

Tips on Becoming a Better Intermediate-Level Dancer

by Laura Brodian Freas Beraha

English country dance and the modern interpretation of English Regency dance are stylistically different. English Regency is not folk dance, but rather is interpreted as a form of early 19th-century aristocratic ballroom dance. Even so, some constants apply to both styles.

I offer you my perspective as a teacher of country dance as it would have been practiced in the ballrooms of the great houses and assembly rooms in the time of Jane Austen. When I teach at my English Regency ‘drums’ (‘drum’ is the Regency word for ‘party’, as in some event that one “drummed” up) I must necessarily address the needs of everyone present. There are, all in the same room and all at the same time, all levels of experience from absolute beginners to long-time seasoned dancers.

Admittedly, I have a patient penchant for beginners. I strive to give newcomers a sense of comfort and ease, and to impart to them the rudiments and period style of the dances so that they can be confident of, participate in, and enjoy the dance.

That said, at the same time I must not ignore the needs of the more experienced dancers. I observe that seasoned (i.e., advanced) dancers, for the most part, are already familiar with style points; they effortlessly and gracefully move in synchronization with the phrasing of the music. They also are efficient helpers to the lesser experienced dancers. Their “feet on the floor” makes the teaching go all the more smoothly.

We now come to those who have stagnated somewhere between beginner and advanced. There are, indeed, some people who suffer from a syndrome I like to call “*Intermediate-itis*”. This condition manifests itself when dancers, having mastered the figures of a dance, believe they are done with learning and growing. They are impatient to just get on with the dance, and do not realize that their job is just beginning. They do, in point of fact, have a lot to learn if they want to experience the flavor of Regency dancing and become truly good dancers.

1. Posture: Early 19th-century ballroom dancers probably did not slouch, stoop, or make unnecessarily florid gestures. Relaxed, erect postures with hands at sides was the call of the day.

2. Marrying the dance to the music: Dance figures have starting and ending points and are tied to musical phrases. Experienced dancers do not start figures early, nor do they rush through them.
3. Figures have places: “Go to some specific place — not just anywhere.” When you exchange places with a partner or with a diagonal, go to the exact place from whence that person came.
4. Starting and ending a figure: Engage in start and stop figure points rather than morphing from one figure to another.
5. If an instruction is unclear, ask for a clarification.
6. Remember that Regency dances were social mixers: Be aware of your surroundings.
 - a. If the longways set develops a large gap, move to close that gap.
 - b. If there’s a circle of couples be aware of uneven spacing between couples and pace yourselves to even it out. Angle in to shorten a space.
 - c. In a longways set if you’re an inactive couple (aka a “second couple”, or “B” couple] you should always be doing something, such as looking down the set to prevent “set creep.”
7. Lead with your eyes: Guide inexperienced dancers by tethering their attention with your smile and gaze.
8. Gentlemen: When the ladies exchange places by the right hand (aka “Ladies Chain” in other dance forms) they are moving on a diagonal; do not make them late by forcing the oncoming ladies to take extra counts by going over to you with their left hand extended. Move to the right into the vacated lady’s position to take the oncoming lady’s left hand as you put your right hand at the back of her waist to escort her around to face the other couple.
9. “Sloppy” Circling: Get out of the habit of circling in an unnecessarily laborious fashion. Circling does not mean “stand still, reach out, take hands, hands pointing down, and then start walking”. Doing so only makes dancers so late that they have to rush (not very elegant) to get all the way around by the end of the phrase. On the very first beat of the phrase start walking, angling in to keep the circle small, taking hands as you go, with hands up and elbows down, and giving weight.
10. Get off the bench and onto the dance floor: The teacher cannot be everywhere at once

and truly appreciates experienced “angels” dancing with newcomers. Just because you’ve already learned the figures, kindly do not sit out during the walk-throughs. Beginners benefit greatly from your movements and eye contact as supplementary prompts. The Regency period had a grace and an elegance that has never been surpassed. Aristocrats of the time believed in “nobless oblige”: the inferred responsibility of the privileged (in our case, more experienced) to act with generosity and nobility toward those less privileged (less experienced newcomer).

If you recognize yourself as a sufferer of Intermediate-itis ask yourself this: Why be a mediocre dancer when you could become a superlative one? All it takes is a willingness to improve, to grow, and to apply oneself. If you challenge yourself, not only will you become a better dancer, you shall certainly savor the flavor of English Regency dancing.

Laura Brodian Freas Beraha has been teaching English Regency Dancing since 1984, and is the founder of the Bay Area and Valley Area English Regency Societies. She hosts a mostly monthly Regency dance party and social tea on third Sunday afternoons in Pasadena, California.



Taking Someone Aside

by Jeff Kaufman

Many dance organizations act as if they have two options in the face of bad behavior: “do nothing” and “full ban.” With a choice between ignoring it and overreacting, it’s not surprising that we often end up implicitly allowing behavior we shouldn’t let continue. If you can become comfortable taking someone aside to talk you can handle small problems before they become large ones.

When I go into one of these conversations, at a surface level my goal is for them to stop doing the thing. The deeper goal, though, is that we can end the conversation with them understanding and accepting the reasoning behind why they need to not do it, as opposed to just feeling capriciously limited. Not only is that more likely to stick, they’re also more likely to stop doing other more subtle things we didn’t directly discuss.

Now, there are cases where I really think a good outcome is unlikely. Maybe they’ve been doing this thing for a long time and seem very set in their ways. Maybe they’re really solidly convinced this is an ok thing to be doing. Still, a general principle of giving people a chance to improve has a lot going for it. One aspect is that you may not have as good a read on them as you think you do, and perhaps they’ll change. Another is that it’s really important to have a fair process you consistently follow: banning someone without warning isn’t going to feel fair to the banned person or your other dancers, however sure you are that a warning won’t change anything. So I find it useful to approach all of these conversations as if the person is going to understand and stop. That way I’m leaving things open, with the opportunity to be pleasantly surprised.

The first consideration in talking to them is deciding who should be the one to do it. Ideally you have someone who can be calm, patient, and firm. It helps if they’re demographically similar (men talking to men, older people talking to older people). I also think one on one conversations tend to work better, because the person feels less set upon, but if none of the organizers are up for that then talking to them as a pair is still worth doing. Another consideration is picking a good place to talk. Ideally there’s somewhere out of the way a bit, where you won’t be overheard and where it won’t be embarrassing to the person to be seen getting a talking to. You don’t want them to be feeling defensive or humiliated. On the other hand, especially if you’re worried about physical violence, you don’t want to be fully secluded. A good place can be somewhere where if you raised your voice you would immediately be heard, and where the other person won’t be between you and an exit.

Then you want to think about a good time to talk. At dances the break is generally good, though if it’s more urgent you can come up to someone immediately as a dance is ending. I’ll tell them I need to speak with them, motioning in the direction I’d like to move. If they don’t want to, I’ll tell them I need to talk to them before they can do any more dancing. I don’t try to get into things while walking over to where I wanted to talk, though I’ll do some small talk if that feels like it will work.

Jeff Kaufman is a Boston-area contra dance organizer and musician. He helps organize the BIDA dance and co-founded its safety committee. He also plays with Kingfisher and the Free Raisins.