

Pirouette Fundamentals

Pirouettes are spins that occur entirely on one leg. In WCS, the famous pot-stir spin is a pirouette in which the turn is started by the follower and then powered by the leader. Both leaders and followers use pirouettes for stationary turns, such as spinning during an anchor.

The pot-stir is one of the flashiest moves in west coast swing. It is also an extremely difficult move because it requires excellent fundamentals in both partners, as well as teamwork to execute the spin together.

Lets break down specific elements of the pot-stir.

However, before trying to do a pot-stir, both partners need to master their own fundamentals. For the follower, being able to execute pirouettes while solidly balanced is essential. For the leader, it is necessary to learn how to pulse turns. Both partners need to have excellent frame. If any of these skills is missing, the pot-stir will fall apart.

This drill is intended to focus on the mechanics of pirouettes by beginning with quarter turns. Your goal is to execute a clean, controlled turn. Most beginners try to spin too much, too fast. By focusing on a small rotation, you will develop the technique needed to stabilize a faster turn or a turn with greater rotation.

The Pirouette Drill:

Start with your feet in open third position and your arms in open position, matching the angle of your feet. Tighten your core and lift your chest so that you have a solid, upright posture. As you transfer your weight to the three-toe base of your forward foot, rotate your core slightly in the opposite direction in order to prep your spin.

To begin the spin, do three things simultaneously. First, collect your free foot underneath the supporting leg, either in closed third or with the free foot touching the ankle of the supporting leg. Second, unwind from your core. Third, bring your arms into closed position by bringing the back arm to the front arm.

You should be able to easily execute a quarter turn—in fact, most people will struggle with having too much power. Your goal is to run out of juice so that your body naturally stops after a quarter rotation. Remain balanced on the three-toe base of your supporting leg in order to ensure that you aren't falling out of the turn.

Be sure to practice turning both ways! After you can control a quarter turn, you can extend the drill to doing half turns, three quarter turns, etc.

Pirouettes with a partner (pot-stir)

For the follower, a pot-stir is fundamentally a pirouette. The mistake most followers make is trying to power their own pot-stir. Instead, you should aim for just enough juice to make it between a half and a full turn around from your starting point; from there, the leader becomes responsible for powering the turn. After getting the turn started, the follower's primary responsibility is balance.

The Drill:

Without a partner, take a small forward step onto your right foot. Pirouette to your right a quarter turn, and hold the finished position for 3 seconds before letting your heel reconnect with the ground. Repeat this exercise until you can comfortably balance when you finish spinning.

Once you can do a quarter turn to the right, go up to a half, three-quarters, and eventually a full turn. The degree of rotation is less important than balance; your goal is to be entirely stable after your spin stops, rather than to spin further around. If you need to rock back onto your heel to keep your balance or if you are wobbling during the turn, try that amount of rotation again.

Troubleshooting

Lets look at a number of common ways that a pirouette turn can go wrong, along with suggestions for troubleshooting the issue.

You are throwing yourself onto your supporting leg. If your body is moving horizontally when you start your spin, that horizontal momentum has to go somewhere, and that's when your center moves away from your supporting leg. To fix this issue, start with your weight on the three toe base of your supporting leg and gather the free leg to your ankle, rather than pushing from the non-supporting leg to the supporting leg.

You are rolling to the outside edge of your foot. Rolling to the outside of the foot can cause everything from falling off balance to slowing your turn. The outside edge of the foot is not stable, and putting weight on the outside edge of the foot functions like a brake, slowing your turn. To fix this problem, make sure you are balanced on your three toe base before starting the turn, and work on your ankle strength to support yourself over the three toe base.

You are throwing your arms around. It's tempting to throw your arms around the body in order to create power, but that only pulls you off balance. When closing your arms, they should both meet almost directly in front of your belly button. If your arm is crossing your torso, you are pulling your center away from your supporting leg.

You are slumping forward. A solid, upright posture is necessary to keep your weight over your axis of rotation. If you pitch forward, your head (which is about 10% of your body weight) is suddenly pulling you off balance. You can fix this issue by focusing on maintaining good posture throughout the turn.

Your knees are locked. Locking your knees makes you wobbly and unstable. As you spin, think about softening the knee without dropping into a bend. You want to be able to use the knee as a shock absorber and adjuster.

Your core is too loose. A loose core makes it difficult to keep the body as a whole centered over the supporting leg. Fix this issue by engaging your core muscles as you prep for the spin, and staying engaged until you step out of the spin at the end of your rotation.

Your free leg is flailing. A free leg that moves all over can easily shift your center of balance enough to make you totter. This issue can be fixed by deliberately drawing the free foot to the ankle of the supporting leg and keeping the foot in contact with the ankle throughout the turn.

Your heel is dragging. If you let the heel of the supporting foot touch the ground, it acts as a brake. Make sure that you keep your weight over the three toe base and your heel slightly above the ground. This issue might be a sign that you need to work on your ankle strength, or you may be shifting your center and moving to the heel to compensate. If the problem is your centering, see if you can fix the underlying reason that your center is not remaining in place.

You are rocking from toe to heel and back. This might be a balance or ankle strength issue, but it could also be a way to cheat the last part of the turn if you don't have enough power. Check that your upper body is prepped correctly and that you are pushing the three toe base into the ground throughout the spin. If you can keep your weight pinned to a very small part of your shoe, you'll find that you don't need much power to make it around.

Your head is pulling you off balance. If the timing on your spotting is off, you can be tilting the head when you turn instead of keeping the head level as you rotate your neck. Practice doing baby steps around as you spot and notice what your range of motion is for your neck. You should be able to flip your head without adding any tilt.

You are rotating too far. The first thing to do is dial down the amount of power in your prep—use less contrabody, a softer close of the arms, and less abrupt unwinding from the core. Ideally, you should be able to gauge your energy so that you run out of juice just as you face the direction you want to stop. On occasion, it is okay to put down the heel of the supporting leg or part of the free foot in order to act as a brake. However, if you need to do so on every spin, you are giving yourself too much juice.