

# SalsAmigos Dancing: A Different Kind of Team<sup>1</sup>

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I remember the day well. New Vista High School students taking my SalsAmigos dance class were beginning to understand how essential is the simultaneous and accurate movement of each dancer around the circle. As we teach this dance there are moments when this understanding is suddenly realized. This particular day we were taking it to an extraordinarily high level by teaching a move called “*revolu*.” This involves a highly complicated series of rotations involving partner changes and interactions with dancers first going one direction in the circle skipping one partner, then going back to the partner they skipped, then going forward skipping two partners, and then doing a complicated move involving a stamp clap rhythm pattern. When I announced that we were going to work on the move, there were groans from a few indicating they knew the level of difficulty. They did very well. I told them how proud of them I was. Then I announced that we were going to do the move again, but with increased challenge. More groans because they knew what I was going to suggest. This dance is most customarily done with the dancers facing the center of the circle. Since it is a social dance this orientation allows looks and energy to circulate among the dancers. In SalsAmigos dancing we also turn the circle to the outside (we call it *afuera*) so that dancers face the outside of the circle. There are many reasons we do this, but of relevance here, is the increase in challenge for the dancers, especially for moves that require dancers to change partners. You see, when the circle is faced inward the dancers go across the circle (a secant) to their next partner, but in *afuera* dancers have extra distance to travel in an arc around the outside of the circle to get to their new partner. So you can appreciate how much more challenging is this complex move, *revolu*, in *afuera*.

We started working on this and I suddenly realized that I was certain that no other *rueda* group ever had successfully performed this move. I don’t even know any groups that dance with the circle turned outward much less would attempt such a move. I told the students that we would be filming their attempt, that if successful they would set a world record, and that we’d publish the video on YouTube. They rose as a group to meet the challenge and after several attempts they succeeded. I thought it remarkable that while there were quite a number of dancers in the circle, they all instantly knew when they succeeded and broke out in cheers and applause.

There are many things to say about this SalsAmigos moment, but the one I want to focus on is that SalsAmigos dancing creates among the dancers an experience of “team” and “teamwork” that I think important and that differs in some fundamental ways from the comparable experiences of those participating in sports.

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Before I talk about the SalsAmigos experience of team and teamwork, I'll just briefly reflect on the sort of experience of team that is commonly experienced in sports. I hasten to say that I believe there are many important benefits in this team experience; however, I will suggest that there are alternative team experiences that are equally important.

Sport teams are commonly based on exclusivity. There are tryouts, cuts, and frequent shifting of participants among favored positions. To be on a team is commonly considered to be among the exclusive, that is, to be on the team. This exclusivity is often designated by uniforms or the possession of team paraphernalia. The exclusivity that is associated with the team certainly encourages team aspirants to work hard to make the team and keep from being "cut" from the team. Exclusivity also instills pride in membership and responsibility to maintain the status and reputation of the team. There is a strong encouragement for team members to act in such a way that reflects well on the team.

Team exclusivity also depends on the difference between those who make it (the winners) and those who don't make the team or are cut from the team (the losers). The often devastating impact on those who don't make the team or who are cut from the team is well known. They often carry this identity throughout life as a personal stigma. There are often negative qualities to the social setting for sport teams or teams based on a sport model. This can run both ways. To be on a team can be considered to be among the exclusive and others are looked down on and chided as being losers. Beyond the activities of the team, team members can be identified with the qualities of the sport or activity, sometimes in negative terms or stereotypes. Members of a football team may be considered "dumb jocks" by the academically accomplished. Members of the debate team may be considered "brainy nerds" by some.

The sport team model almost always contains a hierarchy. The distinctions that create hierarchy may be generated in a number of ways. Often there are team positions, all theoretically considered as equally necessary for the successful functioning of the team, but usually certain positions have greater prestige while others are rarely distinguished. Teams usually have squads or levels that create a hierarchy based on experience or skill. There are elements of prestige, or the lack of it, associated with squads. Teams also have "captains" or "stars" or "most outstanding players" and so on. The importance of these internal hierarchies is that team members constantly have more to work for to achieve their potential.

Sport teams invariably have as an objective measure "winning" in competition with other teams. We often hear that old adage "It is not winning or losing that matters; it is how you play the game." Sportsmanship is clearly a concept that is taught and discussed, yet no one actually believes that this adage actually holds. I have never heard of a sport where the principal trophy given is for sportsmanship rather than winning. Everyone knows that coaches are hired and fired based on their record of winning. Team members are advanced and honored based on their contribution to winning and losing. Thus in the very objective of the team, losing and winning, losers and winners, are essential. Correlative, the goal of the team is ultimately external to the play of the game. Teams are pit against one another to win. It is the results of the playing rather than the playing that is ultimately the measure of the team's performance.

In sport based teams there is a fundamental tension between being an individual competing with other team members for positions, squads, distinctions, records and supporting one another to achieve the goals of the team.

This sport based model of team pervades American and even world cultures. It pervades business, politics, and even reality television. It is of the fabric of our society and it creates the basis for human relationships, human identities, social interactions, and human value.

Now I want to discuss how SalsAmigos dancing exemplifies a different experience of team. It is complementary to the sport team model and not wholly distinct from it, yet it does introduce some variations that are worthy of our reflection.

This SalsAmigos concept of team is not present in all dance groups. Quite the contrary. For example, the renowned “Dancing Classrooms” program in NYC and other cities that teaches competition ballroom dancing to children is based on the sport team model. This is powerfully demonstrated in the documentary film “Mad Hot Ballroom.” There are poignant scenes showing children devastated and sobbing because of their loss to another school. There is a powerful moment in the film when Pierre Dulane, the founder of the program, says, “winning and losing are simply part of life.” Of course, he is correct, although we cannot help but feel the pain of these cute kids who have given their hearts to dancing. We know that much dancing is competitive and even confrontational, think of hip hop and breaking. We understand that these dance forms have the same benefits, as well as, potential shortcomings as all sport team experiences.

Many popular dance forms are based on the sport team model. The progressive elimination competition common to sports is adapted for many dance forms such as the popular television programs “Dancing with the Stars” and “So You Think You Can Dance.” And it is used in many other dance forms where competition is an essential element.

SalsAmigos dancing, and certainly other group activities, offers a different kind of team experience and I want to consider this. Remember, I’m not suggesting that this should replace sport team experiences, but it certainly can complement it and it might be appropriate for some youth who would never even consider participating in a sport-based competition situation. I have known many of these youth and they are often strong creative individuals, singular shining jewels, or kids that may have difficulty socializing with others. Some are simply self-satisfying as individuals, diamonds in the rough.

Let us return to that team experience shown in the opening example, the successful accomplishment of the complex move named “*revolu*.” Note that all the dancers are in a circle and have equal and complementary roles as “leads” and “follows.” While it is not obvious in this film, there are no try-outs, no cuts, no exclusions, no one told to sit out because the group is going to do something difficult. The circle is always inclusive and we’ve never excluded a dancer for any reason. It then becomes fundamental to the operation of the circle to assure that every dancer is doing what is required for each move. I’ll explain how this is accomplished shortly. So there is no hierarchy, no exclusivity; there are no

cuts. There is no competition among the members of the group. There is no competition between the group of dancers and other groups of dancers.

The goal, the objective, of the team is to do what the team does, dance; or in the exemplary case to successfully accomplish a move that requires the equal performance of every member of the group. Thus the goal is intrinsic to the activity, not extrinsic.

This is a different kind of team: inclusive, non-competitive, cooperative, non-hierarchical, intrinsically motivated. I'm sure that the positive attributes of these team characteristics are evident. There are no losers, no cuts, no special designated team members. We might ask "what is the point if there isn't the goal of winning or advancing through the ranks?" The answer to this question is seen in the spontaneous cheers and applause of the dancers who succeeded in performing "revolu" in "afuera" position. Their goal and reward was in the doing, the doing together, the unity they experienced, the accomplishment they felt. They were spurred on by the thought of doing something no one had ever done before, but I truly believe they would have been as excited and satisfied even if we had not mentioned this possibility. While SalsAmigos dancing technically requires work to do, unlike work there is no product beyond the dancing. Thus it might be more appropriate to refer to this experience and process as "teampay" rather than "teamwork."

I want to briefly discuss some elements of this dance that broadly contribute to the experience of teampay. First, the dance roles are designated as "lead" and "follow" yet every dancer learns both parts equally and soon makes a seamless switch between the two roles. Still, key to the lead's job is to initiate and direct the elements of movement that comprise the called move. Leads are the action initiators while the follows take the lead through touch connection. In SalsAmigos dancing where every dancer knows both parts equally, an amazing and unidentified role emerges and that is "backleading." Backleading is when a dancer in the designated follow role senses through touch that her or his partner dancing the role designated the lead does not know the called move or some part of it and exerts an action initiating force from the follow's position to assist the lead in completing the move. This is backleading. While we teach only lead and follow, all dancers certainly learn subconsciously and sometimes consciously that they can, when needed, assist the lead in completing the move. Everyone frequently experiences this situation and it invariably goes undetected by the rest of the circle of dancers. Often the lead will quickly say a "thank you" for the assist.

What I believe is important in this factor of backleading as central to this teampay is that all dancers come to understand through experience that everyone needs help from time to time. They learn that they can offer assistance to another dancer without criticizing them, without interrupting the dance or breaking the circle, or even saying a word to the dancer in need. I almost never hear a dancer criticizing another for failing to properly lead and I think this is simply because every dancer knows that this happens to every dancer and that the ongoing process of the dance is more important than to interrupt the dance by stopping to point out someone's failure.

The result is that everyone helps everyone in need of an assist and does so without glory or shame, without even the others knowing. This is an amazing experience of a kind of cooperation and mutual assistance.

Teamplay also arises when we begin teaching the kinds of moves that require everyone in the circle to rotate in complex ways around the circle. Often the first move that awakens team play is a move called *trente y tres*. This requires the leads to advance in front of the person on their right on the counts 1, 2, 3 and the follows to advance in front of the person on their left on 5, 6, 7. If there are 10 couples then 10 leads must move in the same direction on the same count immediately followed by the other 10 moving the other direction both moves done in an 8-count of the music. The move *trente y tres* requires this same sequence to happen on three consecutive 8-counts. We often have them clap once, twice, three times to mark the progress of the move: "*trente y tres con uno dos tres.*"

As students learn this move they come to understand that any dancer not paying full attention will fail to move on time and, consequently, the move will simply break down as the other dancers pile up on one another and become confused as to when or where to go. The same thing happens if a dancer forgets which role she or he is in and moves in the wrong direction. The move is amazing when all 10 move at once and then the other 10, three times in a row. Dancers quickly learn to assist in various ways those not moving or those heading the wrong way. Since all of this must happen to the specific count in the music and a beat in the music has a time lapse of 1/3 of a second, dancers have to pay close attention.

Thus, the cooperation and mutual assistance is not done through generosity or kindness or altruism. Rather it is done as a bodied minded form of action that we might simply call team play. As dancers embody this element of the dance there is a noticeable transformation in the group dynamics. The awareness and importance of team play is embodied and becomes a foundational element of the dancing from that point on, growing with each new challenging task.

In teaching SalsAmigos we do not talk about team or teamwork or teamplay. It is a core principle of our pedagogy to focus almost totally on the dancing recognizing that such experiences as this concept of team and the cooperative experience of teamplay are more deeply valued if learned through embodied experience rather than through being told or consciously considering this aspect of the dancing. The integrity of the circle, the creative pressure to keep the dancing going and to the music and the intrinsic satisfaction of this process is motivation enough to accomplish the embodiment of these experiences and concepts.

While the sport model of team and teamwork has many distinct advantages for teen and human development, there is still merit to the SalsAmigos model of team and teamplay. It is noncompetitive, inclusive, cooperative, and non-hierarchical and has an intrinsic goal. The experience of SalsAmigos team and teamplay serves to embody these values in sensorimotor programs that become part of the neurophysiology of SalsAmigos dancers.