



How Can I Move Faster When I Dance

Do you feel sometimes that you just can't move as fast as you need to when dancing?

You have the timing right, you know what the figure is but, you just don't seem to be able to physically move yourself fast enough to do the figure and keep in time.

This has been an issue that quite a few dancers have queried, with the Cha-Cha seeming to get quite a number of mentions so, you too may find that it tests your speed...



Let's look at 3 things you can use to increase your speed when dancing.

1. Make sure you are doing the figures right

There is an old saying in dance teaching; "move slow to be fast and fast to be slow".

This clearly makes little sense - moving slow will not make you fast, however, the saying refers to the look of speed and the proper preparation.

Sometimes moving slow at the start allows for proper preparation and then the required release of energy to give the desired speed.

Sometimes you need to move fast so that you then have time to be slow, while at other times moving slow allows movement to continue steadily; so that speed is what is perceived by those who are watching.

This might seem to be telling you very little but, I am about to make a point...there is a way to do figures that will allow you to have the speed required.

If you are unable to perform a figure fast enough, then first make sure that you are doing it correctly.

2. Imagine moving fast

This might sound a bit like the [Muppet Babies](#) (if you're of that generation) and I am not suggesting that the "power of imagination" can solve all your problems but, sometimes the issue is the speed we think we should or, can move at!

Some runners use rubber bands to help them run faster when training.

This form of assistance does not build strength; if anything, it would make them work less and reduce their abilities but the reason for this training method is to help the runner feel what it is to move faster...the body needs to know what it is to move at this speed, so that it can!

It's not really possible to use rubber bands to help you with many dance figures so we need to find other ways.

Many activities use imaging, but dancing seems to use it in the most sophisticated way and it is amazing what you can make your body do with imaging.

If you are moving slow, then try imagining bands pulling your legs or hips, or other body parts, into position. Imagine parts of your body are well lubricated bearings; perhaps imagine parts of your body are steel springs.

This simple use of imaging will likely be enough and as I mentioned above, dance is not a test of speed and you are most likely able to move as fast as you need to for any figure...you just need to know that you can and expect that of your body!

However, let's consider the case where you're not...

3. Working on speed

Now it's time to build some power into those muscles so that you can move fast enough. It shouldn't take much; you're unlikely to be that far behind the norm.



The key here is working against resistance; however, it is resistance under speed that you want. Being strong is not always enough, you need to work on your ability to apply that strength quickly for fast movement.

- Get some body weights - weights that you wear.
- If your legs aren't fast enough, then get ankle weights.
- If it is your arms, then get wrist weights.
- If it's your hips, then get a belt.
- If it is your lateral movement (your whole body), then get some for all over.

The key to body weights is that your body still remembers what speed it should be able to move at. When you try these dance moves with the weights on, your body will work to apply force faster so that the speed it is accustomed to can be maintained.

Then when you take the weights off - after a few practice sessions - your body will have this enhanced strength-based speed that you can use to move faster.

You need not buy body weights, holding bottles of water can be good for the arms and bodily movement. Sand bags can also be held in your hand, tucked into socks (or tied to ankles) and strapped under a belt or, you can also use a good-sized heat pack.

You most likely have something at home that will do the trick and do not need to buy body weights if you do not want to, but you can of course buy weights too.

Partner (Dance) Connection

If you are reading this, chances are you know a thing or two about the importance of partner connection in dancing and really, without connection, what's the point of dancing together at all?

Once we can recognize what goes into a partnered connection, it only remains to understand each piece so let's unpackage the connection skills.

1: What is connection?

Connection is simply the means by which you move together in partnership on the dance floor. For example; if you were to call your friend in Melbourne, the phone service that keeps you from looking like a crazy person is your *connection* to that person.

Partner dancing is also a conversation but one told through our body (which, after all, is a lot more versatile than a tongue and a set of vocal cords).

2: What makes connection work?

On the second level, we divide connection into the three primary skills that make it 'go'.

Frame; is the placement of our arms and body, to create room for our partner.

Most frames involve some form of physical contact, like closed position or promenade position...a few connections have no contact and are visual only.

Movement; is how we travel with our partner, and how we guide and respond to them.

To use the phone analogy, our frame is the phone itself, while movement is the signal your phone sends and receives to keep the conversation going.

Pressure; is the force we apply to our partner to know what they are going to do next.

It's like the antenna (or the phone cord, if you're old enough to remember those) that connects your calls and makes a conversation possible.

Through the magic of *compression* (pushing) and *leverage* (pulling); you know exactly what your partner is planning to do, before they take a step.

3: The details

These smaller details are like the background pedestrians in a movie or show: you won't notice them, unless they go missing!

Hands in centre keeps you from collapsing your frame or invading your partner's space...try to picture you and your partner as two positively charged magnets; each repelling your clasped hands toward the middle.

Hand placement; is the way your palms connect to your partner to ensure they don't slide off but 'stick' during a dance. For instance, we usually 'hook' our hand holds together with palm and four fingers, so we can apply both compression and leverage without losing grip.

Lock-in the joints; maintains muscle tension in the wrists, elbows and shoulders; enough that your frame will bend *with resistance* and snap back into place when released.

Move from the centre; requires you to initiate every action; from the centre of your solar plexus (just under the ribcage).

Moving from the centre helps your connection look more natural, and less like a wrestling match.

Weight on balls; refers to shifting your weight forward to the balls of your feet. Your frame must move forward with your body, so it doesn't collapse inwards. If you feel like you will fall if your partner removes their arms, pull back slightly.

Energy forward; means applying pressure on your partner's frame.



Think about pushing from your back muscles and continue 'extending' that pressure through the arms and out the palms of your hands.

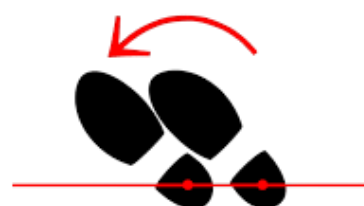
This pressure can switch to the fingers/palm to create a pulling action when needed.

The more we understand a skill like partner connection; the more we 'unpackage it' to reveal smaller skills that aren't as difficult; these skills, when combined, can create a great dancing experience!

Avoiding the 'Heel-Turn' Drama



Heel-Turns; They are a beast to learn, deceptively easy once you think you have learned, but then, like so many things in dance, they feel challenging again once you realize what perfection really looks like.



Part of the importance of perfecting heel turns is similar to the need in travelling Pivots (see Edition 11's article on Pivots).

The impact of each dance partner on the other is significant even when a move or position is only slightly off.

The first part of perfection is knowing the main challenges:

1st Challenge - The word 'Heel-Turn' is a bit misleading.

It suggests to a follower that the follower turns on the heel, which is not the case!

The follower is turned.

A good way to remember this is for a follower to remember that in a heel turn...The LEAD will turn YOU!

2nd Challenge - It looks like the turn is on both heels, when it is not.

The turn happens on one heel, then on the other; In fact, the heel turn actually happens on a flat foot, with the weight on the heel.

Pointing toes to the sky will reduce balance, which is never good.

3rd Challenge - A common complaint of followers; the feeling of being knocked or pulled down by their partner during the turn.

Leaders need to enter the heel turn with Contra body movement (CBM) and allow the weight shift of the followers before a turn is initiated.

Leaders also need to get around the followers before initiating the turn so the follower can use their momentum, and not feel pushed.

4th Challenge - Timing of weight shifts in the turn.

When the follower is closing their feet, it is tempting to close it too quickly.

A good way to prevent this is to think of only partially pulling the front foot back, to allow for the partners' momentum for the completion of the close. You can then transfer your weight to the closing (left foot) at the end of the turn.

When it's all good or, getting good, you then practice, and practice again ...

(A Brief History) The War Years - Part 4/4

Vernon and Irene's love story really comes to life after he went to war.

As WW I began, Vernon Castle was actually trapped in France and nearly didn't make it out of the country.

After he returned to retrieve his beloved dog that he had left with a vet as he couldn't originally leave France with a pet, Vernon was so troubled by things he observed that he felt compelled to enlist.

Irene was devastated by his wish to go to war but she loved him so much that she gave in to his request, knowing that his soul would not rest if she forced him to stay home.

Vernon learned to fly and joined the Air Corps. Despite his fame, he was sent to the front lines and served with great bravery. He flew dangerous reconnaissance missions and fought in dogfights. He even shot down more than one enemy plane.



Once a bullet went right through the collar of his flight jacket but he was unscathed. Another time his plane was shot up, forcing him to land but he was able to come down on his side of the line.

After an all-too short visit with Vernon in England during the early part of his wartime experience, Irene boarded the train and opened the carriage window to wave goodbye. Vernon, in uniform, was standing at attention...Saluting. Irene sobbed for most of her journey.

She wrote a poem on a scrap of paper and later Vernon attached it to a watch chain and wore it around his neck and wore it on every flight while he served on the front lines in France; it read:

*Almighty God, if thou art there,
Listen to my humble prayer
And keep him safe.
Keep him in your care always -
Watch o'er him through this weary day
And keep him safe.
Make him feel my love and sorrow.
Bring him back some near tomorrow
And keep him safe.*

A Love Story

The couple wrote to each other almost daily and while Irene's letters are lost to history, many of Vernon's survived the years and give a marvellous insight into the love story between these two remarkable people.

On February 29, 1916 he wrote, in part:

It's when I get home that I feel so terribly lonely.

I haven't even got a dog to talk to, but I guess I shouldn't grumble, especially to you, my darling, but at the same time I want you to know that I miss you too frightfully for words, dear, and I haven't even started to do any work yet.

Oh, but we will have a wonderful time when I do get back. Won't we darling?

March 8, 1916:

I'm simply crazy about the little poem you sent me. I wish I could send you one, but somehow my words don't rhyme...

May 14, 1916:

I haven't smiled yet. I feel so lonesome and blue. It's just terrible, having your mate snatched away. I received your sweet letter this morning. It was so good hearing from you and now I guess I shall have to wait a long while before I hear again. Your little prayer was too adorable, sweet. I am going to tie a string to it and wear it around my neck until after the war; God will surely listen to such a pretty prayer.

June 30, 1916:

Oh, I am so happy today, darling. I have received all your mail. It came this morning - eight letters! I wanted to save some for tomorrow, but I just couldn't wait. It would have been worse than not looking at your presents till Xmas, so I simply went away all by myself and devoured them all. You don't know how I've waited and longed for just a word from you. I almost cry all the time I'm reading the sweet things you say to me...

August 30, 1916:

My precious little wife, you are so sweet to think of saving enough money to buy me a Rolls-Royce - but, darling, I don't want one, I only want you and a home. If I had one, I'd give a Rolls-Royce just to look at you for five seconds. It seems years since that last night in the little inn at 'Pewsy', and those six days were so short that they seem like a dream, and I haven't lived since.



Though he lost many comrades, Vernon survived the front and travelled back to England and then to the US where he was put in charge of training new pilots at Benbrook Field in Texas.

Plans were being made to put Vernon and Irene on tour to help support the war effort even as victory seemed well within grasp for the allied forces. Irene reported that she was nervous at their first practice after he returned home but very quickly their dancing felt smooth and in sync.

Instructor pilots always sat in the back seat and after Vernon lost a student who crashed into the

roof of a hangar and was killed by the impact, he blamed himself for being in the safer back seat.

After that he insisted on flying in the front seat despite its limited visibility as it was directly over the wings but he enjoyed teaching; Engineers said that Vernon Castle flew the way he danced, flowing with grace and musicality.

He once took Irene on a flight in his plane although it was strictly forbidden.

A Fateful Day

On Friday, February 15, 1918 Vernon was training a student when a series of misfortunes all came together.

An aircraft was taking off as Vernon's aircraft was about to touch down.

The inexperienced student in the back seat didn't realize the significance of the aircraft moving on the ground underneath them and Vernon, in the front seat, didn't see the danger in time.

He tried to avoid a collision but the plane stalled and they nosedived into the ground.

Less than an hour later, Vernon Castle was declared dead.

Hearing the news, Irene was said to have shown great courage, then ran to her bedroom where she promptly fainted.

The world was stunned and grieved deeply and Vernon Castle's funeral was one fit for a head of state. Thousands lined the streets to bid their hero farewell.

The Houston Post reported: 'Men wiped tears from their eyes, the sobs of women were audible above the slow, measured tread of the funeral procession.'

At Union Station, a guard of honour of airmen opened a pathway to the train. Captain Frederick Fedgewick of the Royal Flying Corps was responsible for the transit; thousands for the overwhelming sadness of the day.

As Jack Coats said, Vernon would have liked it.

In March 1918 a letter arrived for Irene. It was a final love letter from Vernon, having been stored with his parents during the war in the event that something happened to him.

It read, in part: *"When you get this letter, I shall be gone out of your sweet life. My only thought, darling, is for you. I don't want you to be unhappy. You may be sure that I died with your sweet name on my lips, and my only wish for your future happiness. You are the sweetest thing God ever made, dear."*

It was the end of a partnership that changed the world more than it could know. Even today we owe our understanding of ballroom dance and even some cultural norms we take for granted to this beautiful and dynamic couple.

Let's not forget what the Castles did for the world of dance and, if you have a dance partner, give them a whirl on the floor in [memory of Vernon and Irene Castle](#).

