

## Tango Basics

### Pre-requisite

None

(These are basic patterns)

### Introduction

The easiest way to learn to dance the Tango is to understand a little of its roots. (Read about it in greater detail in the History Section.) The word Tango means “I have” in Spanish. However, the name is thought to have come from an African word meaning “meeting place.”

The Tango began in the lower class under-belly of Argentine society around the turn of the century before the first world war. Refugees from all over Europe and Africa, living in squalor, migrated to Argentina hearing of a better life. There was a better life there but only for the upper class. This migration was mostly men and the population of Argentina grew with the ratio of men to women at 50 to one. Many of these lower class men took on jobs as gauchos (cowboys) or making what money they could as portenios (residents of the port of Buenos Aires) living in the barrios (lower class neighborhoods).

They spent their free time (they had a lot of it) in the red light district drinking, carousing, and visiting prostitutes. The music they heard was a montage of music from Europe, Africa, and the gaucho country of Argentina where the predominate form of dance and music was the Molonga (meaning party or festival). The Molonga was played with a small accordion-like hand instrument called Bandoneon.

Gauchos, with their sweat hardened chaps and knees bowed from riding horses, paid “ladies” to dance with them. Since the men had not bathed, the lady danced in the crook of his arm with her head held back, holding her right hand near his pocket waiting for payment. They walked to the heavy beat of the music around the small dance area and among the tables.

The history of the Tango is that as Argentine society changed after the war with more rights for the lower class, the dance became extremely popular throughout the country. Its popularity spread back to Europe with the upper class and to America. The French influenced the European style with their marching, staccato contributions to the music. In America, Arthur Murray introduced the Tango into ballroom dancing and its popularity spread across America after movies of such figures as Rudolph Valentino exhilarated audiences with ballroom style Tango.

Today, there is Argentine Tango, European Tango, and American Tango. The Argentine Tango is seductive, sexual, and suggestive of its roots. It's movements are small and it is best suited for dancing in small places. It is often called "Tango Orillero". The European Tango which has a staccato march feel to it, and the American Tango, which is often called show Tango are grouped together as ballroom Tango or "Tango de Salon".

## Overview

**Social Tango** What we are teaching here is NOT show Tango or Argentine Tango or even European Tango. We like to call this social Tango. We take primarily from American ballroom Tango, and we show you what is absolutely necessary to dance to Tango music, We show stylistic and traditional variations that allow the dancers to choose what they wish to do and to play. After all, this is a playful dance.

Although the graphics we use are accurate, we often take playful liberties in the spirit of the Tango. Enjoy this instruction.

In this segment, we discuss:

- The music – how to step to the beat and how determine if it is a Tango.
- Contact – how to hold your partner. This includes both the standard dance contact and the Tango hold.
- The basic foot work including the Tango Walk.
- Introduction to Improvisation and the "mark". This is the heart of the variety found in Tango patterns.
- 8 count Basic.

## The Music

Tango music comes from a mixture of cultural influences including Africa, India, France, Spain, and Latin America. Modern Tango music comes in two distinct flavors: The melodic Argentinean style, and the rhythmical European style. At the heart of the Argentinean style is the Bandoneon, which is often accompanied by a small band, including a piano, guitar, one or two violins, and sometimes a singer. True Argentine Tango music never has a heavy drum beat, if drums are used at all. The European style, in contrast, is a strong march with a steady, consistent downbeat played by a snare drum. The music is often played by a large orchestra with or without the Bandoneon.

American style Tango is danced to music of either variety, sometimes to something in between. It may be written in 2/4 or 4/4 time, but to the dancer it usually feels as though beats occur in groups of 8. The tempo is medium; 120 - 128 beats per minute (30-32 meters per minute at 4/4) is recommended. The best music for social dancing should have steady, predictable two-measure (8-beat) phrases with a strong cadence.

The following are some Tango songs that are easy to dance to. Others can be purchased in Tango collections.

- "Araca", A Tango composed by Eduardo Arolas, and played by the Orquesta Miguel Villasboas, recorded by London (32-14497) in Montevideo, Uruguay.
- "Adios Buenos Aires". Another Tango by Eduardo Arolas, and recorded by his Orquesta Eduardo Arolas as an instrumental on 4/23/1917 by Victor (69587) in Buenos Aires.
- "Armenonville". This Tango was composed in 1929 by Juan Maglio, and is played by the composer's own Orquesta Juan Maglio. This Instrumental was recorded by Odeon (9045 5009) in Buenos Aires, Argentina, 12/6/1929.
- "Abandonada". was composed by Francisco Canaro, with the Lyric by Manuel Romero. This version was recorded on 9/11/1939 in Buenos Aires, by the Orquesta Francisco Canaro. Ernesto Famá is the singer
- "A Media Luz", is a delightful Tango composed by Edgardo Donato. Carlos Lenzi contributed the Lyric. This instrumental is played by the Quarteto Juan Cambareri and was recorded in Buenos Aires.
- Don Juan. This lovely Tango was composed in 1898 by Ernesto Poncio, and is still very widely popular today. This version is played by Orquesta Carlos De Sarli and was recorded in Buenos Aires, Argentina on Jan. 31, 1955.

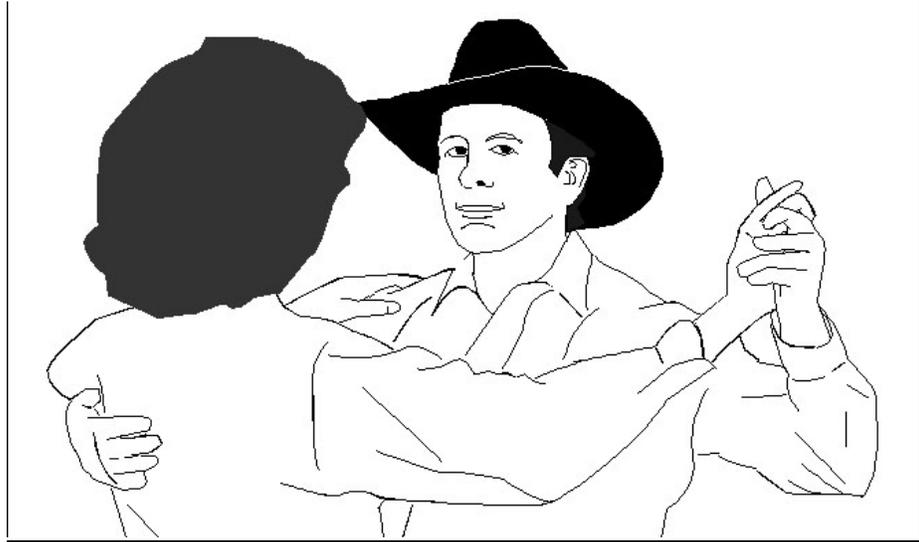
- The Count** The beats are usually accentuated in the form of "ONE two THREE four", - the first and third beats having a pronounced accent.
- Tango uses two types of steps; a SLOW step and a QUICK step. The beats are often interpreted as quick, quick, slow where the quick steps take up a beat each and the slow step takes up two beats. Therefore, a quick, quick, slow will take up one measure of 4/4 timing.
- A phrase is 8 beats that is made up of two measure of 4/4 timing. The traditional count (as taught by Arthur Murray) is five steps made up of slow, slow, quick, quick, slow. Each of the three slow steps takes two beats and each of the quick steps take up one beat for a total of eight beats.
- What is a beat?** A beat in music is a heavy guitar strum, a drumbeat, or some other heavy sound in the music. It is the **natural** place you would snap your fingers or clap your hands if you were keeping time to the music.
- The important thing to remember here is that in dance, you put your foot on the floor on the beat as opposed to picking it up. To practice, you can snap your fingers and stamp your feet as you listen to the music (guys use the left foot and ladies use the right.)
- Is it a Tango?** Listen to the music. Tango is earthy and dramatic. If it is a Tango, you should be able to count to the beat as follows:
- You should be able to hear four beats – a sharp beat followed by a light beat followed by a sharp beat followed by a light beat. More than likely, the music will have groups of two distinctive sets of four beats. If it is a Tango, you should be able to count slow, slow, quick, quick, slow, pause and remain on beat to the music.
- An alternative is to watch what other dancers are doing before you go out onto the floor. If you can distinguish the often set of slow, slow, quick, quick, slow with a following pause or an often lunge back against the gentleman, it is a Tango.
- If you still cannot determine what it is, ask someone nearby. Most dancers are friendly and they will be glad to tell you.

**Contact**

Standard Dance  
Hold

The Tango footwork can be danced with standard partner contact. Since this is the most simple and requires no complex postures, we will describe this first. Use this if you wish and move on to more traditional Tango hold that we describe next.

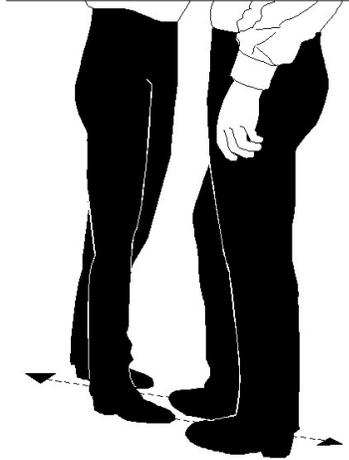
Face each other.



Gentlemen – Put your right hand under the lady's left arm and place it gently on her left shoulder blade. Keep your fingers together and turn the tip of your hand down so that it raises your right elbow to create a shelf for the lady to rest her arm. In Latino dancing, the clasped hands on the gentleman's left side tends to be held a little higher than in other continental dances. Hold your left hand out to the side about level with her chin but below her eyes. Hold your palm forward and fingers pointing to the outside to create a fence for her right hand.

Ladies – Rest your left elbow on the gentleman's arm and cup your left hand on the ball of his right shoulder. Gently rest your right hand on top of the gentleman's left hand.

Finally, hold each other slightly offset so that your right foot is pointing between your partner's feet.



We do three things to prevent stepping on each other's toes:

1. Ladies and gentlemen dance with opposite footwork – guys generally start with the left foot and ladies start with the right foot. Provided they are facing each other, as the gentleman steps forward with his left, the lady steps back with her right and there is always a place to put the foot.

However, be forewarned that due to the improvised character of the Tango dance, the gentleman sometimes leads with the right foot and the lady must pay particular attention to her lead or “mark”.

2. Ladies and gentlemen dance parallel but offset to each other so that the right foot is lined up to always pass between the partner's feet. This prevents bumping knees and toes.
3. Ladies and gentlemen keep their feet fairly close to the floor when they step to prevent stepping on your partner if all else fails. Avoid dragging your feet – it is unsightly, it creates an irritating sound, and it will quickly wear out you shoes.

**Contact**  
Tango Hold

Stand facing your partner as in the standard contact position described above and offset one half body width. Now, each pivot slightly to that person's left so that the gentleman's right hip and right side are in contact with the lady's right side. The gentleman's right hand may now move lower on her back and a little further around.

Each partner's feet will now be slightly offset in front of each other. The man's left foot will be his "buckle foot" and the lady's right foot will be her "buckle foot". However, the man's right foot will still point between the lady's feet and the lady's right foot will still point between the man's feet.

The lady moves her left hand from the front of the shoulder to behind it in a flat plane parallel to the ground and with the ball of her thumb she lifts up against his arm. She may hold her head in the woman's traditional tango aloofness if she likes.

Lowering

There is no rise nor fall in Tango. It is danced from one position only, LOWERED. Each partner bends their knees slightly to lower their bodies. For example, if the man were 6 feet tall, he would lower until he would measure 5' 10". The dancers remain at this height the entire dance.



**Footwork**

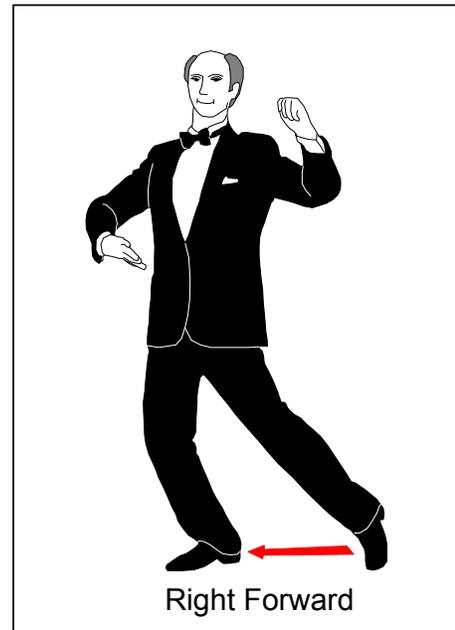
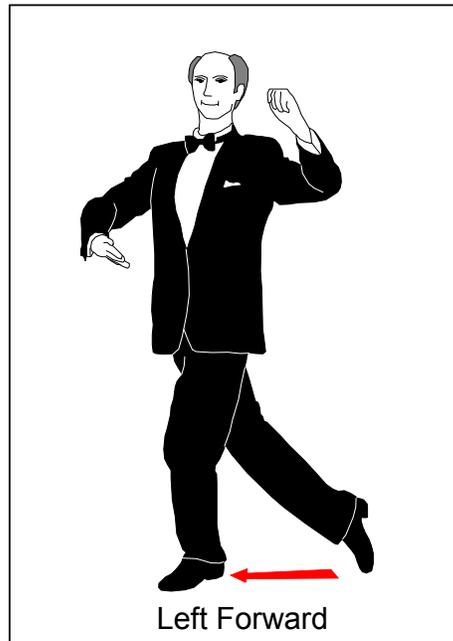
In Tango, there are four types of steps:

- Walking steps, both forward and backward
- Side steps, both to the left and to the right that include cross overs
- Pivot steps, where there is a sharp change of direction, and
- Touch steps where there is no change of weight.

In this segment, we will cover most somewhat and have more detailed discussion in later segments or in classroom discussion.

**The Tango Walk****Forward**

The method of walking in Tango has become an integral and important feature of the dance. Any walk forward with the left foot will be taken slightly across the body.



Any walk forward with the right foot will be taken with the right side of the body advancing with the right foot.

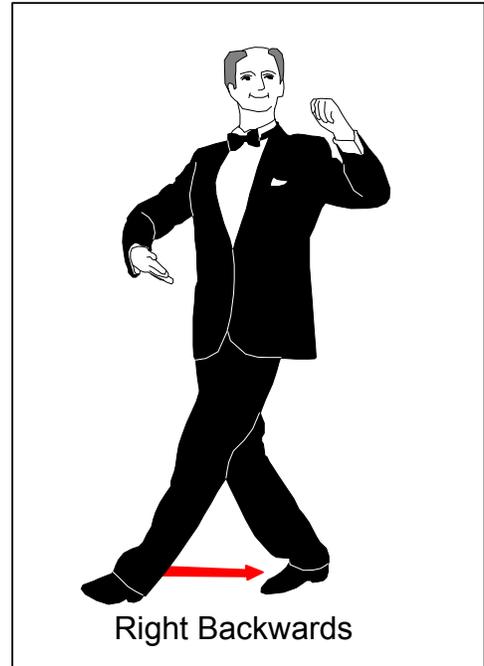
This means that a series of forward walks quiet naturally will curve a little to the left. If the walks are made to go in a straight line, the effect and feel will be of a slight crabbing action. This seems strange at first but soon becomes an integral part of the dance.

**The Tango Walk**

**Backward**

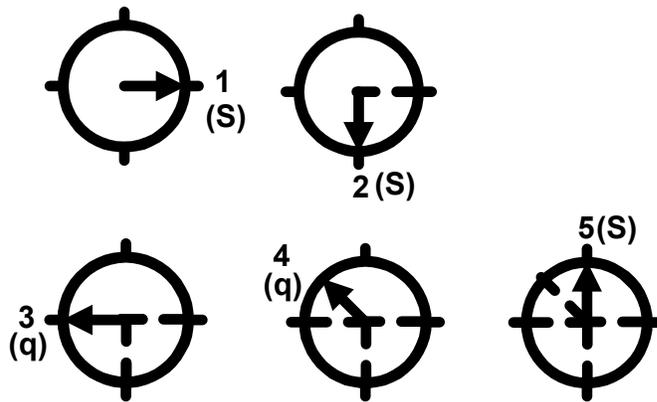
Any walk back with the left foot will be taken with the left side of the body moving with the moving foot.

Any walk back with the right foot will be taken slightly across the body.



The Tango dance clock

Steps number 1 and 2 are slow steps, whereas steps 3 and 4 are quick steps followed by a slow on step 5.



Unlike the regular clock, the Tango dance clock is divided into four segments to correspond to the beats of the basic phrase of music. Clocks for other dances will be different. Due to the improvised character of Tango we will discuss later, any of the four beats can be divided into either slow steps or quick steps. Purely for convenience, illustrated above is the clock for the 8 count basic discussed later in this segment.

**Timing of Steps**

An important point to note is that in every case, the timing occurs after the step, not before it. Therefore, the timing for the first step occurs between point 1 and 2 in the diagram. The second step begins at point 2, the third step begins at point 3.

**Improvisation**

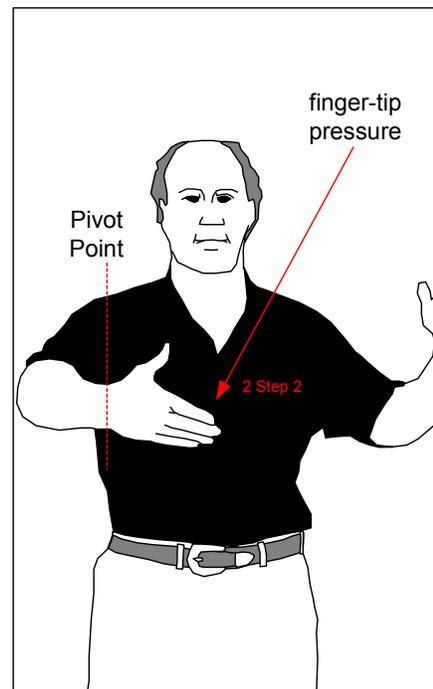
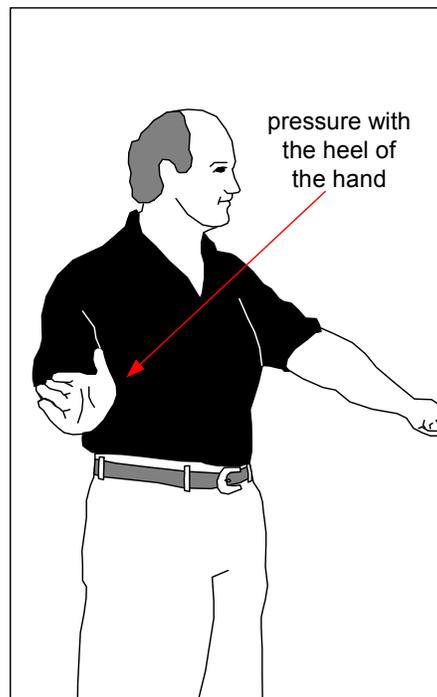
Improvisation is the core of the Tango dance. The dance is made up of many different small segments of footwork that are generally about 4 beats in length. Improvisation is the man putting these small pieces together such that there are an even number of pieces. Usually and traditionally certain small pieces go together to make an 8 beat phrase.

Here a few examples of some of the names of the pieces:

- Stroll (Paseo) made up of two walks or four quicks.
- Walk (Caminata) made up of two or more strolls
- Close (Resolucion) made up of a quick step, a side quick, and touch hold
- The Cut (Corte) made up of a two count lunge
- The Eight (El Ocho) where the man leads the lady in a figure eight pattern in front of him.

**The Mark**

The mark is a combination of the man using his right hand on the lady's back and his frame to tell her where to turn and even what foot to step out on. He uses either the heel of his hand or the finger tips on her back to tell her which way to turn. Tango often requires good control from the man that is learned with great practice.

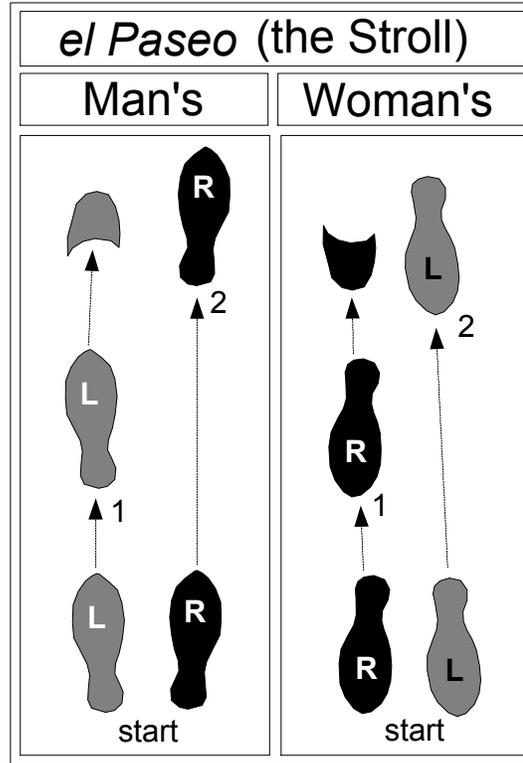


**The Stroll**

El Paseo

El Paseo is the oldest and most common form of the Tango. It is merely two walking steps forward for the gentleman and two back for the lady. Two or more Paseos together form a Caminata.

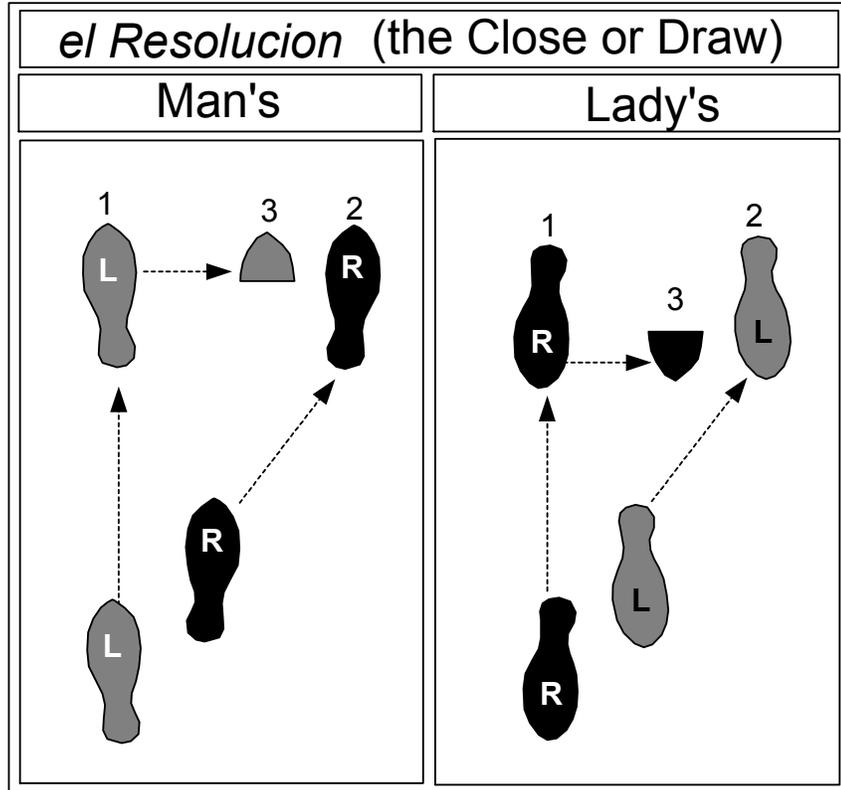
In the beginning, all the dancers did was walk.



**The Close**

**El Resolucion**

El Resolucion is made up of three steps – two quick steps and a slow. The man steps quick forward with the left foot, diagonal quick to the right with his right foot and then draws his left foot up near his right without changing weight. (European style is to do a tap step here). This allows him the freedom to step forward with his left foot on the next phrase.

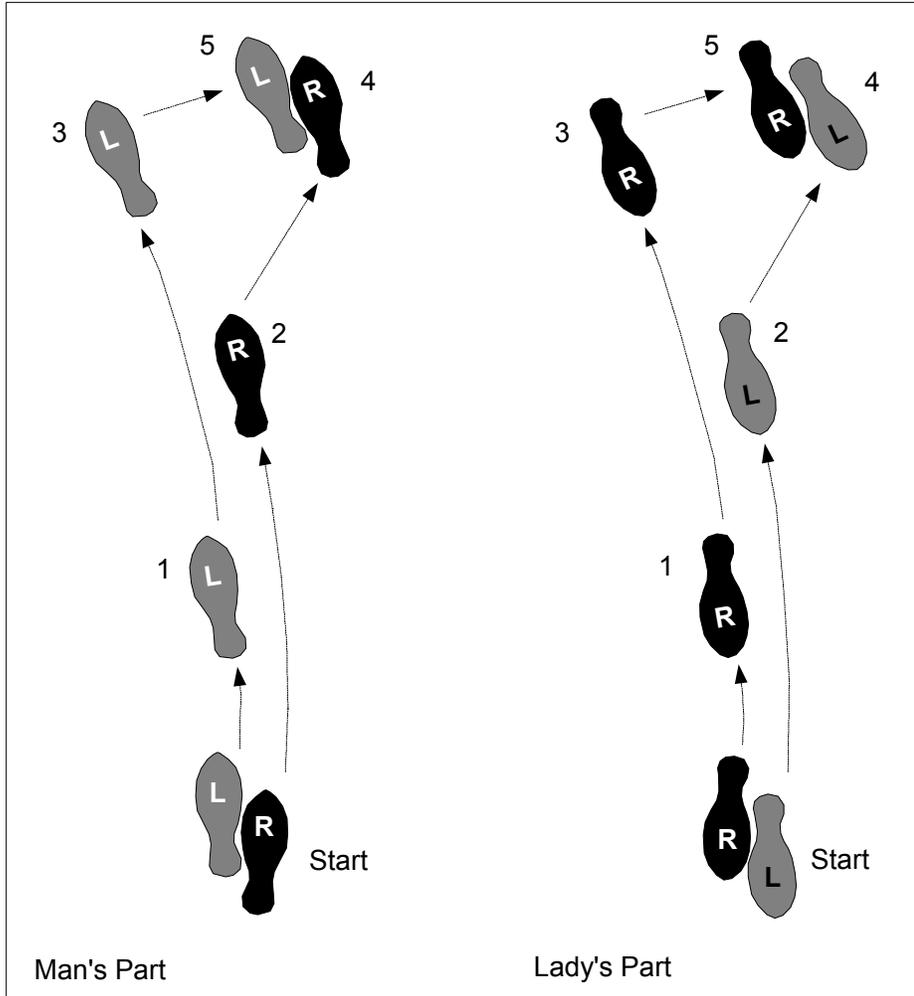


The lady follows and steps backward quick, to the left quick and draws her right foot accordingly.

**The 8 Count Basic**

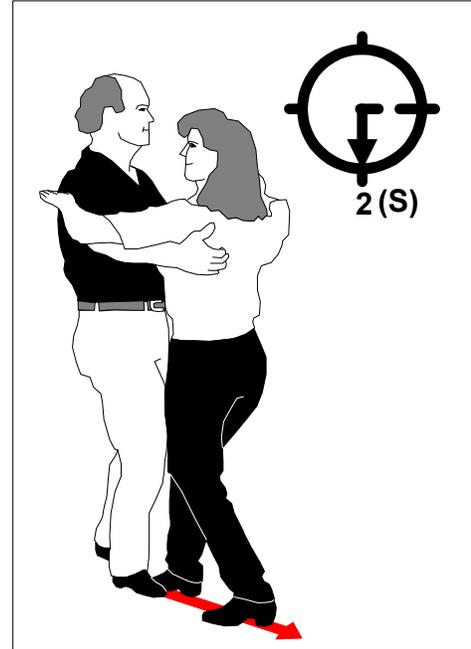
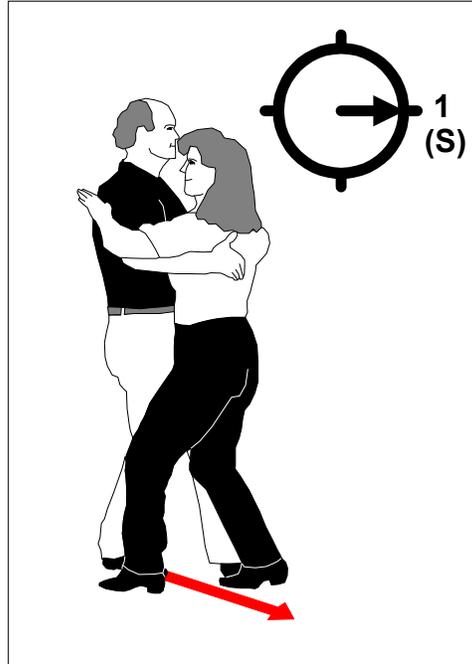
The 8 count basic is actually two patterns that make up an 8 count phrase. These are the two walking steps of El Paseo and the close of El Resolucion.

This is the most common phrase seen in Tango. It is counted as slow, slow, quick, quick, slow with no transfer of weight on the last step so that the next step can be with the left foot of the man.



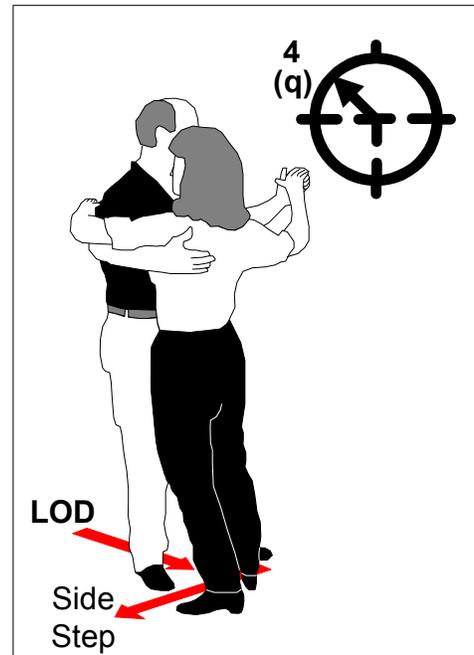
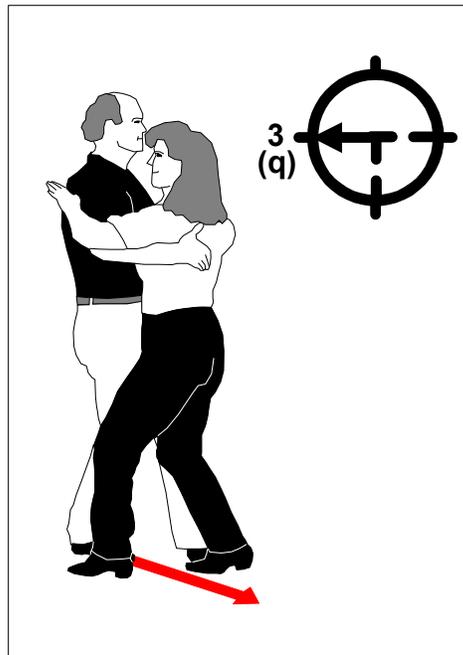
**El Paseo  
(The First Slow Steps)**

The slow steps are taken from a slightly lowered position with the right side of the bodies in contact or near contact.



**La Resolucion**

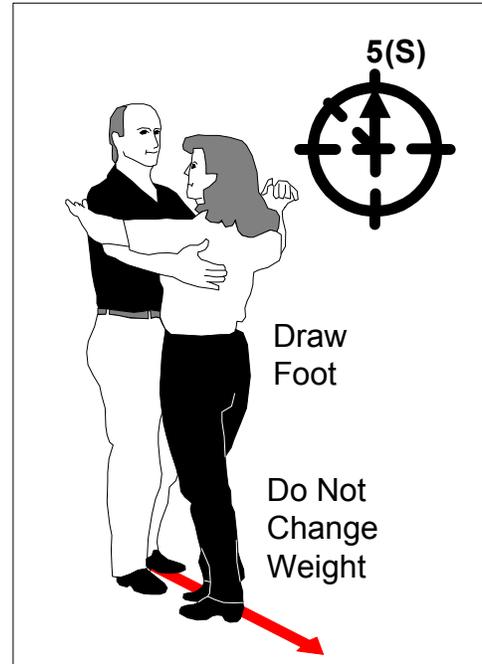
The first quick step is forward for the gentleman. On the second quick step he must tighten his frame as a "mark" for the lady and carry her to the side.



## The Close

The close is a draw where the gentleman pulls his left foot near his right and holds it for a full slow count. He must hold the frame of the lady tightly as a mark for her to cause her to do likewise.

The next step may or may not be with left foot due to improvisation. If he is going to step with his right foot, he will transfer his weight to his left and carry the lady to his right as her mark. He could also step back in a lunge or a pivot, each with its own distinctive mark for the lady.



## Don't be Afraid

Every dancer out there has “paid their dues”. They have struggled just like you. However, they are concentrating on their own efforts and not upon you. They do not care if you make a mistake, so go ahead and make them. You have just as much right to be on the dance floor as they do, so get out there and dance. It may be a struggle, but that is ok. Dance as if no one is watching you.

## Protect your Lady

As you are dancing, check often around you to be aware of the traffic and patterns that are happening nearby. Do not run your lady into another dancer and do not allow them to collide with her. Take smaller steps or maneuver her into an open spot if necessary. Avoid collisions with other dancers. It is even permissible to come to a dead stand still and not move or look around until the path is clear. That is a valid Tango pattern.

## Take the Blame

If a collision does occur, remember that it does no one any good to get upset – this is just recreation. The best policy is to apologize regardless if it is your fault or not.

And last, but not least – if you do bump into someone and knock over their drink, offer to replace it, and try to be more careful.

**Conclusion**

The material presented here is not all-inclusive, but only touches the high points. There are many other tips to help in your Tango technique. Some of these tips will be presented in the course of other dance segments, while others may have to be taught in conjunction with an instructor present.

This concludes the segment on basic Tango.