



SAN FRANCISCO BRANCH, INC.

*A Guide to the
Valentine's Ball*

*For
The San Francisco Branch
of
The Royal
Scottish Country Dance
Society*

An Invitation to the Dance...

You have been Scottish Country Dancing for at least a year and even attended a monthly party or two. You have heard about the wonderful formal event the San Francisco Branch of the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society holds every February, the Valentine's Ball.

You are intrigued but have some questions.

You aren't sure if you should go.

On behalf of the Valentine's Ball committee let me answer your question.

Yes!

Our Valentine's Ball is one of the most wonderful traditions of our Branch of the RSCDS. It is a beautiful and exciting dance event, in a most elegant setting, amongst some of the most fun and kindest people in the world. Despite its name this is most certainly not an event for couples only. The name is a holdover from the original Balls that had a Valentine's Day theme. Nowadays it is simply our Winter Highland Ball, so there will be no hearts or cupids adorning the hall. It is a celebration of good fellowship between dancers and an opportunity to dress up and dance the night away in elegant surroundings.

The following guide is intended to help the beginning dancer prepare for the upcoming Valentine's Ball. With it you will know how to dress, what to expect, ball etiquette, and which dances you should join. Descriptions of all the dances themselves will be available well before the Ball in other documents.

If you accept this invitation, read on!

Sincerely,

Jamie Tanner,

Member of the RSCDS, San Francisco Branch and a dancer with the San Jose Class

Part I: How to Dress

This is a formal event. Even casual dressers usually make a special effort to dress up for the occasion.

For the Ladies

While the traditional garb for ladies in the RSCDS is a long white dress with a tartan sash pinned to the left shoulder, many attending the Ball prefer to break with this and revert to the older tradition of wearing a dress in which they feel their most beautiful and elegant. Most ball gowns are full length, and may be of any fabric or color.

If you do not have a formal gown, any pretty party dress will do nicely. Preferably, it should be *ballerina length* (almost touching the ankle) or longer. Be sure to try on your dress with your dancing shoes. If you usually wear heels with that dress, it may be too long for dancing.

You may be able to find a dress at the annual Ballgown Sale/Exchange scheduled several weeks before the Ball. It is held in a dancer's home. People bring dresses to sell, and come to try on and perhaps buy a "new" gown. Look for the flyer at Monthly Parties and a notice in the Branch newsletter.

Remember you will need your hands free for dancing. Make sure that your skirt is full enough to allow your legs free movement while dancing. Also note that petticoats with hoops can be difficult to manage in a tight set.

Note: *Long sleeved dresses especially in velvet, satin, or synthetics can get uncomfortably warm after even a few dances. If your dress exposes your shoulders then it is best to bring a light wrap to put on when not dancing.*

For the Gentlemen

Most men will be dressed in highland evening attire, such as the Prince Charlie coatee (jacket) or regulation doublet, and vest, with a kilt. A black Argyll jacket, or other black jacket, would also do nicely when worn with a dress (tuxedo) shirt, satin bow tie, and fancy evening belt with a bright metal waist plate. Sporrans should be semi-dress, dress, or full mask. If you are hiring an outfit make sure to get all the proper accoutrements. Some classes or other dancers have kilts available to borrow for the evening. Ask around or ask your class manager.

For further information regarding kilts I suggest the book "So you're going to wear the kilt" by J. Charles Thompson, or the online kilt forum www.xmarksthescot.com.

For dancing, men should wear dark colored (black or navy) underwear or bikini shorts. (See the section in the book on "The Final Question".)

For those attending who do not have a kilt to wear, or choose not to wear one, a tuxedo, dinner jacket, dark suit, or dark slacks with a sports jacket and white shirt with a tie will be fine.

Note: *Most gentlemen doff their jackets by the beginning of the second set and many bring several shirts to change into between sets, as the dancing is quite vigorous.*

Notes For Everyone

*(From the SF Branch Members' Handbook):
About Fragrances: Please be aware that you will be in close contact with others who may have allergies and sensitivities. For their sakes, please consider using only unscented products before a dance event. Thank you.*

Please also refrain from chewing gum or tablets while dancing. Chewing emits odors, and is distracting to other dancers. Thank you.

Part II: What to expect (The course of events)

Arrival

As tickets are purchased in advance, you enter the Hall and proceed through the foyer to the sign-in table. You will be given a small booklet with descriptions of all the evening's dances often with a piece of yarn/ribbon and a safety pin. Men will carry these in their sporrans or pockets and the ladies may attach them to their sashes or dresses. There are coat racks for outer garments and lounges for the Ladies and Gentlemen to change into their dance shoes and formal attire.

***Note:** These rooms are unattended. People do bring purses and cameras and leave them at the tables on either side of the dance floor and thus far none have lost any items. However, the Hall and our Branch do not accept responsibility for lost or stolen items.*

The Sherry Social

Entering the Ballroom you will see a table set up and drinks poured for a small sherry social before the dance. On either side of the Ballroom are areas with tables to which the dancers may retire at the end of each set, and gather for the midnight supper afterwards. Take this opportunity to say hello to friends and classmates.

***Note:** Non-alcoholic refreshments also available.*

The Grand March

After the sherry table has been cleared away the attendees will be asked to return to the foyer. At this point ladies and gentlemen should take partners for the Grand March and the first dance of the evening.

***Note:** Do not join in the Grand March unless you intend to dance in the first dance!*

Dancing couples will enter the ballroom to the stirring music of a bagpiper. Couples will walk

with nearer hands joined in a serpentine pattern around the dance floor as directed by the Grand Marshal. The Grand Marshal will be at the very front of the ballroom at the foot of the stage holding a tall wooden staff. This position is an honor given to an individual for their service to the SF Branch of the RSCDS. The Grand Marshal arranges the dancers into sets for the first dance.

The Dancing

For the remainder of the dances, the Master(s) of Ceremonies (the "MC") will announce the dances, see that the sets are counted off, and redistribute people as needed. They will offer a very brief talk through of the dance and will announce any encores.

At the end of the first and second sets of dances there will be a punch break. The start of the next set is announced with the band playing some music. The band also plays a waltz at the very end of the dance after the singing of Auld Lang Syne.

Auld Lang Syne

The dance concludes with everyone joining hands in a very large circle and singing Auld Lang Syne. There are some movements that traditionally accompany the song, but these are easily learned by watching those about you.

***Note:** If you don't know the lyrics, here are the words. You may want to memorize them. (Or, just sing-along the best you can, with people near you.)*

Should auld acquaintance be forgot
and never brought to mind? _
Should auld acquaintance be forgot
and days of auld lang syne?
For auld lang syne, my dear,
for auld lang syne,
we'll take a cup of kindness yet,
for auld lang syne.

Should auld acquaintance be forgot
and never brought to mind?
Should auld acquaintance be forgot
and days of auld lang syne?
And here's a hand, my trusty friend
And gie's a hand o' thine
We'll tak' a cup o' kindness yet
For auld lang syne

The Buffet

After the dancing is over for the evening, there is a light midnight buffet. The refreshments are self-service and may be enjoyed with friends and companions at the many tables set up in the sides of the hall.

Ball Etiquette

General SCD Ball Etiquette

These are universal formal points of etiquette for any SCD Ball.

(1) You may select a partner in advance for a particular dance, however the two of you will be expected to mingle and socialize until asked to form a set.

(2) It is considered bad manners to form a set before the dance has been announced. It is up to the MC to set the pace for the evening.

(3) Sets always form from the top of the hall (nearest the musicians) to the bottom. You and your partner join a dance set at the bottom of the set. Do not insert yourself into the middle.

(4) The gentleman escorts his partner to a place in the set (with nearer hands joined) and then steps back to his own place. After the dance he escorts his partner off the floor.

(5) It is considered very rude to leave a set or change positions once you have taken your place. If you feel you must switch places (most likely for less experienced dancers to move to

fourth place) you may do so only after asking and getting permission from the other dancers involved.

(6) The first couples (those at the very top of each "line") are responsible for counting off the sets in their line. It is much easier for them to do so if everyone remains in their places whilst they do this.

(7) It is considered polite to dance with a variety of partners. If you are with a spouse or date, it is customary to walk the Grand March, dance the first dance, the last dance, the waltz, and of course "*our dance*" (if it happens to be on the program) with them.

(8) Formal introductions are not required to ask someone to dance. If they are wearing dance shoes and attending this ball you can reasonably assume they are interested in dancing! You may exchange names on your way to the set lines.

(9) If you haven't learned a dance, it is inconsiderate to join a set with the expectation that others will cue you along continually. When this happens it spoils the fun for those who did make the effort to learn the dance beforehand.

(10) At the conclusion of the dance it is customary to thank your partner and the others in the set before retiring from the floor.

(11) Ladies may dance with other ladies. The stronger dancer usually takes the man's part, or if there is an allemande in the particular dance, the taller dancer takes the man's part.

Ball Etiquette

SF Branch Customs

Each branch of the RSCDS will have its own local customs. The following describes those used by the San Francisco Branch of the RSCDS:

(1) It is acceptable in our branch for women to ask a man to dance. The official position of the RSCDS is that this is acceptable “among familiars”.

(2) “Signing up” dances (planning beforehand to dance a particular dance with someone) is discouraged in the SF Bay Area, though a widespread practice, even if somewhat controversial, elsewhere. Some dancers do this, others wouldn’t dream of doing it, and some do this occasionally.

Note: For beginning dancers, it is probably a good idea to sign up with an experienced partner for at least some of your dances for fear of sitting out the only dances you can do.

(3) Though technically it is considered impolite to study one’s notes or diagram sheets once you have taken your place in the set line, it is an extremely common practice both here in the Bay Area and abroad. So go ahead and peek at those notes, before the talk-through, if you need them! During the briefing though, one should be listening to the MC.

Physical Comfort

Like the monthly parties, there are no group warm ups at the balls. Be sure to do a few stretches on your own before the dancing begins. If you have been sitting out a while between dances remember to warm up again before dancing next.

If you haven’t purchased cushioned insoles for your dance shoes, you probably will want to do so before the ball. Eighteen dances is a LOT of dancing!

Note: If your dancing shoes have been treated with non-skid silicone rubber, be aware that this coating can get extremely slippery when you step in water. So be careful around the punch bowl!

Dance Strategies

(What dances should you do?)

Here’s a true story.

My wife and I attended our first monthly party after only taking *three* SCD classes. Our teachers and class manager encouraged everyone in class to come so we did! We struggled through two dances and were quite overwhelmed. Luckily our whole class and all the folks attending that first dance were very kind, as most Scottish Country Dancers are, so we stuck with it.

We weren’t ready for that dance in the least, but we did learn the importance of being prepared. When we attended our next dance (a year later) we were ready, did much better, and had a lot of fun.

Be it a monthly party or the Valentine’s Ball do not simply assume that because one dance is labeled a beginner dance and another intermediate that you will find the former easy and latter more difficult. In general these it may be that you find a basic reel exceptionally difficult but the Strathspey pousette easy. So it is possible there may be some intermediate dances you can do easily and some beginner dances you will have trouble with.

The most important thing do before a monthly party or ball is to review the evening’s dances by going over published dance descriptions, diagram sheets, or ball booklet descriptions, whichever you are more comfortable using.

Then with the program of dances at hand:

- * Check for dances with which you are already familiar.
- * Ask your teacher to go over with you the dances that they feel you can do.
- * Ask if some of them can be reviewed in class.
- * Check and see if there is an upcoming Ball

review where you can get a quick walkthrough of all the dances.

* Make note of any dance that has a figure or figures that you know you are not able to perform at this point even with guidance.

After you have done as many of these as you can, sit down before the ball with your dance descriptions and label each dance one of the following:

YES: A dance I can do

MAYBE: A dance I can do with an experienced partner and/or set

NO: A dance that I cannot do (and I will take the whole set out with me!)

The hardest of these three categories will be the "MAYBE" group. You will have to decide, most often very quickly if a potential partner can help you successfully through a dance. We will cover how to politely do this in the very next section.

Asking for, Accepting and Declining a Dance

There is a limited amount of time between dances for people to find new partners.

Requests to dance, acceptances, questions/admissions in regard to a particular dance, and turning down dances should be kept brief. This enables dancers to have a chance to find a partner, if the first person they ask declines.

Asking for a Dance

This is simple. Whether you are a lady or gentleman, the one asking should approach and make eye contact with the potential partner and say either "*Would you like to dance?*" or "*May I have the pleasure of this dance?*" and then wait for a response.

Accepting a Dance

This is even easier than asking. To say yes all you need to do is say, "*it would be a pleasure*", "*that would be lovely*", "*I would, thank you*" or simply a utilitarian "yes". Then offer your hand to be led (or to lead) onto the dance floor with your partner.

Questions/Admissions

When you reviewed the evening's dances earlier you listed some as "Maybe". These dances are the ones you could do with an experienced partner or set. If you are being asked to dance one of these (and frankly for all your "Maybe" dances you should not be the one actively seeking a partner) you can say, "*I'm a beginner and I know this dance, but I'm not terribly confident dancing it. Do you know it well?*" The lady or gentleman asking you has now been informed of your skill level and experience and the onus is on them to now let you know their own familiarity with the dance in question, skill level, and ability to successfully lead you through the dance.

Whatever their response, you will have to use your best judgment to decide, if in this brief interaction, you feel that they can truly help you out.

Things to think about:

Do I know/trust this person?

Have I seen them on the dance floor before and do they appear a "strong" dancer?

Caution is generally the best course of action. There are people that will offer to get a new dancer through a dance they don't know. They may be thinking of only their own enjoyment and not yours (grabbing someone so that she or he can do the dance).

In the end you will have to make the call, and, as you dance or sit out the dance, you will learn from the experience.

Declining a Dance

There really are only two good reasons at a Ball for declining a dance.

The first is that you already have a partner.

“I’m sorry I already have a partner”.

The second is that you don’t intend to do this dance. *“I’m sorry I need to sit this one out.”*

“No thank you, this one is a bit beyond me and I shall watch.”

Note: *Once you have refused an invitation to a particular dance, it is considered polite not to accept another offer for that same dance.*

In reality there are many factors why someone may or may not wish to dance with someone else.

Some dancers always accept a dance even with someone they don’t enjoy dancing with. These very kind men and women sacrifice a little of their own enjoyment for the sake of others.

Other dancers have established techniques for slipping away from people they don’t want to dance with (before they can be asked by or make eye contact with them). These people sometimes engender negative feelings and even comments.

You will have to decide for yourself about the two options above and do what feels right to you.

However, if you have decided that a dance is beyond your skill level, do not waver on your answer. If the lady or gentleman asking you is persistent and tries to “talk you into” dancing with them you should firmly repeat “no thank you” and then excuse yourself.

Tips and facts on all this asking, being asked, answering, declining, or being declined:

* There are more ladies than men in our branch; ladies enjoy dancing with lady friends; and many ladies are not timid about asking men to dance, particularly men they know.

* Even though there are all these wonderful ladies to dance with, this does not mean the gentlemen are required to wear themselves out and never take a break. Declining a dance doesn’t make you a cad.

* If you know you are not going to do the next dance, it makes it easier on all, if you walk over to the punch/water bowl, have a seat, or walk upstairs to the balcony instead of standing by the entrance to the dance hall with those wishing to find partners.

Note: *You really owe it to yourself to get up to the balcony to observe a dance from above. Scottish Country Dancing is absolutely stunning to watch from the Hall’s balcony with everyone in their best finery. Each year we have spectators who come to the Ball simply to watch!*

* Don’t take a refusal personally.

* Do not consider your evening ruined if you do not have a partner for the waltz or polka.

Last thoughts and an acknowledgment

In an ever increasingly casual world we are privileged to enjoy this great tradition of our branch of the RSCDS, our formal Valentine’s Ball.

It is an event that many of us both within and without the branch look forward to each year, a delightful evening of live music, dashing gentlemen, beautiful ladies, amazing dancing, and all in such elegant surroundings.

It does cost more than a monthly party and does require a little more preparation.

But it is worth it.

It will be up to you, our new dancers, for this tradition to continue and thrive for our branch in the future.

I hope this little guide has encouraged you to attend and helps you have a night to remember.

I would like to thank in particular one member of our branch in the preparation of this guide. Sitting in the planning committee for the 2010 ball I thought I was quite clever in suggesting that we create a little booklet to help out beginners interested in attending the Valentine's Ball...

*...Until I found out that **Rebecca Davis** had been doing something similar for quite some time!* Much of the information contained here is based on her original guides from a few years back. She graciously allowed me to utilize her work to make this updated guide.

Also my thanks go to Jonathan Lovell and Susie Langdon Kass for their invaluable assistance in proofreading and editing this document, and to Janet Kitajima, our Ball Committee Chair, for her support of this project.

See you at the ball!

Jamie Tanner

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