

This final article of the series takes a step backwards to look at a common handling problem and an exercise to treat it.

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This is the concluding article of this first series of 'The Education Column', and I want to move backwards rather than forwards, to look at a handling problem that is widespread among people learning to ring. Generally speaking, finding out about handling errors and how to deal with them is best explored in person or via a video. I particularly recommend attending a Module 1 course run by ART. In fact I recommend all the ART modules — you are likely to meet all the exercises we have discussed in this series if you attend these modules, and indeed I had never heard of one of the exercises (Penultimate) until I attended a Module 2 course.

However, the particular handling problem I want to look at this week can be discussed in an article like this, and helpful exercises exist to cure the problem. This common problem comes about as a side effect of having more control of the handstroke than the backstroke.

What are the symptoms?

When a student can ring a bell safely on their own, they move to ringing with other bells, whether rung by other humans or via a simulator. When they ring rounds, their timing will sooner or later become inaccurate. They may be ringing too early or too late, but more often than not it will be too early, after they either let the bell drop or bump the stay. They need to get back to the right place by delaying, and most learners try to achieve this delay by letting the bell rise up to the balance (or at least closer to the balance) at handstroke rather than at backstroke.

What they do is ring a backstroke with a pull long and firm enough to allow the bell to rise, catch the sally for the next handstroke, and then achieve the required delay by letting the bell rise to or near to the balance before pulling the rope down for the next handstroke. While this may well succeed in getting their bell in time with the rest of the band, the problem is that they tend to be able to make this correction only at handstroke, and not at backstroke. They seldom attempt the correction at backstroke, when their grasp is on the tail-end, allowing the bell to rise just before the start of the backstroke pull. Of course at first any correction is fine, but we don't want to cause problems later on by training a ringer who can confidently let the bell rise to the balance only at handstroke.

Another symptom of the same problem often occurs as the student learns to dodge, perhaps ringing Plain Bob Doubles. Even if they are confident about what the work is and when to do it, their dodging may be badly struck. If so, it is often the 3-4 DOWN dodge that presents the bigger problems of accuracy.

At the 3-4 UP dodge (*Diagram 8.1*), which is generally better struck, a significant alteration is needed to bring the dodging backstroke into third place down SOONER than the plain hunt rhythm; after this quicker backstroke, reverting to the slower plain hunt speed happens at handstroke.

But at the 3-4 DOWN dodge (*Diagram 8.2*) the equivalent alteration needs a DELAY at the dodging backstroke into fourth place, requiring the bell to rise near to the balance at the backstroke. Many learners find this difficult to achieve accurately — it is exactly the same problem that we have just discussed in rounds, namely a lack of confidence to let the bell rise adequately at the backstroke. The result is often that the blow in fourth place is not delayed enough, so that the bell sounds too early and clips the bell with which it is dodging.

The UP dodge requires the bell to ring sooner at the backstroke.



Diagram 8.1

The DOWN dodge requires the bell to ring later at the backstroke.



Diagram 8.2

What is the problem?

In each case the problem is that the student is not confident to let the bell rise up to the balance at backstroke. At first sight this may seem odd. Surely the handstroke is the more difficult, as all sorts of things can go wrong for a learner as they reach for the sally — they might miss it altogether, or bat it away and grab it only belatedly, or grasp it at different positions from stroke to stroke (making it hard to judge, from the position of the hands, how near the bell is to the balance). All of these tend to lead to imperfect control, perhaps even bumping the stay if the preceding backstroke was over-pulled.

We might think that, by comparison, letting the bell rise at the backstroke ought to be a doddle. The learner can't 'miss' the tail-end in the same way that they can miss the sally. They don't grab the tail-end differently each stroke, but maintain a constant grip at the same place, varying their hold of the tail-end only if they consciously choose to do so. So surely it should be much easier and safer to judge how near the bell is to the balance! But in practice this is not the case. Fear of hitting the stay often leads students to hold the tail-end too high, so that even at full stretch or on tiptoe it is physically impossible to let the bell rise enough to produce the required delay. Another factor that contributes to the problem is that whenever we set the bell, we let the bell rise to the balance and carefully control it past the balance; while this is excellent practice at letting the bell rise under control, we unfortunately don't practise it equally at both handstroke and backstroke!

What is the cure?

I like the '3-and-2' exercise. It is a good idea to introduce the much easier '2-and-2' exercise first, to get the idea across. Ring rounds. The treble just keeps ringing throughout at a steady pace, but the other bells ring for two strokes (hand and back) then miss two strokes (hand and back) before ringing the next two, missing two, and so on. Ideally the bell will be held just over the balance for the missed strokes, rather than actually being stood.

Some bands take a while to get the hang of this, so it may help for the conductor to maintain a running commentary: "We're ringing these two ... now miss two ... ready to ring again NOW ..." It helps to have good ringers on the 1 and 2. The treble needs to maintain a steady rhythm whether the other bells are ringing or not, and if the 2 fails to hold the bell at the balance it tends to cause the following bells to go wrong too.

Make sure your band has got the hang of this '2-and-2' before moving on. Most ringers find it comparatively easy to get the bell up to the balance at the handstroke, as it is just like setting the bell. Even so it may take a few attempts to get everything working smoothly.

Then introduce '3-and-2' where everyone other than the treble repeatedly **rings three** strokes then **misses two**. This is the real point of the whole exercise, as this time everyone has to hold their bell at the balance alternately at backstroke and at handstroke. Note that if all goes well TWO strokes are missed each time, so everyone should always ring in step with the treble (with everyone ringing a handstroke when the treble rings a handstroke, and a backstroke when the treble rings a backstroke).

Getting started can also be a problem. A good idea is to explain in advance what will happen, then start the exercise immediately at the pull-off (with the three strokes everyone rings, then the two missed blows), rather than with the normal rounds followed by a 'Go!' call to start the exercise. This is shown in *Diagram 8.3*.

Be prepared for lots of errors. If your band has huge problems with this, try having just one or two bells doing the exercise with the rest ringing rounds all the time, as the treble does. You may find some ringers can never get their bell high enough at backstroke, and may need vigorous encouragement to hold the tail-end lower. They may even need a box, or a bigger box, or to have the rope lengthened. If they can succeed at this exercise only with a box, tactfully suggest that maybe they should always use a box for that bell! I remember once with this exercise when a ringer, who did not strike very accurately, could never get their bell to the balance at backstroke; they decided to try with a box, and instantly achieved success and with vastly improved striking. 'Problem solved!' I rather optimistically thought, only to be taken aback when they remarked 'Isn't that odd. I needed a box for that exercise, but I don't need one for normal ringing.'

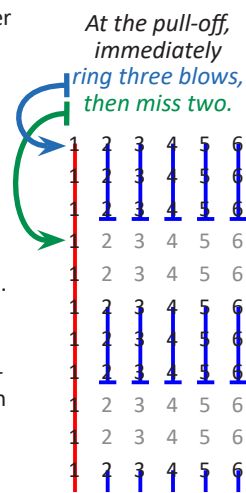


Diagram 8.3