



## Collapsing touches

There aren't many of us, and we are mostly millennium learners. One of us went on a training course and found it very useful. Occasionally we have competent visitors, and seem to do better then, but when we practise together on our own, most touches end in a pile-up. How can we improve on our own?

Take comfort - you are not alone. Many bands struggle with the slow, and daunting process of trying to climb the steep, and at times seemingly vertical, learning curve. They want to improve, but don't know how to.

Pile-ups are a common experience, after which you hear things like:

- I could not see what was happening.
- I'm not sure whether I was in the right place.
- The bells weren't where I expected them.
- Nothing seemed to fit
- It all got rather confusing

The common theme is confusion and uncertainty. It is hard to learn very much from such an experience, but there is often little alternative to the ever hopeful 'let's try again', even though the odds are stacked against you.

### Why do things fall apart?

People make mistakes of course, but touches don't fail just because of that. If they did, far more would come to grief. Mistakes don't help, but many are survivable with the right approach.

The serious problems, the ones that turn slips into disasters, are not about simple mistakes, or even poor striking by individual ringers. They are about how one person's ringing affects another's - how the band as a whole behaves. The old saying that the whole is more than the sum of the parts is very true in ringing, especially when things go wrong!

### What to aim for

Think what a good touch is like. The ringing is even and well paced. Each bell moves through an orderly pattern formed by the others. The striking is even and the speed changes of individual bells are controlled and predictable. Any method or handling slips produce minor glitches but do not disrupt the ringing. You might have experienced this when ringing with a band of 'experts'. Everything seems so much easier when other people are in the right place. So what do experts do that is different? Can you emulate them, even if only partly, and reap some of the benefits?

To help touches to stay afloat, as many of you as possible should try to:

- Survive mistakes
- Preserve the structure
- Add some stability

### Surviving other people's mistakes

You know what happens to dominoes if one of them falls over. Try not to be like dominoes! If someone suddenly does something unexpected don't assume that you are wrong and jump out of

the way. That will mean there are then two of you wrong, and by the time you realise it you will probably have forgotten what you should be doing. Unless you **know** you are wrong, keep doing what you should be doing, as best as you can. If you can see something wrong and give a helpful hint (e.g. 'dodge with me') by all means do so. If you know you should be dodging, but can't see a bell to dodge with, then dodge with fresh air - it is better than not dodging. If you stay right, it is more likely that whoever was wrong will get back to the correct place.

How can you do the right thing if you can't see who to follow? We discussed the importance of developing your sense of rhythm, and relying on it, in *The Learning Curve* in June 1999. *Ringling Skills* and *The Tower Handbook* also cover the topic.



Another attempt fired out

### Preserving the structure

If you drew out a method on squared paper, and the paper stretched or shrank as you did so, you would find it hard, and even harder if the paper shrank to a thin strip with all the bells overlapping. This is a fair analogy of what often happens in doomed touches. Instead of being spread out from first to last, the bells bunch together in the middle, see figure 1.

|              |                 |
|--------------|-----------------|
| 423165432615 | 346251364521    |
| 42315        | 4325 3621 33521 |

Figure 1

The top row shows correct spacing, while the bottom row shows bells clustered together with large gaps between each cluster. This does not normally happen in rounds. It happens while ringing changes because bells do not move right down to the front, or right up to the back. This can happen very easily. Moving the whole way needs conscious effort, so under-moving is easier than over-moving. Uncertainty also tends to inhibit movement.

Once the bells get in a bunch like this, it is hard to see what is happening, and hence more uncertain, which makes things worse. To avoid it happening, each of you should:

- Make sure to move briskly to the back and to the front. Think ahead to avoid permanently trying to catch up.

- Listen to be sure that a gap does not open up between lie and lead. Huge gaps should be obvious, even if hearing your own bell is hard.

If between you, you can keep the rows properly spread out, and avoid bunching up, then even with imperfect striking you will dramatically increase your chances of getting to the end of the touch more or less in control.

The bunching problem is worse with fewer bells. You need more speed change to move from front to back, making it more likely that some of you will fall short. Also fewer people need to go adrift before the majority are out of place. On 8 bells, two ringers astray is a small minority, but on 4 they are half of the band.

### Adding stability

Stability is one of those intangible things that is hard to pin down, but it is very important. *The Learning Curve* mentioned it briefly in September. Stable ringing means small disturbances can be survived without escalating, whereas in unstable ringing, tiny upsets grow out of proportion, and possibly lead to collapse. Most of us know the symptoms, but what are the causes?

When a band rings together, each person tries to fit in with the others. So when you try to ring in 3rds place say (or any other place) the correct instant to strike depends to some extent on what everyone else does - there is no external metronome. If you all respond (or over respond) to every short term move of someone else, then every slip or trip rapidly spreads to you all, and things go unstable. If instead you try to preserve the rhythm of the last few rows, and so damp down your response to each other's jerkiness, then you can help to stop the disturbance spreading.

How do you avoid over reacting? How can you ring steadily if all around you is unsteady? It is difficult, but achievable. Try to rely more on your sense of rhythm, however imperfect, and less on instantaneous decisions. In a struggling band, it might seem unrealistic to suggest putting confidence in your rhythm, but stability does not come by magic - you must all work create it, and you have to start somewhere.

You can't guarantee to be in exactly the right place every time, and of course you will still make a few mistakes. But if you move predictably at constant speed when hunting, make your dodges orderly one-step-sized manoeuvres, and make your places at normal 'rounds speed', then you will help stabilise the ringing for everyone else.

### The rewards

These three things should help touches to survive (and also help you to feel more in control of your own ringing). There is another, perhaps unexpected bonus of stable ringing. The rhythm that you all hear will sound less erratic and less panic stricken, so instead of making you all feel tense, it should help to relax everyone a little, which in turn makes it easier to ring more steadily - a virtuous circle - so you should all enjoy your ringing more, as well as helping to get it right.

Tail End

*Ringling Skills* and *The Tower Handbook* are both available post free from CC Publications,