

So It's Your First Dance?

A Beginner's Guide to What to Expect and What to Do

BEFOREHAND:

- If you have pre-registered for a dance, very often, a set of notes for the dances on the program will be sent to you. Look over these notes ahead of time. Maybe even "dance" them on the kitchen table with salt and pepper shakers. Many of the dances on the program for balls in your area will be done in class during the weeks before the ball.
- Don't feel compelled to find a date. In Scottish country dancing, it is customary to change partners throughout the evening, even if one has come with a date.
- Many ball organizers will schedule a walk-through or ball rehearsal of some type the afternoon or evening before the dance. Consider attending if you are unfamiliar with or not sure of some of the dances.

WHAT TO WEAR:

- Whatever you wear, make sure you can dance in it!
- Men are always encouraged to wear a kilt at a ball, but don't feel you have to stay away if you don't have one. At a formal ball, other formal wear such as a suit and tie would be appropriate. At a semi-formal ball, a nice pair of trousers and shirt would be appropriate attire. On the other hand, if you've never worn the kilt before, a ball is the perfect opportunity to borrow or rent one to try out.
- Ladies, a Scottish country dance ball may be your golden opportunity to wear those bride's maid dresses and prom gowns you thought you'd never be able to wear again. Unless you are up for an Oscar, there just aren't many opportunities to really dress up these days, but a ball is one of those few times. Of course, if you don't have an Yves St. Laurent lying around, never fear. An attractive skirt and top or dress will do quite nicely.
- Ghillies or other soft-soled leather dance slippers are the typical footwear for all dances for both men and women. If you haven't got a pair, any soft-soled shoes will do in a pinch, even Keds. For the safety of themselves and other dancers, ladies should not dance in high heels. Stocking feet will work but may be dangerously slippery.

AT THE DANCE:

- There are usually very few walk-throughs at a ball, so try to look over the dance notes beforehand. If you have been going to classes, you will have already danced most of the dances on the program at least once before. At most balls, the dances are "briefed" (i.e. the notes are read aloud) just before they are danced as a reminder. In the Vancouver area, it is customary to walk through the dances once before they are danced.
- A copy of the dance instructions is usually distributed at the ball. At more formal balls, these are often in the form of little booklets. Men usually keep them in their sporrans, but since women's formalwear rarely has pockets, they usually have more of a challenge. Many more formal balls will provide a ribbon to tie the notes to your waist or wrist. Consider bringing a safety pin or two to facilitate this.
- After more popular dances and old favorites, dancers may call for an encore. If a dance is repeated, it is usually once and to the bottom, unless the MC says otherwise.
- Balls usually begin with a Grand March and customarily end with a closing waltz or a polka. Often the evening ends with everyone singing "Auld Lang Syne."

WHAT'S A GRAND MARCH ANYWAY?

- The Grand March is often used to start off a ball. It is simply a march around the room with a partner, usually to the music of a piper. It is extremely easy -- no fancy footwork or formations -- and very suitable for normally non-dancing partners who may have attended the ball with you.
- When the Grand March is announced, find a partner and line up. If they've come with a date, most people partner up with that person for the Grand March, but if you've come alone don't feel bashful about just asking someone. It doesn't matter if the person is the same sex.

GENERAL DANCE ETIQUETTE:

- Some people continue the habit of "booking" partners for dances later in the evening. Many people consider it rude to do so for the whole evening.
- Feel free to ask anyone of either sex to dance. It is customary to dance with many different partners throughout the evening. Beginners shouldn't be afraid to ask more experienced dancers to dance.
- Form sets when the dance is announced or the band signals the next dance by playing the opening bars of music. It is considered rude to take the floor before one of these two signals has been given.

- Always join sets from the bottom, never dash into the middle or the top of a set that has already formed.
- If you are the top couple, it is customary to count off the couples so each dancer knows if s/he is first couple, second couple, etc. If after counting off the sets you find that more couples are needed to complete the set, hold up fingers indicating how many couples are needed. The MC will announce it.
- After each dance is completed, you should thank your partner and the other dancers in your set. It is also considered polite to escort your partner from the dance floor.

TIPS FOR LESS EXPERIENCED DANCERS:

- Be aware of and open to cues your partner and the other members of the set may be giving you as you do the dance. A good partner will try to help you through a dance and remind you what comes next.
- Don't feel you must skip a ball if you don't know all the dances. Few people at a ball know all the dances. They just look like they do and practice gives the ability to look at the dance notes quickly, watch carefully and work out (i.e. guess) what is coming next. For example, if you are 2nd corner and something is happening to 1st corners, it is likely that you will be doing the same in the next phrase. You can also glance over at the person dancing in your same position in the set next to you. Most importantly, keep an eye on your partner and watch for cues.
- If the program indicates a dance is recommended for more experienced dancers, consider sitting that one out. Don't let other dancers bully you into doing a dance if you are uncomfortable with it, just to make up a set.
- If you mess up, which most people do during the evening, however experienced, don't panic! Sort out the set so that you can all dance the next time through.
- The vast majority of experienced dancers are eager to encourage and help you, and want to make your ball experience fun. If you run across one of those rare stinkers who won't dance with you or gives you a dirty look if you make an error, DON'T let it discourage you.

MOST OF ALL, SMILE AND ENJOY YOURSELF!

Adapted from an article by Lara Friedman-Shedlov. Inspired by and partially adapted from the guide on the Edinburgh University New Scotland Country Dance Society web site. Note that in some cases it reflects our local practice and may not be universal.