

Underarm Turns Part 2 Handhold Techniques

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Handhold techniques are perhaps one of the most overlooked aspects of ballroom dancing. There are various handhold options that can be implemented on the dance floor. A set of guidelines for effective and safe handholds is provided in this article.

There always seems to be more emphasis placed on how to physically move through an underarm turn than on the proper handhold. Such things as feet positions, footwork, and timing usually get most of the attention. It is, however, vitally important to understand handhold interactions in partner dancing and especially so for underarm turns. These interactions will not only help one to dance cleaner turns but will also prevent potential hand, arm and joint injuries that may otherwise occur. In ballroom dancing, partners' hands are connected palm to palm at approximately chest level with fingers and thumbs lightly clasped around each other's hand. This describes a standard upper-clasp ballroom handhold. This handhold has to be reconfigured for underarm turns. We will look at how to manage the handhold for this figure.

There are several suitable handhold methods for underarm turns. The following one provides a safe and efficient handhold option. I personally refer to it as the 'ball and socket' handhold technique. Here is a summary breakdown. As the man prepares to lead the lady into the turn, he raises his hand and relaxes his grip as he opens his fingers. With his hand fully opened, he forms a curved shape with his fingers. His hand shape is similar to the one used for holding a drinking glass. The lady opens her fingers as soon as she feels the man's hand open. The handhold between partners is now analogous to a ball and socket connection. As such, the lady's fingers are inside of the man's circularly configured hand, i.e., his hand is analogous to the socket and her hand is analogous to the ball. This arrangement provides an unrestricted slip-joint connection that allows the lady's hand to effortlessly rotate within the man's hand. There should be a well-defined light connection between partners' hands, serving as a guide for the follower to dance through her turn. Using this handhold technique affords an effortless and efficient means to lead and follow safely and smoothly through the turn.

Here are several important caveats. The lady's palm should remain turned out so that the back of her hand is in front of her face throughout the turn. The man leads by tracing a small circle around the top of her head. The lady has to track exactly the path of his hand rotation. She has to remain behind her hand throughout the entire turn. We commonly assume that the lady turns under the raised arms. However, to be technically correct, she actually turns



under the man's raised arm. A common mistake is when the lady loses arm tone and then turns under her own arm. In this instance the leader will lose his ability to properly guide the lady through the turn. It is best for the leader to raise his hand slightly above the lady's head throughout the turn. This will give the lady more room to pass through. If his hand is held too high the lady will have less room to navigate through the turn.

Here are some good safety tips to keep in mind. Hands, fingers and wrist joints are very susceptible to injuries in partner dancing. For one thing, dancers can suddenly become unnerved on the dance floor for many reasons. This can cause one partner to tightly grasp the other's hand. Unfortunately, this always creates a high potential for injury. In this instance, an underarm turn makes the potential risk even higher because there is rotation involved. In essence, the lady is turning around a fixed anchored point and something is bound to break. Related to this is the common bad habit of not releasing the thumb at the onset of the turn. This will not only interfere with the turn but becomes a recipe for physical injuries. The lady's thumb should always be released and moved out of the way at the beginning of the turn, i.e., as soon as the leader's fingers open. Failing to do so can cause injury to the leader's hand, wrist and thumb. It is also possible for either partner to wind up with a compromise thumb joint. This is a very important caution as injuries are a common occurrence.

Handholds are important to understand. This is especially so because they are not static. Partners' hands are always moving in complex ways to facilitate various elements of each figure. Using good technique always adds a measure of safety and style

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