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Frame matching and Δ pTed: a framework for teaching Swing and Blues dance partner connection

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Frame Matching is a codified theory of partner-dance connection. It establishes a framework for breaking down and teaching Swing and Blues dance connection. It is the act of creating, maintaining, or changing tension between partners with posture and tone, in order to lead and follow energy and direction. Frame Matching is explained in terms of changes in posture, tone, tension, energy, and the direction of energy (Δ pTed).

Keywords: partner dance; frame matching; pTed; Swing dance; Blues dance; connection

Introduction

Currently accepted as social dance forms with occasional competitions and performances, Swing and Blues dance styles are learned and appreciated for their culture and histories, as well as execution. Technique and instruction of the dances are continually being redefined with regard to body movement, improvisation, trends in music and style, and partner connection. ‘Frame matching and Δ pTed:¹ a framework for teaching Swing and Blues dance partner connection’ is the first article of its kind to suggest a framework for teaching partner connection and connection vocabulary in Swing and Blues dance. It adds to previous dance terminology works such as Blair’s (1995) the *Dance Terminology Notebook* and Moore’s (2009) *Ballroom Dancing*. Frame Matching is a theory of partner-dance connection and Δ pTed is the framework for explaining it. Δ pTed stands for changes in posture, tone, tension, energy, and direction of energy.

Frame Matching is the act of creating, maintaining, or changing tension between partners with posture and tone, in order to lead and follow energy and direction. Changes in tension are made to create rhythmic variations in moves and movements,² and are communicated through points of contact. This communication is what dancers commonly call partner connection.

In Swing and Blues dance connection, each move and movement has unique signals and cues transmitted though ‘frame,’ a dancer’s body shape and muscle tone while dancing. The majority of these signals and cues are so subtle that dancers must be trained on how to appropriately suggest and respond to them. Frame Matching teaches followers the correct behavior responses to these signals and cues, and educates leaders on what their body is communicating while dancing with a partner.

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Frame Matching is an important new theory of partner connection. It unifies former instructional strategies of connection; has the potential to create a framework and common language for all dancers learning Swing or Blues dance; acts as a guide for creating well-planned, comprehensive, and scaffolded lessons in connection; and creates criteria to analyze and evaluate a student's proficiency. Frame Matching and Δ pTed have already been adopted by several Swing and Blues dance instructors around the world.

The development of frame matching and Δ pTed

In an interview between the author, creator of Δ pTed and champion Lindy Hop and Blues dance instructor Joe DeMers, and Dax Hock, a champion Lindy Hop dance instructor, at Lindy on the Rocks 2008,³ Hock presented a new theory of partner connection called frame matching. He stated that after observing other professional partner dancers in their respective fields practicing and teaching, and commonly addressing the tension created between partners while executing moves, he concluded tension was the most important component of frame in creating connection. Frame matching, as defined by Hock, was a follower matching a leader's body tension. 'Tension' in regard to Hock's initial concept will be separated into two categories as determined by the author: tension within the muscles of the body, 'tone,' and tension between partners, 'tension.'

After the interview, the author and his partner, Nelle DeMers, sought to understand Hock's idea on tension by applying it to Blues dance. The style of Blues they specialize in (and have revolutionized) is called Drag Blues. Drag Blues is a modern variation of Ballroomin' and Slow Drag, both close embrace vintage Blues dances, danced to the swinging rhythms found in Blues music. While based on vintage traveling Blues dances, Drag Blues' technique is more defined and incorporates Swing moves and movements. After some analysis, they found that Hock's tension-change concept did not fulfill most connection principles taught in Drag Blues, such as how a follower should respond to a leader's changes in movement in which tension was not present. Building on Hock's concept, they developed Δ pTed, a more comprehensive framework for analyzing connection.

In a second interview between the author and Hock at the International Lindy Hop Championships 2009,⁴ Hock introduced body matching, a concept in which followers match in their body what they feel in their arm. Body matching is a necessary component of frame matching. After this interview, the frame matching theory of partner-dance connection and Δ pTed framework, as presented in this article, were further developed by the author without additional influences. The author credits the foundation of Δ pTed to Hock's initial ideas on frame matching.

In January 2010, the completed frame matching and Δ pTed theories were presented for the first time in a comprehensive Swing and Blues dance workshop curriculum at Lindy and Blues Weekend in Philadelphia, PA, by the author and his partner. Jon Darvil, a dance instructor and organizer in Philadelphia, says 'since Joe and Nelle's workshop, Δ pTed is a framework we use to teach how changes in tone and tension translate to moves and movements. We use posture, tone, and tension as fundamental concepts in nearly every class.' Since then, the author and his partner have successfully taught frame matching and Δ pTed in France, South Korea, Japan, Canada, and all around the USA, with continuous positive feedback.

Teaching frame matching and Δ pTed

Prior to Hock's initial concept and the author's recent developments in a framework for teaching partner-dance connection, there was not a cohesive method for teaching partner connection in Swing or Blues dance. Several successful strategies for teaching connection technique were adopted from Ballroom dancing, or were passed-on from historically significant dancers, such as Frankie Manning and Dean Collins. They included techniques on how a dancer should pulse to music, place the hands, and connect the arms to the body; however, were often poorly defined and fragments of the completed Δ pTed framework being presented. Partner connection classes often used generalized statements such as 'use your hips to create a gush,' 'turn off your brain and just follow,' 'always continue the momentum,' or 'set your frame like "Barbie" arms.' Statements such as these limited a dancer's mastery of connection by creating incorrect assumptions on how two partners connect.

Teaching frame matching requires a strong understanding of Swing or Blues dance styles and figures, along with considerations of current popular trends in movement and connection. For it to become standardized, instructors need to invest a large amount of time in understanding the new vocabulary and framework, and how it applies to traditional pedagogical techniques. They need to be up to date on current styles and figures, and communicate them with accuracy, because nuances in body movement determine how a dancer executes frame matching. Many Swing and Blues dance instructors might look at frame matching and Δ pTed and think 'I already teach that.' They may do an excellent job of teaching aspects of it, but often come up with extraneous rules and exceptions to compensate for unknown concepts, or ones they have not yet considered.

Frame matching and Δ pTed define what it means to lead and follow in Swing and Blues dance. Adopting them gives instructors a framework for creating a well-organized partner-dance curriculum, and gives them a means of assessing students' working knowledge and execution of connection. They teach Swing and Blues dance students to create and manipulate movement within the framework of connection; to be aware of their baseline posture, tone, and tension; to utilize different moves and movements, and know how each affects their partners; and to communicate with a common language of connection.

Δ pTed breakdown and terminology

Partner dance connection is established, and should be taught, in this sequential order: Δ pTed.

Posture

Teaching Swing and Blues dance partner connection begins first with teaching posture, as it is the first cue a follower responds to while following the leader. Posture is the shape that a dancer creates with his or her body, when executing a move or movement (e.g. upright, fully bent over, or lunged). For each move and movement, there is an optimal posture in which energy is most effectively communicated.

Every Swing and Blues dance posture includes an axial position, such as leverage, compression, or neutral. A leverage posture is a body position leaning one's center of gravity away from one's partner while anchored in place on the floor. A compression posture is a body position leaning one's center of gravity into one's

partner while anchored in place on the floor. A neutral posture is a body position in which a dancer holds his or her own weight without leaning away from or into his or her partner. Each body position is used to execute different moves and movements.

One example of how posture changes can create a lead in Swing and Blues dance is a posture-led rock step. This style rock step occurs when the leader, connected in open position with a relaxed arm, steps away from the follower and then toward her,⁵ creating two posture – or shape – changes. By matching the change in posture in the opposite direction of her partner, the follower responds by doing a rock step as well. In Swing and Blues dance, it is typical for most posture changes to occur opposite to one's partner, as demonstrated in this example.

In partner connection, communication occurs through tension, a concept that will be explained further in the article. Posture is the crucial first step to this goal, as it is the one factor that determines *where* tension is created. Once the 'where' has been established, posture and tone together determine *how* and *how much* tension is created. Tone is analyzed independent of posture, once posture has been chosen.

Tone

Tone refers to the amount of muscle tension, or engagement, in the body to accomplish a movement. It is within a dancer's body and is matched by his or her partner. Frame matching tone can be visualized with a handshake (Hock 2008). When giving one to another person, if the initiator chooses to squeeze tightly, the other person has three response choices in return: to squeeze lighter, tighter, or equally tight. If he responds too lightly, he may feel uncomfortable in the handshake. If he responds too tightly, he may begin working too hard and making the other hand uncomfortable. If he matches the strength, he may find a point of equilibrium and comfort.

Followers, matching different low-tone to high-tone (relaxed to really engaged) moments initiated by the leader, dance comfortably within different frames regardless of the amount of tone. Traditionally, dancers often consider frame as it relates to ballroom postures and tones; however, frames occur in any body shape or tone, like different handshakes.

Another concept of frame matching tone, which allows dancers to create effective frames, is body matching. When a dancer's hands and arms are similarly toned to his or her body, he or she is body matching. It occurs within one dancer's body, while frame matching occurs between two connected bodies. Followers frame match the leader by body matching the tone felt through his hands and arms. For example, a leader can choose to embellish a musical break with a freeze. Her posture locks when body matching the sudden change in tone initiated by the leader, which she feels in her hands and arms. As she tones her body in response, she is frame matching tone, and the couple freezes.

Body matching can be visualized with colors (Hock 2008). In this Lindy Hop example, low tone is illustrated with the color blue and high tone with the color red. Imagine a leader that is body matching and dancing with low tone. His hand, arms, and body are all relaxed. They are the same color: blue. If he were to do a Lindy Hop basic step, his body may look 'floppy' or with 'bad' posture. If his partner matches the same postures and colors (tone), they will look and feel in sync. If

she dances with a relaxed arm (blue) and a tight back (red), not body matching, and the couple may experience difficulty achieving certain moves and rhythms.

Another key concept of body matching is a dancer's ability to 'lock' or fix his or her posture, preventing changes in movement. For example, a dancer prepares to jump in a bent posture with arms behind her back. If she maintains the amount of tone in her arms and legs, locking her bent posture, she will find it impossible to leave the ground (Hock 2008). When her tone is released, she can change postures and jump.

An example of locking one's partner's posture using tone is a Drag Blues partner lean, similar to a Tango volcada. A leader communicates an increase in tone to his follower while in a close-embrace position. She body matches the tone and becomes locked. He stops body matching by disengaging his lower body from his frame, and with a step backward takes her center of gravity forward into a lean. As long as his frame remains toned, he can utilize his disengaged body, and her locked posture, to, for example, walk around her in a circle. He should return to body matching before communicating another movement to his follower, so as not to release her posture into an uncomfortable body shape. Locking posture is a valuable tool in executing different moves and movements.

While the frame matching methodology is strict in creating partner connection, exceptions in body matching are permitted and occur when dancers disengage, or isolate, one or more parts of the body, such as the above example, or a dancer choosing to stylize, while maintaining timing and tension between partners. An unacceptable exception to body matching is 'breaking' frame. Breaking frame occurs when a dancer's arm(s) becomes disengaged from his or her body and energy is not transmitted through frame. It occurs when a dancer does not body match, and most often is unintentional. For example, if a follower is not properly creating the tone needed to execute a partner assisted turn (i.e. her body is red and arm is blue), she may break frame with her arm extending behind her body, and the energy required for her to turn is not communicated.

Swing and Blues dance instructors should build students' awareness of how different postures and levels of tone affect their dancing and their partner's. Mastery of posture and tone changes will enhance a student's ability to properly create, maintain, and change tension, the keystone of partner connection. Without tension, there is no communication between partners.

Tension (and compression)

Tension and compression are the means of communicating in Swing and Blues dance connection and are created with axial postures at any level of tone. Tension, as it relates to partner dancing, is the elastic potential energy created by the stress exerted on the muscles of two connected dancers leaning away from or pulling against one another to execute partner movements.⁶ Compression, the opposite of tension, is elastic potential energy created by the stress exerted on the muscles of two connected dancers leaning into or pushing against one another, and is another manner of executing partner movements. Potential (stored) energy from tension and compression is released into kinetic (moving) energy. They are typically equally created and released with the body in the opposite direction of one's partner.

Many instructors, and students, often mistake the terms tone and tension, and treat them as one component of connection instead of two. Tone is the amount of

muscle engagement in the body. It only exists in, and can be set by, an individual dancer. It may be matched equally by one's partner, but cannot be imposed on him or her. Whereas, tension may be matched equally by, or imposed on, one's partner. An increase in tone increases the amount of tension created.

Tension and compression can be created or changed in three primary ways: by pulling, pushing, or releasing. These three are comprised of four classifications: tension-pull, compression-push, tension-release, and compression-release. They can be visualized with two dancers each holding hands connected at an equal distance between them. When the leader pulls the follower towards his body, he leads a tension-pull. When he pushes the follower away from his body, he leads a compression-push. From tension, when the leader's body moves toward the hand(s) anchored in between him and his partner, and the follower responds by moving her body toward the hand(s), they demonstrate tension-release. From compression, when his body moves away from the hand(s) anchored in between him and his partner, and the follower responds by moving her body away, they demonstrate compression-release. In light of frame matching and Δp Ted, Swing and Blues dance instructors should categorize a majority of partner moves and movement into the above four primary classifications of tension and compression leads.

Traditionally, partner dance moves are taught with tension-pull and compression-push connections. These methods of connection result from the leader imposing tension on his partners by adding tone, whereas more modern teaching approaches incorporate the concepts tension-release and compression-release, which place responsibility on the followers to equally and oppositely create, maintain, and change tension with the leaders. In tension – and compression-release, a follower is responsible for matching changes in posture and tone, and to move her body on her own in response to the leader's body. They place more responsibility on the follower to be aware of and sensitive to the changes in tension that occur. This form of dancing takes practice to master, because it requires followers to act on their own to create movements and rhythms that complement the energy being led.

In addition to pulling, pushing, and releasing, dancers can also manipulate tension by disengaging, such as when executing stylizations. Stylizations are the replacement of select postures and tones with new ones that are compatible with the established tension. While matching tension is essential in transmitting and receiving energy and direction, it is not necessary to copy exact postures and tones. If a follower's stylization makes a change in tension that interrupts the flow of energy, it is called a 'back lead.' Consistency in tension between partners allows dancers to incorporate rhythmic and directional variations without inhibiting changes in energy.

Energy

The purpose of tone and tension in partner connection is to create energy. The category 'Energy' refers to the potential energy created by tone and tension, which is used to execute moves and movements. Once it becomes kinetic energy, it is separated into a different category, 'Direction of Energy.' The 'E' and 'D' categories in Δp Ted are teaching tools for breaking down potential and kinetic energy into component parts in preparing and executing moves and movements in partner dance.

In Swing and Blues dance, potential energy determines how much kinetic energy a follower uses to step. When choosing a partner move or movement, it is important to consider how much kinetic energy will be required to execute it, and then create the necessary potential energy to carry it out. Potential energy is created by a dancer's tone, tension between two dancers, or a combination of both. Higher energy movements typically require postures with higher tone and tension, and therefore require more potential energy in the body or between partners, while lower energy movements require postures with less tone and tension.

In releasing tension, the amount of change in the leader's posture and tone determines the amount of energy the follower will have and the direction she will go. For example, think again about the rock step in the Lindy Hop basic. Should the leader extend his lead foot farther back than normal, creating a larger amount of tension between the connected dancers, the release of that tension would lead the follower with a greater amount of energy. In this example, the tension created between the partners is potential energy awaiting a direction before it can be put to use.

Direction of energy

Once energy is generated within the connection, how dancers utilize it varies on their interpretation of music, desired move or movement, and path. When potential energy is given direction, and a dancer's body becomes in motion, energy becomes kinetic. Kinetic energy is a part of the 'Direction of Energy' category in ΔpT ed.

Potential energy can be directed into kinetic energy in multiple ways. For example, leaders may choose to direct all the energy to the follower, take it for themselves, or share it equally. In a Swing basic, if the leader pulls in his follower, she will travel to him with a large amount of energy. If he disengages his arm from his body, he will leave her stalled out in place and travel around her with the energy. If both dancers share the energy, they will equally travel with one another. The amount of potential energy present in the connection, and manner in which leaders release it, determines how and how much a follower will travel in a certain direction.

In Swing and Blues dance, kinetic energy is expressed in a dancer's body in terms of rhythm, moves, and movements in a certain direction across the floor. Each move and movement has a unique ΔpT ed. Dancers transform the energy within connection to perform musicality and execute syncopations. The execution of rhythm, moves, and movements, greatly depends on correct posture. The shape a dancer creates determines where energy is transmitted into the body, and tone and tension determine how it will be utilized. Although tension is necessary in creating energy, it does not create rhythm; changes in tension and movement of the body do.

Momentum is a consequence of a dancer moving his or her body in a general direction and is often an important component of directing a partner across the floor. Dancers make constant changes in posture, tone, and tension to direct and redirect momentum expressed in moves and movements. In general, there are three directions in which Swing and Blues dancers carry momentum: linear, rotational, and vertical. Leaders create many variations in moves and movements by varying the direction they move their followers. For example, a tuck turn is normally led with half-rotation and half-linear direction. It can, however, be led with all rotation,

wherein the follower stays in place during the turn, or with all linear direction, wherein the follower moves forward without rotating into the hand.

Conclusion

Like other partner dances, Swing and Blues dance is an artistic and stylistic manner of expressing oneself through whole body movement, communicated through connection. Dancers must practice this connection in order to effectively execute different patterns and master the different postures, tones, tensions, energies, and directions of energy they each require. Δ pTed unifies various connection models and creates a framework in which instructors can effectively teach partner connection, or frame matching. As with all aspects of partner dance, leading and following requires practicing the knowledge of moves and movements and their specific cues within the dance. With frame matching and Δ pTed, dancers now have a definition of what it truly means to lead and follow.

Notes on contributor

Joseph Daniel DeMers is a champion Lindy Hop and Blues dance instructor based in Denver, CO. He and his partner, Nelle DeMers, have toured the world from South Korea to France to Canada and all over the USA. He loves to dance and is proud to be a dancer, performer, competitor, and instructor. He is the owner of Overstreet Dance Gallery in Littleton, CO; a club for the arts, music, and dance. He graduated from Colorado State University with a Bachelor of Science, Metro State College of Denver with a license in Secondary Education, and the University of Colorado, Denver, with a Masters in Educational Psychology. He is very grateful to Shauna Marble, Carsie Blanton, Mike Varney, Marty Klempner, and the Philadelphia and Denver dance scenes, for embracing him and Nelle, Δ pTed, and frame matching. Without them, there would be no synthesis or motivation for creating this article. He would also like to extend his appreciation to the Blues dance scene around the world, for without Blues he would not have discovered the importance of movement as a way of connecting. Visit him at his website www.joeandnelle.com or www.bluesdanceteacher.com.

Notes

1. The "T" in Δ pTed is uppercase because it stands for Tone and Tension, both beginning with the letter "T."
2. Moves refer to patterns executed with a partner and movements are those done individually.
3. A Swing dance convention in Denver, CO.
4. A Swing dance competition weekend in Washington, DC.
5. For simplicity, the personal pronouns 'he' and 'she' are used to refer to the leader and the follower in partner dances, respectively, but it is acknowledged that these gender conventions do not always apply.
6. The author acknowledges that tension is scalar and created by multiple forces imposed on all parts of the body, but for the purpose of this article it is specific to muscles.

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Appendix

Back-lead: When a follower's stylization makes a change in tension that interrupts the flow of energy.

Baseline: The posture, tone, and tension a dancer uses to begin leading or following.

Body matching: When a dancer's hands and arms are similarly toned to his or her body.

Breaking Frame: When a dancer's arm(s) becomes disengaged from his or her body and energy is not transmitted through the frame.

Closed position: Varying types of frames with the leader's hand placement primarily connected on the follower's body as opposed to the hands in open.

Compression: The elastic potential energy created by the stress exerted on the muscles of two connected dancers leaning into or pushing against one another, regardless of the level of tone.

Compression posture: A body position leaning one's center of gravity into one's partner while anchored in place on the floor.

Compression-push: When a leader's hand, connected to the follower, pushes her body away from his.

Compression-release: From compression, when a leader's body moves away from the hand(s) anchored in between him and his partner, and the follower responds by moving her body away.

Connection: The communication of changes in energy and direction of energy with posture, tone, tension, through one or more points of contact.

Dance form: A set of styles and figures determined by a dance's music, history, movement, and connection (if applicable).

Dancing: An artistic and stylistic way of expressing oneself through whole-body movement.

Direction of energy: When a dancer's body is given direction and becomes in motion, and potential energy becomes kinetic.

Disengagement: An isolation of a body part by a difference in tone, which energy from the disengaged body part(s) does not transmit through frame.

Drag Blues: A modern variation of Ballroomin' and Slow Drag, both close-embrace vintage Blues dances, danced to the swinging rhythms found in Blues music.

Energy: The potential energy, created by tone and tension, used to execute moves or movements.

Following: Matching the changes in tension with posture and tone, established by the leader, in order to follow energy and direction of energy.

Frame: A posture set with a level of tone used to communicate energy and direction of energy through tension.

Frame matching: The act of creating, maintaining, or changing tension between partners with posture and tone, in order to lead and follow energy and direction.

Framework: An established connection of posture, tone, tension, energy, and direction of energy, within which dancers move.

Isolation: A disengagement of one part of the body from another.

Leading: Initiating changes in tension with posture and tone, in order to lead energy and direction of energy.

Leverage posture: A body position leaning one's center of gravity away from one's partner while anchored in place on the floor.

Locking posture: Using tone to fix a certain shape of the body and maintain tension.

Neutral posture: A body position in which a dancer holds his or her own weight without leaning away from or into his or her partner.

Open position: Varying types of frames with the leader's hand placement primarily connected to the follower's hands as opposed to her body.

Optimal posture: A posture in which energy is most effectively transmitted through the body, when executing a move or movement.

Optimal relaxation: The minimal amount of tone required to lead and follow a move or movement.

Partner dancing: An artistic and stylistic way of expressing oneself through body movement, communicated through connection.

Partner connection: The communication of changes in posture, tone, tension, energy, and direction of energy, through one or more points of contact.

Posture: The shape a dancer creates with his or her body when executing a movement.

ApTed: an acronym describing the changes in posture, tone, tension, energy, and direction of energy.

Release: Exiting tension or compression, or relaxing engaged muscles.

Rhythm: An element of kinetic energy expressed by dancers to match or create musical variations and patterns.

Stretch: Tension created between two dancers entering a leverage posture.

Stylization: The replacement of select postures and tones with new ones that is compatible with established tension.

Styles and Figures: Movement, moves, patterns and rhythms of a particular dance form.

Tension: The elastic potential energy created by the stress exerted on the muscles of two connected dancers leaning away from or pulling against one another, regardless of the level of tone.

Tension-pull: From tension, when the leader's hand, connected to the follower, pulls her body toward his.

Tension-release: When the leader's body moves toward the hand(s) anchored in between him and his partner, and the follower responds by moving her body toward her hand(s).

Tone: The amount of muscle tension, or engagement, a dancer creates in the body to accomplish a movement.