



Back seat drivers

We give plenty of advice about bell handling and method ringing, but you don't often hear much about that all important skill of 'standing behind'. Notable exceptions are *Teaching Beyond Bell Handling*, *Ringling Skills* and *The Tower Handbook* all of which include sections on standing behind. Here we summarise some key points. For more detail, look at the books.

A relationship

You stand behind a person, not a machine. You are probably much more experienced and perhaps a bit awe inspiring, unless you are the regular mentor. Before the touch, try asking the person you are standing behind what (s)he would like you to say, or not to say. Nothing kills a relationship like saying the wrong thing.

A responsibility

Standing behind is not an easy option. It needs hard concentration to know exactly what is happening, what should be happening, and what (if anything) to say. If your concentration wanders, you could wreck someone else's touch.

Remember that taking advice from you uses up some of the ringer's available concentration, so let people correct their own errors if they can. Only jump in if you think uncorrected errors will lead to a mix up - otherwise bite your tongue. You might find this holding back takes more effort than ringing the bell would!

What to say

This is harder than it might seem. You are there to provide missing information or to help correct mistakes, so what you need to say depends on what has gone wrong, and why. Sometimes, saying which bell to follow is helpful, but not always. If the problem is a missed dodge, then saying so might be enough. In this case, the immediate priority is to correct the 'over shoot' and get back on the blue line. If the problem is caused by handling, eg failing to change speed at lead and going below first place, the first priority is to 'hold up' (now) since without a quick speed correction things will get much worse. After recovery, it might be helpful to advise 'hold up the handstroke leads', and if the problem still persists, you could pre-emptively warn to 'put the brakes on' when passing through 2nds place.

How much to say

It can be very tempting to say too much. As far as possible, try not to intervene - only say something if you think it is needed to avoid further error or de-stabilisation. Especially don't just keep pouring out information. Only continue if more is really needed. Try not to create dependence. Be a safety net, not a crutch.

Sometimes, gestures are better than words. Pointing is visual and less likely to disrupt the place counting. Pointing in a general direction not only saves words, but leaves the ringer in charge of actually seeing who to follow, so it helps rather

than replaces ropesight.

When to say it

Nothing is worse than being told what to do when it is too late to do it, and this can cause a lot of trouble for the hapless ringer on the receiving end. Try to avoid this trap by thinking ahead. Some types of advice are less time critical than others. For example, if the bell is too low, then saying 'higher' is likely to be good for a few blows, but saying which bell to follow will become stale within a blow (and by the time you say it might already be too late). Some information after the event (like 'that was a dodge') can help to reorient the ringer's thinking, whereas instructional information (like 'dodge with Fred') can be positively damaging a couple of blows late.

And finally

Don't forget words of encouragement. We spend much time telling people when they are wrong. Try also to say when things go well. Apart from 'well done' at the end, quiet words of encouragement can sometimes help build confidence during the ringing too.

If there were problems, try at the end asking how it went. If you understand the problems as perceived by the person ringing, you are more likely to be able to give helpful advice.



Overheard

Seasoned Ringer to Erratic Learner (whose striking left much to be desired)

SR - "Do you find it difficult to strike your bell in the right place?"

EL (surprised) - "Why do you ask?"

SR (wondering if she should have started the conversation) - "Well did you think you were ringing in the right place just now?"

EL - (puzzled by such a silly question) - "I must have been. Bill would have shouted at me if I wasn't".

Apart from a quiet chuckle, what can we learn from this? Had Bill lost his voice? Hardly. The poor chap can't spend all his time shouting at EL. So what went wrong (apart from EL's striking)? We don't know all the background, but let's think about what might have happened. Presumably there have been times when Bill shouted

corrections to EL quite a lot. Presumably he did this in the early stages. So what changed?

a - Perhaps EL has always been erratic. At first Bill tried to be helpful and kept calling out corrections. But after a while he gave up because EL didn't seem to respond and never improved.

b - Perhaps at first EL needed a lot of prompting, but then did improve so that Bill rarely needed to give corrections. Then some while later, EL's striking deteriorated again, perhaps through laziness. Bill knew this, but did not like to say anything in case EL took offence and left. Perhaps at first he thought it was a temporary lapse, but when he realised it was becoming permanent it was too late. He had tolerated poor striking and didn't feel he could now start to criticise EL.

c - Perhaps Bill himself is not a very accomplished ringer. (Many tower captains aren't. They do the job because no one else is there to do it.) Perhaps he is never very sure who is striking badly, and so does not comment on the striking. Perhaps when EL was first learning, the mistakes were quite large, and he did not feel inhibited to criticise a raw beginner. But now EL is more like one of the other ringers, he is back to the state where he does not know who is or is not striking correctly.

There might be other scenarios, but these three provide food for thought.

We can sympathise with Bill in scenario (a). It is very dispiriting when people don't improve, and you can only pour so much effort into a single person. But before he gave up, would it not have been much better to take EL on one side and try to find out why improvement never came? Was it motivation, was it the inability to hear which bell was which? Perhaps it was handling problems, though Bill should have had a pretty good idea about that just by observing EL ring.

Scenario (b) is more subtle. This time Bill thought he had solved the problem, but then it came back. Should he really be afraid to say anything? If someone starts to have problems, would it not be natural to expect the tower captain to take an interest? Could he not have offered any help?

In these two scenarios, while we sympathise with Bill's weakness, it is clear that he should have taken some steps to find out the problems and try to help EL overcome them. Otherwise, he is not only condoning a degraded sound coming out of the tower, but he is also degrading what the rest of the band experience, when ringing with EL, and hence their motivation.

What about poor old Bill in scenario (c)? If he can't tell what is going on, is it fair to criticise him for saying nothing? Of course it isn't, but the role of a tower captain is more than just putting people right while ringing. If Bill is aware of his limitations (and many tower captains are) should he not be trying to draw on the skills of others in the tower to help?

We don't know whether SR was a visitor or a member of the band. She was competent enough to detect that EL's striking was erratic, and she clearly wanted to help or she would not have said anything. If SR was a regular, perhaps Bill should encourage her to take an interest in his fledgling ringers, and be prepared to give them advice when needed. Perhaps there are a few more SRs in the tower who could be encouraged to take the less experienced ringers under their wings.

Tail End