

Left Turning Figures in Smooth Rhythms

A Progressive Teaching Approach

Bill & Beth Davenport

Introduction

Left turning figures in smooth dances such as waltz and foxtrot present unique challenges for dancers at every level. Teachers frequently observe that students who are comfortable with right-turning figures struggle when asked to turn left. This paper outlines a progressive approach to teaching and executing left turns, beginning with foundational concepts for beginners and layering in additional technique as dancers advance through intermediate and advanced stages.

Our goal is to identify the fundamental technical elements that affect successful turning and to provide instructors and dancers with practical strategies for developing those skills over time. We focus on several key areas that strongly influence turning success:

- Frame
- Poise
- Mechanics of turning
- Partnership
- Common problems and solutions

While each of these components develops gradually, understanding their relationship helps teachers present and dancers execute left turns in a structured and achievable way.

Why Left Turns Are More Difficult

In smooth dancing, the follower generally dances on the leader's right side. This body alignment creates a structural difference between left and right turns. When turning left, the follower must clear space more quickly so that the leader can step forward into the space the follower has vacated. If this clearing action is delayed or insufficient, the couple loses alignment, balance, or connection.

Because of this spatial challenge, left turns often expose weaknesses in frame, timing of rotation, and partner coordination. Teaching dancers how to maintain structure while creating space for their partner is therefore essential.

Frame: The Foundation of Communication

Frame is the primary means through which partners communicate direction, timing, and energy. A well-constructed frame allows dancers to sense:

- Which direction to travel
- How large a step to take
- How much rotation is intended

Without a stable frame, left turns quickly become disconnected, causing dancers to move independently rather than as a unified couple.

Beginner Level (Phase II, early Phase III)

At the beginner level, instruction should focus on understanding and establishing **consistent points of contact** and a **stable frame**.

Students must avoid what many teachers call “spaghetti arms”—arms that collapse or change tension unpredictably. A stable frame and consistent head position allow both partners to sense movement and direction and help maintain balance.

Important beginner concepts include:

- Maintaining consistent contact points
- Reestablishing contact when transitioning from open to closed positions
- Understanding common dance positions such as closed position, semi-closed position, and banjo
- Moving as a single unit rather than as two separate dancers

Balance is also critical. Dancers should learn to remain centered over the weighted foot while turning.

Most beginner-level choreography frequently alternates between open and closed positions, which gives dancers fewer opportunities to practice maintaining a stable frame. We suggest that instructors create simple practice modules that allow dancers to focus on maintaining a stable frame while introducing turning figures.

Helpful exercises at this stage include:

- **Left Turning Box** to introduce progressive turning
- **Two Left Turns** to reinforce rotation while maintaining frame stability

These figures allow students to experience rotation while still maintaining relatively simple movement patterns.

Intermediate Level (Phase III–IV)

At the intermediate level, there is a greater number of left turning figures, which increases the need for coordinated movement and body control. Figures are also danced more frequently on diagonal alignments, requiring dancers to develop a clearer understanding of direction and floor alignment.

Dancers begin to refine their connection, learning how the frame supports rotation without collapsing or distorting. The goal is to maintain the couple’s shape while allowing the bodies to rotate together.

Helpful exercises at this stage includes:

- **Telemark to Semi Closed** to introduce faster rotation with follower’s heel turn and correct body positioning when finishing in semi-closed position
- **Weave to Banjo** which incorporates transitions between semi-closed, closed, and banjo positions while continuing left turning rotation

These figures allow students to experience rotation while still maintaining relatively simple movement patterns.

Advanced Level (Phase V–VI)

At the advanced level, additional left turning figures require more and faster rotation to accomplish, which makes body alignment and frame even more critical.

At this level, frame is not merely structural—it becomes expressive and dynamic. Dancers must maintain connection while allowing larger movements, stronger swing, and more complex shaping.

Helpful exercises at this stage include:

- **Double Reverse Spin** which uses a follower's heel turn as well as a locking action to accomplish a higher-speed rotation while maintaining balance
- **Reverse Fallaway and Slip** which has left turning rotation in both closed and semi-closed position

Mechanics of Turning

While frame provides the communication between partners, turning mechanics determine how efficiently the couple rotates.

Beginner Level

Beginners should first understand that left turns are **progressive movements**, not spins performed in place. The couple travels while turning.

Key beginner concepts include:

- Turning while progressing down the floor
- Understanding the inside and outside of a turn
- Closing the feet in waltz to finish the turn (to avoid overturning and loss of balance)
- Introducing the basic concept of rise and fall
- Managing head weight to maintain balance and correct alignment

A helpful exercise for maintaining alignment is having the follower position the right arm near the right side of the leader's head while turning. This encourages proper spacing and alignment during rotation.

Intermediate Level

At the intermediate level, dancers begin learning **Contra Body Movement (CBM)**. This principle teaches that body rotation begins **before** the step is taken rather than during or after it.

Students also refine:

- Inside and outside rotation
- Allowing the body to lead the turn while the feet follow
- Controlled rise and fall
- The introduction of sway

A useful training exercise is practicing turns with a **locked hold**, which helps maintain body alignment and prevents the couple from drifting apart during rotation.

Advanced Level

Advanced dancers develop efficiency in turning through **body swing and leg swing**. Instead of forcing rotation, the natural swing of the movement generates the turn.

At this level, greater emphasis is placed on:

- Controlled sway
- Precise orientation
- Accurate amounts of turn

These refinements allow dancers to execute larger, smoother, and more dynamic turning figures.

Common Problems

One common challenge arises when **both partners hear the cue for a figure** and anticipate the movement independently. When this happens, the follower may initiate the turn rather than responding to the leader's movement.

This reduces the need for true lead and follow and often results in:

- weakened frame
- disconnected movement
- inconsistent timing

For effective partnership, the follower must wait for the leader's body movement rather than reacting to the verbal cue alone.

Training Tools and Exercises

Several training exercises can help couples develop better alignment and connection during left turns. These drills emphasize maintaining proper body relationships while rotating.

Useful tools include:

- **Follower's right arm next to the right side of the leader's head**
Helps maintain proper head alignment and body spacing.
- **Follower's left arm used to "lock" position**
Helps stabilize the frame and maintain consistent body alignment.
- **Follower's right hand hooked into the leader's belt**
Encourages connection between the leader's left side and the follower's right side, particularly helpful in figures such as the Double Reverse Spin.



Photographs or visual demonstrations of these exercises can greatly enhance understanding for both teachers and students.

Conclusion

Teaching left turning figures effectively requires a progressive approach. By introducing foundational concepts early and gradually layering additional technique, instructors can help dancers build the skills necessary for successful turning.

Frame, body mechanics, and partnership must develop together. When these elements are taught systematically—from beginner through advanced levels—dancers gain both the technical understanding and the physical control needed to perform left turns smoothly and confidently.

Through structured exercises and clear technical progression, teachers can transform one of the most challenging aspects of smooth dancing into an opportunity for deeper skill development and stronger partnership.