

How to Prepare For A Social Dance

Note: This guide is not a “how to” on reading and interpreting dance instructions, cribs, diagrams or pilling. For that information, please see the accompanying guide: “How to read Dance Cribs”

Introduction

Learning figures, formations, handing, footwork and transitions are the primary reason for RSCDS classes, where it is generally expected that *Dancing*, and not *Dances* are taught. The dances from a given social dance programme may have been used in class as examples of dances where a particular figure or step is used, but other dances may also be used to illustrate the figure being taught.

Learning how to “cope” at a social dance, how to recover from your mistakes and meeting new people in under 5 minutes are all skills learned at a social dance, as well as enjoying the music/dancing and having fun. You are unlikely to learn these just by attending a beginner’s class, but will learn them from a general or mixed level social dance.

Dancers are expected to have attempted familiarity with at least **some** of the dances (and by association their figures) on the social programme, if not all. Thus removing the need for endless walkthroughs, or for the caller to call over the music (as happens at Ceilidhs), because, let’s face it, walk-throughs/voiceovers are boring and detract from the dancing and music itself.

So how does one attain familiarity with dances, if few or none of the dances from the programme are being taught in the class or if they are, will only be taught once?

More importantly, how does one remove the fear that, having attempted to learn the dances, one will promptly forget how to do the dance and be judged forevermore by the dancing community?

How are Social Dances Structured?

There are rules to the way social dance programmes are devised. Whilst I won’t go into every complexity that an MC/programme writer might need to know, the following are useful for a new dancer to be aware of.

- There is no warmup – you should aim to arrive 15 minutes early, change your shoes and do your own muscle loosening warmup (don’t stretch cold muscles!) – particularly if you have just walked in from the cold. This is also an opportunity to meet people and identify possible partners.
- Typically there are 16 dances on the programme. Short/walkthrough programmes might only have 14 dances. Ball programmes might have 18. The programme will last about 3 hours, including an interval halfway through
- The programme generally follows the pattern Jig, Reel, Strathspey (Sometimes Reel, Jig, Strathspey)
- The first and last dances of each half are in Quicktime (Jig or Reel)
- The first dance shouldn’t contain any setting (pas de bas)
- The last dance is normally well known and often contains circle round and back.
- A properly balanced programme will be 1/3 easy/well known, 1/3 hard/advanced and 1/3 somewhere in the middle. If it is billed as “nice ‘n’ easy, or “for beginners”, expect a programme tailored towards the easier/intermediate end of the spectrum.
- There is very little time between one dance finishing and the next starting. You just about have enough time to grab a sip of water, glance at the crib and grab a new partner.
- Most dance programmes have **no walkthroughs, just a quick recap** once sets are made up.
- Each dance always starts and ends with a Chord – no “Ready And’s..” here. Remember the Chords are part of the dance, you do have to bow/curtsey during both.
- Dances are danced in full. For an 8-by-32-bar dance, that means 8 times through. Dancing couple dance once from first place with 2s and 3s (4s stand still) and once from second place

with the 3s and 4s (old 2s stand still). Then the old 2nd couple become the new dancing couple and we repeat the pattern until all 4 couples have danced twice through.

Learning Dances At Home – Example Techniques

When attending a social dance, a variety of techniques are used by various dancers to “get through” the programmes, depending on their own style, ability and learning preference.

I think every dancer falls into one of the main categories illustrated in Table 1 at the end of this document, although there may be some overlap. Becoming rapidly the most popular method of learning among newer dancers is watching the dances on YouTube.

Assuming you have already learned how to read dance cribs in one form or another, here’s an example method for beginner/intermediate level dancers to learn dances from a social programme.

1. Print out the programme and crib about 2 weeks in advance. Any earlier and you’ll procrastinate or forget what you’ve learned. Started late? There’s still time to catch up, just learn what you can.
2. Read through the programme items. Are there half a dozen dance names you recognise from class or previous dances? If yes, start by learning (or revising) these ones. If not, contact your teacher, the organiser, or an experienced dancer and ask them to help identify the easier 1/3 of the programme.
3. Also ask your teacher or an experienced dancer in your class to help you identify which are the hardest dances on the programme (which you might be content to sit and watch), those which you might be able to do with an experienced partner, those you have done in class, etc. (write it down!, or use highlighters to indicate easy/medium/hard etc.)
4. If your teacher knows you are going to a social dance, they may try and include dances from the programme in their lesson - but this isn’t always possible at short notice, and unless you go to classes dedicated to teaching that programme, you are unlikely to be taught the whole programme.
5. Of your shortlist of 6 easy dances, starting with the earliest on the programme ¹:
 - a. Read through the crib / instructions as given
 - b. Find a good quality YouTube video of the dance and watch it through once.
 - c. Found a figure you don’t know? Ask your teacher to go through it in the next class, or find a tutorial video for that figure. Note that teachers might prepare their classes several days in advance.
 - d. Listen to just the music for the first turn through (the “lead tune”), as this can sometimes work as a memory jog for some people as they associate a tune with a dance.
 - e. Read the crib again
 - f. Write out the crib in your own words (A5 sheets of paper, or index cards work well for this). Try to stick to groups of 8 bar phrases.
 - g. Now, try using objects around your house to “dance out” the dance for you. Chess pieces work well for this (black for men, white for ladies, different pairs of pieces to represent 1st, 2nd, 3rd 4th couples). Coins, coloured paperclips, ludo pieces, gummy bears, etc. also work well. Imagine you are teaching your chosen pieces how to do the dance from the crib. Notice not just the order of figures but any changes of direction or polite turns
 - h. Check your interpretation against the YouTube video, just in case you missed something.
 - i. Repeat steps 5.e and 5.g above.
6. Repeat step 5 for the next dance in your shortlist.

¹ Thanks to Teresa Lockhart - RSCDS Toronto Branch, whose TACTtalk article I cribbed for some of these notes, although I have tried to put them in my own words

7. Once you've gone through your shortlist:
 - a. If you're a beginner and this is your first social dance – stop there. Don't overload yourself. It's OK to only do 1/3 of the programme on your first attempt. You can still enjoy watching the other dancers and listening to the music for the dances you don't know. Keep revising those first 6. Just be aware that experienced dancers might ask you to dance something you haven't tried to learn – you can politely say no, or try it and accept you might go wrong.
 - b. If it's your 2nd or 3rd social programme, at least watch the YouTube videos for the rest of the programme in case someone asks you to dance. Ideally, try to learn the whole of the first half using the method above, plus any easy ones in the second half (aim for some level of confidence in 2/3 of a programme, even if you are still relying on an experienced partner)
 - c. If you are an intermediate or advanced dancer, you probably had some familiarity of a few dances already, so should be able to learn the rest of the programme using the above method. Or just the ones that are completely new to you
8. Some dancers have very good imaginations, if you are one of those, try walking the dances through in your living room, with 5 or 7 "ghosts". Note that this is an intermediate/advanced level skill not everybody will acquire, so don't worry if you don't succeed. It's easier if others in your household also dance and can help you.
9. Remember to take your annotated crib with you to the dance, you won't have much time to read it but just a glance at the first 8 bars and your colour coding might help.

Partnering, Covering, Teamwork and Recovery

Now, you have tried your best to learn the dance in advance. You get onto the dance floor and forget the dance, or panic. What next? How do you make this easier on yourself?

1. **Choose an experienced partner, and get yourself into an experienced set if you can.** It is much easier for things to go right if there are more experienced than inexperienced people in the set, and if the inexperienced people are not partnered together! The experienced people can help guide you round. A word of caution – it has been observed that "bizarrely, the success of a set is often inversely proportional to the number of teachers in the set". Probably due to them having spent all their time trying to teach a hundred other dances in 8 bar phrases and having no time to dance it all the way through themselves². Teachers do *not* know every dance in the books!
2. **Get into 4th place if you can.** This only works in dances which are 8 times through but means you can watch the dance 1st time through before participating. *It also only works for beginners.* Intermediate and advanced dancers have no excuse (unless their partner is a beginner) – not everyone can be 4s. Note that pushing in is not allowed, but you might be able to politely ask the set if someone else minds being in first position if that is where you ended up.
3. **Do listen to the recap.** Don't talk over it or let your partner talk over it – remember some people are actually learning entirely from that recap (see Table 1). Others need it as revision. So do you. If you see people eyes closed/lowered, waving their hands about during the recap, don't distract them – they're moving their imaginary chess pieces around (see point 5.g above) to memorise the dance from the recap!
4. **Watch for Helpful Clues at Shoulder Height.** Why do teachers tell you not to look at the floor when dancing? Not just because it smartens up your dancing and improves your balance, but also because other dancers might be trying to help you out by pointing which way to go. If they do, they will point at shoulder height, tap a shoulder (for right/left shoulder passing), nod with their head, or hold out a hand. None of which is done at floor level.
5. **Covering With your Partner.** This is the art of watching your partner for clues as to how the dance goes, whilst simultaneously looking where you are going. Don't look at the floor, it won't help.

² Thanks to the TACTalk Editor for pointing that one out!

6. **Covering With the Next Set.** This is the art of watching the next set over using your peripheral vision, to see what comes next. Obviously you can't do this 100% of the time, as sometimes you will have your back to them, and you also need to watch your partner and where you are going. You also need to be quick at observing as you don't want to be dancing two bars behind other people. However, this is a skill you can nurture the more you dance at social dances. Just don't look at the floor!
7. **Ask "What's Next?"** Sometimes even advanced dancers forget, and all of the above advice stops working. Asking your set to help you is teamwork, it isn't a problem. However, too many people shouting directions can get confusing. Pick just one person to listen to.
8. **Keep Going.** The worst thing you can do is stop dead in the middle of a dance. Better to get well out of the set on your own side and wait for the next turn of the dance if you can't pick up where you should be. Meanwhile, look for the "ghost" that everyone else is dancing around – that's where you should have been, so you can learn for next time.
9. **Smile and Say Thank You at the end of the dance, no matter how horribly wrong it went.** Any dancer that helped you round should be quickly thanked at the end of the dance. They may even ask you to do the next dance as a result.

Finally, a thought. Sometimes doing the "wrong figure" won't always make the dance fall apart – although it might make it a little more awkward. An example is "half figure of 8". Dancing both up through the 2s, or both down through the 3s, instead of "man up, lady down", will normally still end the dancing couple in 2nd place, opposite side. However, one or other person might then have to turn back on themselves to start the next figure. Nevertheless, dancing a left shoulder reel of 3 when the other two people are dancing a right shoulder reel will only lead to confusion...

Dispelling the Fear Factor

Firstly, to make something absolutely clear: **You are your own worst critic.** Nobody else on the dance floor is going to judge you for not knowing a dance, or for going wrong in the middle of a dance. So take some pressure off yourself right away.

Secondly, if you are a beginner, or new to social dancing, or a visitor to a particular area, or otherwise lacking confidence on the dancefloor – tell the person on the door who takes your money and they will be only too happy to point you in the direction of some experienced dancers who will help you partner up, help you through the dances, or tell you which dances it would be wise for you to sit out of, if you don't know them. They won't mean that latter point in an unfriendly way, just in recognition that you may not have learned all of the complexities or figures in that particular dance.

It is worth knowing that, in social dancing, **Booking Up Partners In Advance Is Not Allowed**, and that you are not supposed to dance with the same partner twice in an evening (although sometimes this is inevitable in smaller gatherings). The first and last dances on the programme being possible exceptions, where romantically attached couples, or close friends, might wish to dance together. With this in mind, it should be perfectly possible to find experienced dancers to dance with, who can help you through the dance, and also dance with a wide variety of people who take it in turns to help you.

Thirdly, **be proud of yourself** for simply turning up, for knowing just one dance on the programme in advance and making an attempt to dance it. You may know other dances, someone may come over and throw you in the deep end by making you dance an unfamiliar dance, but that is an added bonus. If you danced with a smile on your face and had fun (even when you made a mistake), then the evening was a success – for you and everyone else.

A Further Note On Social Dance Etiquette – For Beginners and Experienced Dancers Alike

The following are points to observe on a dance floor out of general courtesy to your fellow dancers:

- Aim to arrive 15 minutes before the first dance – these events start promptly and you need to change your shoes, warm up, say hello, use the bathroom, skim your crib, etc.
- When forming up sets, wait for the MC to announce the dance/say “please make up sets”. The musicians usually play 8 or so bars of the lead tune whilst you are doing so. It is bad form to try and rush the MC/musicians by forming up early. They may have a valid reason for the delay.
- When forming up sets, don’t push in at the top of the lines or in the middle – especially not after the sets have been counted. Go to the bottom, regardless of your experience level.
- If you find yourself at the very top of the hall in top man’s place, remember to count down the lines – even if it looks obvious. You can take your partner with you for moral support but it isn’t their job, or anyone else’s, to make sure the sets are complete. Also, remember to count yourself as ‘1’...
- Once the lines have been counted, and before the recap, spread the sets out down the hall to ensure everyone has space to dance and the gaps between sets are obvious.
- **Don’t “book up” partners in advance.** With the possible exception of the first and last dance you should be available for *anyone* to ask you to dance, including beginners and strangers. Remember, they might not know anyone at the dance and appreciate a friendly face. In those awkward instances where you have a partner for this dance and someone asks you to dance, offer them the next dance.
- If you don’t want to do a particular dance, leave the room before the sets form up and come back in once the recap has been given. Everyone has a “loo-break” dance, either because they don’t know, or don’t like the dance – or simply want a rest.

Table 1: Different ways of Preparing for Social Dances

	Method	Suitable for / Typically used by ^{Note 1}
1.	Relies heavily on the teacher teaching the dances several times in class and requires walk-through from first place for every dance on the programme during the evening and having an experienced partner. Can't read cribs/diagrams Only manages 1/3 or 1/2 of the programme.	Beginners attending their first/second social dance. May choose to only go to dances aimed at beginners (which allow walkthroughs) Beginners should try to wean themselves off this method within 1-2 years of dancing.
2.	Relies heavily on learning the dances in class and the recap, plus an experienced partner for more complex dance. May need a quick walkthrough for more advanced dances Just starting to learn how to read cribs/diagrams May only manage 2/3 of the programme.	Improvers (less than 2 years' experience) attending their first half dozen or so social dances Those with very little confidence in their memory, footwork or figures, either due to age or limited time dancing
3.	Going over dances just once in class, plus a combination of reading the cribs/diagrams and/or studying dance videos, plus a prompt from the recap. Can read cribs/diagrams and prepared in advance Dislikes walkthroughs Manages the whole programme, but may need help from an experienced partner/set for the hardest dances	Intermediate dancers who have been dancing typically 2-3 years and going regularly to social dances For very advanced dances, new, infrequently danced or unusual dances, advanced dancers might also use this method, but not for the general repertoire.
4.	Just turn up, don't know what's on the programme, haven't read the crib, don't know the dances, relying entirely on recaps Dislikes/ gets easily bored with walkthroughs	Very Advanced dancers who have been taught <i>Dancing</i> , not <i>Dances</i> (typically have been dancing longer than about 3 years) and who have already been to quite a few social dances in their time. Those with natural ability and good short-term memory but no long-term memory. Those with inclination or time to study outside of class. ^{Note 1}
5.	Have been dancing so long they know the majority of dances off by heart already, only rely on cribs as an aide memoire/prompt. However, for very new dances or figures, still need to go over the dances in class	Advanced dancers who have been dancing too many years to count and who have already been to quite a few social dances in their time People with incredible long and short term memory. Those with plenty of time to study outside class.
6.	For reasonably complex dances (i.e. not beginner level), goes over dances multiple times and learning via a multitude of methods Will often be studying the subtle nuances of the dance in detail, as well as memorising the order of figures.	Those preparing for a non-recapped, no-walkthrough programme, demonstration, festival or display.
7.	The dance devisor, caller, teacher or MC who just read the crib/taught the dance, so naturally forgets the dance completely – regardless how they normally learn.	The dance devisor, caller, teacher or MC for the dance

Note 1: This represents my own observations of dancers over the last 10 years, plus a quick unscientific facebook poll

Note 2: I include myself in category 3 and occasionally 7.