The Learning Curve

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Steady as she goes

We have all heard this phrase, in fiction if not in real life – four words that signify everything is under control. The ship is under weigh and making progress. She is heading in the right direction and at the right speed – as it should be.

Rough waters

The steady progress of a ship through rough waters relies on the skill of the helmsman (or a well designed auto-pilot) to make small timely adjustments to stay on course, whilst not over responding to the impact of every wave to hit the ship from one side or the other. When ringing, you also need to make small adjustments to stay on course, and unless you are fortunate enough to ring with perfect ringers, those ringing round you might be far from steady, so you need to be able to ride out some turbulence.

Can you ring steadily in say 4ths place, if the bells in front and behind move erratically? A ship has a gyro-compass to provide a stable reference, and when ringing you need to develop your own equivalent – a rhythm that enables you to 'feel' where your next blow will come. There are many examples of people doing things rhythmically, for example an orchestra conductor keeping a steady beat or a trained athlete maintaining a steady pace.

Ringing methods complicates things a little because changing places changes the interval between successive blows, so as well as preserving the basic 'rounds' rhythm, you need also to be able to switch between that and the 'hunt down' and 'hunt up' rhythms. The relationship between these three rhythms is very precise, the up (down) intervals add (subtract) one beat of the rhythm of the sound.

You have to learn what the shift between the different rhythms feels like, the same as you have to learn how far to lift your foot when walking up stairs, and having learnt it, you should then be able to repeat it when you want.

Attaining poise

You can ring better if you feel balanced and in control. One common, and much discussed problem that undermines this is tenseness. If you are tense, it is difficult to produce measured and accurate responses from your body. It encourages a jerky style with a tendency to react at the last minute, often over reacting, a little too late, and then having to correct again.

One major cause of tenseness is not knowing what is coming next, and the fear of 'not seeing who to follow'. We are very visual animals, and we are uncomfortable doing things without visual cues. It need not be like that though. With a modest sense of rhythm, and with the natural rhythm of the bell to help you, you can develop the ability to 'feel' where you are going. Once you do this, you are much less dependent on visual cues. You still need to see your progression through the other ropes for clues about what is happening around you, but knowing that you can place your next blow even if you can't see anyone to follow (or if you can see that the bell you ought to be following is nowhere near the right place) is a huge confidence booster. It frees you from short term anxiety about the next couple of seconds, and allows you to plan more confidently several seconds ahead. It enables you to ring with more poise, which in turn should improve your bell control and reduce the effort you need. Like the helmsman, as you see the waves crashing around you, you know which way you are heading, and hold the tiller steady.

Sense of place

As well as knowing which place you should be in, and being able to feel where you are relative to the place you have just been in, there is a third aspect of being place aware – ropesight. If anyone tells you that 'ropesight is about knowing which bell to follow' don't be fooled – it is more than that. Free of the tyranny of second by second rope following, you can become aware of the bigger picture. Think of it as watching a swimming race. You can see where the leader is and where the back marker is, with the others in between. When looking at the ropes you should be able to 'see' first and last place, with you and the other bells in between.

If briefly there is confusion around you, and if it is unclear exactly who is where, the combination of the visual awareness of roughly where you are, with the stability of being able to place your next couple of blows rhythmically, without any visual input, means you can remain poised and in control. It is like a pilot flying down the glide-slope towards an airport through what is known as 'scud' – alternating between seeing the ground and being in cloud. Inexperienced pilots feel the urge to try to keep below the cloud, but an experienced pilot stays on the correct path. The ringing equivalent is the urge to follow someone, even if it means moving drastically to do so. For example, some people after hunting down hesitantly, lunge from seconds place to lead, like a swimmer desperately grabbing for the bar at the end of the pool as soon as it comes within reach. Unlike the swimmer, the lunge often means overshooting the lead and going too low.

Rear view mirror

Switching to land transport for an analogy, drivers are trained to look regularly in their mirrors, to avoid lapsing into tunnel vision, unaware of what is happening behind them. When ringing, too, it is tempting to take more notice of the bells in front of you than those behind, yet they are all important for how you fit into the overall pattern – and half the bells you meet in a method come from above you.

Just to ring rounds properly, you need to be aware of the whole compass. *The Learning Curve* in June 2001 used cars going round a roundabout (another transport analogy) to illustrate the need for even spacing between all the bells, including between last and first. The example used then had the front bells too far apart – taking more than their fair share of the available space – but the reverse often happens too, especially during the raise or lower, with the front four or five bells far too close together for the overall speed, as shown in Figure 1.

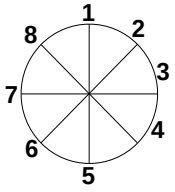

Figure 1: Front bells too close

This illustrates both the truth and the folly of the saying that 'the second sets the pace'. If all the bells closed up to the gap between the front bells, then the ringing would have to speed up dramatically. That might mean from a peal speed of say 3 hours to one of 2 hours 40, or if it occurred during the rise, the speed increase would take the bells quite a way back down, (unless the Treble left a yawning gap after the Tenor, which sounds very inelegant).

One cannot get inside people's heads, but it seems pretty sure that when the bells crowd in at the front like this, their ringers are not aware of what is behind them; they are each following hard on the heals of the bell in front – like cars driving too close in thick fog. If each ringer listened to the gap either side of his or her own bell, the 4th (in this example) and then the others would adjust to even out the rhythm.

The same effect can occur when ringing with a cover – the working bells become so engrossed in following each other that they drift closer together and further from the Tenor, as in Figure 2 (left). Drawn like this, the Tenor is shown correctly in 6th place, but suppose the Tenor was being rung rather ponderously, and getting slower, as in Figure 2 (right).

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1 2 3 4 5 6        1 2 3 4 5 6
2 1 4 3 5 6        2 1 4 3 5 6
2 4 1 5 3 6        2 4 1 5 3  6
4 2 5 1 3 6        4 2 5 1 3  6
4 5 2 3 1 6        4 5 2 3 1  6
5 4 3 2 1 6        5 4 3 2 1  6
5 3 4 1 2 6        5 3 4 1 2  6
3 5 1 4 2 6        3 5 1 4 2  6
3 1 5 2 4 6        3 1 5 2 4  6
1 3 2 5 4 6        1 3 2 5 4  6
1 2 3 4 5 6        1 2 3 4 5  6
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Figure 2: Drifting apart

Is everyone else correct and the Tenor wrong? Assuming that the lead blows are all correctly spaced after the Tenor, then the ringing has slowed down – maybe it shouldn't but it has – and the working bells are too close together for the speed that everyone is now ringing. Almost certainly the ringers on the working bells are not listening to the overall compass, and when they are in 5ths place, they are not listening to the gap behind them as well as in front of them.

It is very tempting to drift into half listening – like walking round a supermarket, where your ears accept any sound pattern so long as it contains no major crashes – but it is a temptation to be resisted.

So what?

The skills we have discussed can be hard to acquire, but they are worth the effort. Being aware of where you are, listening to the whole compass, and having the rhythmic stability to keep steady amidst disturbance, help you to ring far more confidently, and accurately.

Tail End

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