down’ as its ‘some-thing’. The ‘hold’ lifts the heel of the relevant foot off the floor, knee a little forwards, the toe still in gentle contact with the floor. So the rhythm runs “step step hold down step step hold down”. Practice separately from your partner first.

Leaders: You have to control the shape of the dance as well as do the steps. In the classical basic, begin stepping backwards a little on your left foot, then backwards on your right foot. On the L foot ‘hold’, leave your weight (middle of your chest) forwards, so that if you stopped dancing at that moment you would topple slowly forwards: this feeling is very important if the follower is going to pick up the change of direction in the basic. Put your L foot down. On the step step (RL), move forwards. On the hold with your R, hold your weight back (again, you would slowly topple backwards if you just stopped). Put your R down and start again. When you first do this, your back and forwards movement will almost certainly be too large for Balboa style. That’s OK – get used to the feel with your partner, and as you practice you will become more accurate and can make everything smaller.

Followers: You start with a step step R-L. What you have to do sounds easy but is hard – do not ever think about directions: leave all of that stuff to the leader! You have two simple rules. 1) Always take the next step with the foot you are not already standing on and 2) always put it down underneath you, wherever the leader happens to be putting you at the time. Do not be kind and ‘help’ the leaders – the whole lead and follow thing will only work if you can learn from it going wrong.

Partnering up: Balboa is a close-hold dance. Each of you should stand upright, without compensating for unequal heights. Leaders, take your left hand and feel your right collar bone; it dips down. Now imagine a vertical line running down the right hand side of your chest from the lowest point of your collar bone right down into your leg. This should be your line of contact with your partner, who should stand so that her sternum touches that line (or her cleavage faces it, for followers with a fuller figure). The main contact is with the chest. You sometimes use contact at thigh level too but this is not a Latin dance and does not use pelvic contact or leading (North American propriety!). The lady will therefore be offset to your right side, and not quite facing but in a slight ‘v’. Leaders, place your right hand around the lady’s back, the hand being between the bottom of her shoulder blades. Ladies, place your left hand on or just over the man’s shoulder. You ought to have some contact between the top of the man’s right elbow and the lady’s arm – if it is not there, the man needs to raise his elbow a little, though not as much as he would in

ballroom. The man's left hand connects with the lady's right in a 'lazy' ballroom manner. If the lady is tall enough, she can look over the man's shoulder. If not, she can turn to her right to look 'out' rather than stare fixedly into his armpit (actually, many Balboa followers dance with their eyes closed much of the time).

Dancing the basic: having established the hold, start dancing! Look at the list below and consider whether any of the problems are happening to you.. if so, try to deal with them one by one and be patient with each other. The Balboa basic is hard to learn and will take time.

Frequent problems:

Pogo dancing: There are two 'pulses' in Balboa. One is the forward and back one that the man has been reading about above. The other, present strongly in some styles (eg Maxie Dorf) and less so in others (eg Willy Desatof), is an up-and-down pulse. This should be no more marked than it is in walking: if you feel you are pogo-ing, there is a problem. Make the steps more shuffly, and the holds gentle. If you have the pulse under control but are not doing it at quite the same time, you are probably not making the contact you are meant to - close up!. The problem of poor contact can also happen if the lady is of a fuller figure and is not being very well-supported by her clothing.

Rocking: When enthusiastic people say that 'Balboa rocks', they don't mean that literally. If you find yourselves rocking from side to side, this is usually either because your legs are absolutely straight, or because one of you is lifting your whole foot off the ground with a flat sole, as if about to stamp on something, in the holds. Please re-read the notes on the holds above, and try again.

Knocking knees and trodden on feet: Both of you should only tread UNDERNEATH your own body. Leaders, that means you lead by taking your centre (chest) forward first and stepping underneath it – you do not step first and then catch up with your body. If knees and feet are clashing, at least one of you must be violating the 'only step underneath you' rule (since your bodies cannot be occupying the same space). Be patient with each other, and find out who is doing it.

Extending the basic:

When the basic is working well, try this (which will really help to sharpen up your connection). Leaders, instead of just doing step step before a hold-down, do one or more extra sets of 'step step', still moving in the same direction: the lady should just follow you and only hold when she feels you doing so (leaders remember that weight change business – the 'topple'). Do NOT go on to try anything more than the basic until it is good enough that you can throw these extensions into your dance at random moments and have them working every time. Please trust us on this – you really need the basic to work well before thinking of doing anything fancy, and people who rush on usually acquire lots of bad habits that they need to spend ages losing again.

To make suggestions or to request up-to-date copies, e-mail Balboa@swingdoctors.org.uk

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