Getting To the Next Level
By Tim Gregory

This article serves as a guide to assist in getting your dancing to where you want it to be. Sometimes as students, we get frustrated that we are not as proficient as we think we should be given our time frame or effort given.

1) Have a good instructor/coach and see them often.
   Whether pro or amateur, you need somebody to guide you in the right direction. A coach should be able to help shape your dancing the way it needs to progress because they know what to look for and what to fix. Private 1 on 1 lessons are a key factor in getting to the next level. The instructor must be able to attentively listen to your goals and have a plan of how to accomplish them! Discuss with them what your goals are and your coach will help you get there.

2) Take notes. Take notes. Take notes.
   If you are ever going to be able to practice effectively, you need to write down the concepts and guidance of your coach/instructor. It will help clarify what you need to practice and how you practiced it in your private lesson. Taking notes help you recreate those results in your practice time. Video notes are also a great tool but do not replace written notes. The act of writing down the information personally is what helps your brain recall and explain it back to yourself in detail.

3) Practice by yourself.
   Sometimes the distraction of a partner will hinder what you are trying to do. Practice technique and patterns by yourself and be able to imagine a partner in front of you. If you can't do it correctly by yourself, then you don't know it well enough. Using a mirror when you practice is vital to being able to emulate the look in what you are trying to accomplish.

4) Practice your patterns & technique using a partner.
   When you practice with a partner, it can make your patterns easier to visualize by having a point of reference. When you DO practice with a partner, make sure that you use them as a "body" to help visualize where you are and what you are doing to help YOU practice. If both students are trying to practice different things at the same time it can cause issues and frustration and is counterproductive. When issues arise, write them down and take them back to your coach. In the meantime, practice something else together or practice by yourself.

5) Be patient!
   And don't be so hard on yourself. It takes time to learn how to dance! Set small goals to achieve and don't look too far ahead. Learning how to dance is a journey, not a destination. There is no end. You always have something new to learn and it will never stop, no matter what level you are at. Never directly compare yourself to other dancers. We each have our own measuring stick that we use to evaluate our progress and everyone is unique. Practicing your dancing on a consistent basis is the quickest way of getting to the next level.

6) Leaders: Learn your patterns. Then, when you're done with that, learn the follower's patterns.
   As the leader, you have many responsibilities. You need to know what you're doing, what your partner needs to do, how to lead/initiate the steps, dance it on the correct timing, and watch where you're going; just to name a few.. Studying the follower's patterns will help elevate your leading because you will
be able to better understand what foot they are supposed to turn on, change direction on, rotate, etc. When you only know when you are supposed to raise your arm for a turn, but don't know what foot the lady needs to be on for that turn, you now have to guess that she is going to do the turn correctly.

7) Followers: Learn your patterns.

As a follower, your role is to react appropriately to the lead initiated by your partner. Each dance has its "signature moves" or certain style of patterns. Tango has the corte, rocks and promenade. Waltz has the left box, right box and twinkle. Samba has botofogos, voltas, Samba walks, and copa cabanas. When you know the style of patterns and how to dance those properly by studying your school figures, you will be a better follower and partner. Saying, "I just follow whatever the guy leads me to do" without taking the initiative to learn your craft, tells me that you expect your partner to do all the work while you fumble through it.

8) Practice your technique in the most basic step suitable for what you are working on.

Many times as students, we get too excited about patterns and lose sight of the technique. Technique is what makes you look good and dance better! Patterns do not do this. When working on technique, i.e., Cuban motion, body isolations, frame, rise and fall, footwork, posture, head position, connection to your partner, etc; master them while using simple patterns and then work your way up from there. Technique is for social dancers and competitive dancers alike. To be an enjoyable dance partner, you need to be able to communicate through your body. Your connection and frame are the medium that that conversation travels through. At its core, technique isn’t used just because it looks pretty but because it serves as a communication tool to effectively dance with another person. If you want to get to the next level, practice your technique. Why is it typically more fun to dance with an instructor than another student; because they are better communicators.

9) Practice to slow tempo music.

The whole adage "You have to walk before you can run, and you have to crawl before you can walk" holds true in dancing. Students learn Waltz before they learn Viennese Waltz. It is the natural progression. To get to the next level, you have to be able to do the technique properly at a slow tempo before you can speed it up and perform it at regular tempo. Sometimes I will hear, "I hate slow Waltzes!" and my initial thought is that they probably don't like them because they lack the control to dance them properly at that speed. When dancing to slow music, you need to have control over your own body and this forces you to analyze what you are doing more; each little movement by little movement until the body feels natural doing it.

10) Be able to clearly explain to another person what you’re doing.

Often times I ask my students to explain dance concepts or patterns to me so I can gauge their understanding of it from their own mouth. I love teaching because it helps challenge me to explain what I know in many different ways which in turn helps me solidify and understand the topic on a different level myself.
Practice

“I fear not the man who has practiced 10,000 kicks once, but I fear the man who had practiced one kick 10,000 times.”
— Bruce Lee

“Knowing is not enough, we must apply. Willing is not enough, we must do.”
— Bruce Lee

Setting Goals

“A goal is not always meant to be reached, it often serves simply as something to aim at.”
— Bruce Lee