

A Little Instruction Goes A Long Way

“You have a balky partner,” the dance instructor told me.

Our teacher’s name was Darlene Hill (an ageless woman in ballet slippers), and this was about 25 years ago when LuAnn and I were taking a ballroom dance class via Kirkwood Community College’s Adult Ed program. Ms. Hill had borrowed LuAnn from me to demonstrate a dance move, and Lu was evidently not sufficiently compliant.

Ever since then I have frequently dragged out Darlene’s quote frequently – every time I step on LuAnn’s toes on the dance floor - as independent verification that any perceived deficiency may not be my own. She’s actually a very good dancer, despite Ms. Hill’s initial analysis.

My first exposure to ballroom dancing was probably in the Iowa City Central Junior High gymnasium in the late 60’s, when every now and then they would combine the girls’ and boys’ gym classes for a week, slap some scratchy 45-rpm records on an industrial-grade record player and attempt to teach awkward but mostly-willing boys how to lead a partner.

I say mostly-willing because at that age I did not get very many opportunities to put my hands on girls without experiencing a significant amount of resistance (and a certain amount of shrieking), so I made the most of it. As a result, I actually learned how to dance and lead a partner.

This is a skill that has turned out to be surprisingly significant to women of all ages. Most guys don’t take the time to learn, and some of them who try couldn’t locate a downbeat with both hands and a GPS – this is a fatal flaw.

At some point most of us discover that we can’t continue to do the Twist to every style of music for the rest of our lives. If you can’t dance a simple waltz or foxtrot, you are to some extent a social cripple. It may only hurt a little at weddings or New Year’s Eve parties, but that’s often enough.

My most recent dance instruction came on a cruise ship in July during one of the days at sea when learning the rhumba seemed to be the only thing of interest (besides the shuffleboard tournament) at 2 p.m. on a Wednesday afternoon. I went stag because LuAnn's nap was taking precedence. "You learn to lead it, I'll follow," she said as she sent me off.

I appeared at the Horizons Lounge on the Lido deck (really) and looked for a loose female to learn with among the half-dozen couples that showed up. The only other single there was a very fit woman who was at least 70 years old and couldn't avoid making a face when it became apparent that we were going to be paired up.

I was wearing shorts and a t-shirt while everyone else there was in "high tea" attire, so I couldn't blame her for assuming she was stuck with the loser. I didn't find out until later that she and her husband were former North American Senior Latin Dance Champions. He was using a walker now, but she still liked to get out.

Anyway, after she realized that I could shuffle my feet to the music and remember a series of steps, she loosened up. She ended up complimenting me on my leading abilities (although she had to correct my closed-position dance hold) and sought me out at subsequent dance lessons.

Anyway, the moral of this story is that a little dance instruction goes a long way. With a single introductory dance class, you can look better than 80% of the people careening around the average dance floor. LuAnn and I know only six or seven swing dance steps that we string together – it looks impressive although it's pretty much the same moves over and over.

We belong to one of several local dance clubs that hold events every few months – let me know if you'd like to join. But you may want to sign up for a Kirkwood class first – tell them you already know the Twist.

Dave Parsons is awaiting his invitation to Dancing With The Stars at the business he co-owns on the Coralville Strip.