Gentlemen - Are You A Good Leader?
Lets run some tests to find out.

By H. Leon Raper

It seems as though the goal of dancers today is to learn a great many lengthy, complicated looking, step patterns. Many mistakenly think they will be accepted as advanced dancers by their peers once they have learned a truck load of these step patterns. That is a myth that prevents people from really becoming advanced dancers. Skippy Blair likes to say "it is no sin to be a beginner, but it is a sin to look like one." It is not quantity that makes an advanced dancer, it is quality.

To find out if you are an advanced dancer or not we first have to find out if you got a "A++" in basics. If you did not, you will have to relearn some basics before you can become an advanced dancer.

In this article I am going to talk mainly about the slot in West Coast Swing, the direction of movement and the physical forces involved. Remember, in the slot, the woman's line of travel is straight through the man. He will move to the rails on either side of the slot to let her execute her line of travel. Regarding forces used (the man's lead), lets make a rule that the resultant of all forces used by the man must be directly in the resultant of all forces used by the man must be directly in the line of the slot - either up or down the slot. That is, there shall be no resultant forces used by the man that would pull or push to either side of the slot. I used the term forces to make a point. These forces boil down to a very gentle lead and follow-through, with no forces at all being used.

OK, we have discussed what to do, now let's discuss how you can test yourself. One way for the gentleman to test himself is to ask an advanced woman dancer to participate. Tell the woman you want to test your lead, and need her critique. Tell her you want to know if she feels any lead forces to either side of the slot, and have her tell you when these occurred. The woman you chose must really be an advanced dancer who can execute multiple turns, standing erect and keeping her feet close together without getting off balance. If the man can't find a lady who can execute turns in the manner just described then the test will become more difficult, but can still be accomplished. Either have someone watch you, or watch yourself on video tape, and watch for the following: Are you using force? Does your lead cause the lady to move toward either side of the slot? This will be more difficult to determine if the lady does not execute turns properly and gets herself off balance, but even if she does, you can still watch your lead very closely to make sure the resultant forces go up or down the slot.

Whatever you do, one dance partner should not correct for the errors of the other just to make a step pattern work. This makes matters much worse and gives you a false sense of security. Just spend a little time working out the bugs. If you seem to run into a road block, and can't seem to solve the problem just remember: almost any problem in dance can be solved by going back to the basics. Examine every little part of the pattern. That is exactly what I do when I am developing advanced materials. I go back to absolute basics and examine every aspect of the step pattern. I examine my lead to make sure there are no cross-slot forces involved. I ask the lady if she felt any force whatsoever in my lead. People say "you are better because you are a dance instructor." I tell them "no, that is not the reason. I am better because I analyze every small aspect of the step pattern, reverting to basics every step of the way." This is one heck of a lot faster than just doing it over and over again until it feels good - a technique which will assure that you never become an advanced dancer.

When you really become an advanced dancer then you can take what is called "creative license," and do just about anything you want, in any direction you want. But remember, even the most advanced moves known will not violate the principles of good basics. This applies to all dances, not just West Coast Swing.