



HOW HARD WILL IT BE?

Planning the difficulty of your material in advance

"Oh, the knee bone's connected to the shin bone....."

When you're dancing, all the parts of your body work as a team: Ears take in the calls, brain decides what to do, and feet do the moving. But each part can only do so much — run the music too fast, and your feet can't keep up.

It's the same with your ears and brain. If the calling over-taxes them, it quickly becomes impossible to dance. Controlling the difficulty of your calling comes in two parts: Controlling the difficulty of the material you call, and helping dancers cope with the difficulty level you've planned for. This sheet covers the first facet.

Limits and Coping

Your brain runs with three basic limits:

1. How much it can keep track of at once

This is called "Short Term Memory." It's where you keep things like words in call names as you hear them, which way you're supposed to move next, and what direction she said to turn at the end of this Tag the Line.

2. How fast it can get things from memory

If you don't know the call, of course, this will take forever! But the better you know a call, the faster you can remember what to do. Unfamiliar calls take up to a second or so. Calls that sound like other calls take longer, as do calls that feel like other calls.

3. How fast it can deal with what's coming in your ears as it tells your body what to do.

It can do 2-5 things a second. But if it's busy, it can miss new calls coming in. "What

did he say?" But everyday life violates these limits all the time—so your brain also "keeps things simple" for itself.

Chunking

It groups things together, so Right and Left Thru becomes one thing to remember and execute, rather than "Step forward, take right hands, pull by — remember to let go — now reach out your left hand and wait for his hand around your waist..." This saves short-term memory, since each chunk takes only one spot. It also saves brain cycles, because the one chunk controls your body without further brainwork.

Simplification

Notice that you can define a call 'til you're blue in the face, but that if you only use it from right-hand waves your dancers can only do it from there? Or, if you call Fan the Top, men always move forward and right.

Anticipation

"Half Tag, Trade and ... Fan the Top?!" And dancers tend to keep moving; it buys them a beat or two of thinking time, and they're usually headed in the right direction. Dancers tend to go where their attention is focused: Watch beginners doing Remake the Thar fail to switch hands.

Making it feel right

Notice that half-sashayed couples tend to become normal (by themselves)? Or that dancers facing out want to turn around? Or that Slide Thru always ends in facing couples? It's the dancers making themselves feel comfortable. Odd positions send a signal of, "something's wrong; fix me!"

How This Affects Difficulty

So, you're sitting down to plan a dance, and maybe write a few interesting sequences. How can you tell whether they will be easy or not? And if they're hard, can you change them a bit — keeping the interesting parts — to get better dancer success?

This section is a check-list of points to look for in your material — things that will make it difficult.

Uncommon Calls: Fan the Top is the best example at Mainstream. People either don't remember the call, do something similar (Spin the Top), or take several beats to remember it.

Obscure Call Usage: From a static square, Heads Walk and Dodge; who does what? How many dancers know this bit of oddity?

Unusual Formations: Left-hand waves. Check out the Choreographic Applications Committee's lists of common usage for what's usual. For truly unusual formations, the dancers won't even *be able to find* the folks they're to work with. E.g., from waves, Peel the Top.

Unfamiliar Starting Arrangements: Ditto. Generally, the problems here are caused by switching "mens" and "ladies" parts of a non-sex-dependent call.

Unfamiliar Ending Formations and/or Arrangements: These are usually the result of an odd starting arrangement. When things are odd, dancers tend to fix them. There are a few common threads:

"But I should end facing in!" From #1/2 lines, Slide Thru.

"But I'm on the wrong side!" From a #1/2 wave, Recycle.

People tend to make normal couples. Ditto facing lines with men on the ends, Pass Thru, Wheel and Deal. You'll wind up with normal couples in the center.

"But this ends in couples!" Have two facing men Slide Thru, and notice that they form a couple afterward.

Unusual Use of Call Rules: Some calls (more often at Advanced) include Cast Off 3/4 in the definition. It's usually an Arm Turn, but can be a "push-type" as well. Similarly, Trades that are usually Arm Turns can sometimes be Partner Trades. The unusual cases feel wrong, so dancers will tend to "fix" them to be Arm Turns.

Cut the Diamond is a good example. From facing lines, Pass Thru, Centers Trade, Centers Pass the Ocean, Cut the Diamond. The points (who should Partner Trade after moving to the center) will force an Arm Turn.

Unusual Call Patterns: i.e., defeating anticipation. Think about how often you call two particular calls in sequence. If you vary from that, dancers will be halfway through your usual call before they notice that you didn't call it. Here are some common combinations, with key words missing. Can you fill them in?

Swing Thru, Boys _____

Swing Thru, Spin the Top _____

(from lines) Pass Thru _____

Half Tag, Trade _____

Heads Lead Right, _____

_____ (2 answers!)

A few years ago, Clark Baker made a great list of these combinations. It's worth studying, both for ideas and to know what dancers will expect.

Overloading: You can say more than dancers are capable of hearing. For example, try calling this fast: "Spin Chain the Gears, but only turn the stars 1/2, men whenever you meet, trade, Heads, if you meet, do a U-Turn Back each time, ladies spread." Now, what call were we doing?

You see this more often if you start saying the next call while dancers are in the midst of an especially difficult move: They either get lost, or don't hear you.

Breaks in Flow: If your sequence requires a dancer to do something other than continue walking forward and turning in the same direction she was going, it will be harder — you've taken away 2 beats of thinking time. In the 70's, you sometimes heard, "You gotta sacrifice flow for challenge." Even the most technical-minded challenge dancers haven't believed that in 10 years.

Focusing Attention Wrong: Dancers' attention is on the hand they last used; failing that, it tends to be forward and toward the center of the square. If you use a call or pair of calls that has attention focused wrong, you'll lose dancers. The following calls/sequences have a mis-focusing of attention in them. Who's going to go the wrong way?

-- (Corner Box) Touch 1/4, Fan the Top

-- (Lines) Pass Thru, Chase Right, Left Swing Thru

-- (Starting DPT) Centers Trade

-- (Corner Box) Do sa do, Right-hand Star

Planning for Dancer Safety

When things go wrong in the square, what's happening? By looking at the kinds of failure, you can plan your material to prevent them.

Sure, some can only be prevented by not using unusual material, by carefully work shopping in advance or by coaching dancers as you call. But properly planned material can do a lot.

Falling Behind / Disorientation: Dancers working at the limit of their ability often make small mistakes, but correct them. That takes time, maybe a beat or two. Getting behind

leads to panic, which leads to more error-making, which leads eventually to breakdown.

To prevent this, keep each challenging section short, and follow it with a call that makes the formation obvious ("Up to the middle and back" is the most common one). Or follow it with a cliché set of calls, which has the same effect: Dancers know where they're supposed to be, they reorient themselves, and the panic subsides.

More subtly, keep body flow working to the dancers' advantage: They'll be less panicky if doing what seems natural gets them to the right place.

Failure to find who to work with: This is the result of misfocused attention. At the critical place, insert a call that gets attention focused the right way. Or add a simple call that uses the formation you want to focus attention on.

"Fixing" things: At high-tension points in your material, panicky dancers will try to make things normal. When they do, arrange your material so they're doing the right thing.

"It's too hard, I can't hear you!" Ever notice that dancers have the most trouble hearing when the material is the toughest? They're too busy dancing to listen to the next call.

One solution: After a hard call, use a simple call with a short name. That way, you can say it right at the end of the hard call, which is usually after the hardest parts.

Rote heading the wrong way: This takes a blend of all the above tricks. If you've got a man looking to his left and moving to the left, he's less likely to head rightward when you call Fan the Top from #1/2 couples.

Similarly, Recycle from a left-hand wave is much more successful when it ends in normal facing couples — even if people try to head the wrong way, they know they're supposed to end normal, and they know they're supposed to end facing the other

folks in the wave. Those together generally make it work OK.

Track II benefits from a similar trick: Have the lead couple normal and the trailers sashayed. Since the trailers are focused on the leaders (and follow them), you're more sure of success.

Prevention Pointers

Here's a checklist of the techniques suggested in the last section, to help plan material that's success-friendly.

Focus Attention: Use calls to get people thinking in the right direction. Getting people to look the wrong way feels gimmicky and cheap; do *you* like somebody who's out to smash you flat?

Keep Endings Normal: The more normal ending arrangements you have for hard calls, the more success there will be.

Keep Flow Correct: This will make even the toughest material a good bit easier. Think of it as another way of giving cues to the dancers about what you want from them.

Meter Difficulty: Don't try to sustain a fever pitch of difficulty. Prevent panic.

Speak Carefully: Word calls for easiest understanding, not for fastest or cutest delivery. Plan your phrasing to present dancers with the information they need as they can handle it, rather than rattling off a 50-word-paragraph-call, standing back, and smiling.

Mix Hard Calls and Short Calls: Give dancers the thinking time they need during a hard call.

Give Re-orientation Time: After something hard, do some things that the dancers are sure of, so they can get mentally caught up.

P5 — Prior Planning = People-Pleasing Performance