

Buck and Winging It with Sam Hayakawa

Tap dancing as a new exercise phenomenon
for senators and salesmen

by Karen Feld

Regardless of what our new U.S. senator, Sam Hayakawa, did to convince the citizenry to elect him, he probably wouldn't single out his ability to tap dance as the main vote grabber that put him over the top in last fall's election. But, our Uncle Sam in Washington taps a mean dance. In fact, he's not alone. Tap dancing's coming back in a big way with California doctors, attorneys, secretaries, newscasters, housewives, and businessmen. Seemingly everyone is tapping along, with new enthusiasm for one of America's truly original dance forms.

Senator Hayakawa, now seventy, took up tap dancing five years ago under the guidance of Tony Wing, a San Francisco dance instructor and former entertainer. Hayakawa, who has studied jazz, art, sociology, history, economics, and political science, always is pursuing something new. Now he's following in the footsteps of Fred Astaire, and not only the Republican tradition of former Senator George Murphy (also a tap dancer). Uncle Sam says, "I used to see Fred Astaire movies and say, 'I wish I could do that.' Now I can do it." The senator taps on a regular basis. During the campaign, he would drop by Wing's studio at 6 p.m. for lessons. Of course, he plans to keep it up in Washington, since tap is "fun, exercise, re-energizing, relaxing, and keeps my blood pressure down."

Tony Wing first met Senator Hayakawa when Dr. Hayakawa was a guest on a local TV show, and Wing was teaching tap on the same station. Hayakawa expressed an interest in taking lessons. Since that time, the two men have formed a close personal relationship. "He's like an uncle to me," says Wing.

Wing compares tap to swimming. "It's the best exercise. You use almost every muscle in your body." Another of Wing's students is a San Francisco allergist, Dr. Alan Giannini. Dr. Giannini tried tennis and then switched to squash when he got bored with tennis. He then took up tap dancing last fall. "I had one of these moms who believed in every kind of lesson when I was little. But when I broke my leg, I gave up tap and took up piano. I was inspired to start tap again after seeing Ray Bolger tap dance last summer."

It's the physical exercise, with the rhythm and mental relaxation, that gives him the greatest pleasure. "One hour of tapping is like forty-five minutes of squash," says Dr. Giannini, who signs out for one hour on Wednesday mornings and takes no calls. "Tap clears your mind, as opposed to other sports. You can't think of anything else. You have to give it all your attention. I do it as religiously as I do anything." Dr. Giannini adds that his only problem now is getting his wife to put up with the noise.

Bill Fraker, one of Hollywood's top cameramen, taps—instead of having lunch. It's easier than going to a gym, he says.

Don Correia, a member of the Los Angeles cast of *A Chorus Line*, has taken tap and jazz since he was six. "It's a freer expression; you can do more with tap than with jazz. You can have so much fun with it. I can spend the day tapping. You don't have to warm up as much, so it saves time, and you can get down to enjoying it."

"Tap is fun to do," says dance instructor Danny Daniels. "That's why it has wide popular appeal. I've had all kinds of dance training for forty years, starting

when I was a little kid. I went through the gamut of dancing and choreography. I'd rather tap than play tennis or Ping-Pong," says Daniels, who has performed with Leonard Bernstein, and choreographed Liza Minnelli, Perry Como, Shirley Jones, Judy Garland, Gene Kelly, Marcello Mastroianni, Margaret Truman, and Bob Hope, just to name a few. Daniels now has a dance studio in Santa Monica, where his students include NBC reporter Robin Groh, composer Fred Carlin, and actors Gregory Sierra, Charlotte Ray, Peter Graves, Nanette Fabray, Marge Champion, and Hal Linden's kids and Julie Andrews's daughter.

What is it about tap that turns these people on, and why the sudden surge in popularity? Tap dancing is American, born out of rhythm and technique and physical exuberance, and developed in this country in the middle of the last century. At the present time it has a revived interest because it's classic—not a passing fancy or a novelty. It's part of American culture and dance culture, and certainly is an art form. "Fred Astaire is one of the greatest artists of our time and he's a tap dancer. His tap is classic. His early pictures hold up today as marvelous works of art," says Daniels. Bill ("Bojangles") Robinson, who is more of a hoofer type of tap dancer, is another whose work is classic. His style did not incorporate ballet, and will never be dated.

Entertainer Nanette Fabray thinks of tap as "the first thing I've ever done." She, like Shirley Temple, studied with Bill Robinson when she was young, and now is with Danny Daniels. Nanette compares tap, America's only true contribution to dance, to musical comedy, our contribution to theater. "Tap dancing, as we know it—exemplified by the

"king," Fred Astaire—is a great American dance art form," says Nanette.

"Have you ever seen an unhappy tap dancer?" asks Roland Dupree, of Dupree Dance Academy in Los Angeles. "Tap has a knack of making you feel good. I don't know how else to explain it. It makes you feel good and takes the tension away. You do it because that's what you enjoy. You don't need a reason. It's like I'm fifty-one years old and this Christmas I got my first electric train set, only because I've never had one. We always want to go back to our childhood, in a sense, because it brings back pleasant memories."

Dupree and the others interviewed by *California Magazine* aren't surprised by the many non-show biz persons taking up tap, especially businessmen.

"For some reason, men are not intimidated by it," adds Dupree. "Before, men used to think dancing was for sissies. Now they realize dancing is an art, a very strenuous kind of art, if you do it right."

Model and actress Barbara Flicker says tap is a sensational way to get your body in shape for skiing. "You have to stare at yourself in a full length mirror, so you keep your weight down," she continues. "When I go on location with Teddy [her writer-director husband] I take tap shoes and look for classes. Any telephone book lists them. It feels sensational. I've modeled for twenty years but my legs have gotten better from tap. And I also like instant reward; with tap you can just go and enjoy the feeling of being there." Barbara's father was a tap dancer during the depression in vaudeville, but "I never did it because I thought I was such a clutz." She took it up at age forty-three after watching George Segal's two daughters get up in a restaurant once and do a routine.

Danny Daniels maintains there are two things you need to tap dance: a good sense of rhythm and the ability to think of tap as a fine art. "You have to start with tap before other dance. If you learn ballet first, it's very difficult to learn tap, because they are diametrically opposed." Tap dancing works with a relaxed ankle and relaxed foot, whereas ballet works with a tense and controlled muscular action. "You can learn tap and then develop into a good ballet dancer, but the reverse is difficult," says Daniels.

There are two elements in tap that excite Roland Dupree—movement and sound. "To hear the sound coming out of your feet is kind of exciting. You move your feet and you start sliding across

the floor and all of a sudden you're making sounds at the same time and you double your enjoyment. My senses are picking up on two things instead of just one."

"It becomes an obsession," says Dupree. "Once you learn to do the single time step, you have to go into the double time step, the triple time step, then on and on. It's always a little challenge. Once you do it at one tempo, you have to go into a faster one."

The Hebrew Home for the Aged has a tap group, and the San Francisco Yacht Club has a men's tap group. Rich Guggenheim, Jr., and his wife Cynthia, both San Francisco attorneys, have put together a tap group in their basement. The group, which taps one hour a week under the tutelage of Carol Butler, in-

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cludes couples in their late thirties and early forties, among whom are bankers, lawyers, doctors, and Gene Washington of the San Francisco 49er's. "We've all been frustrated actors or dancers. It's a creative challenge, a great form of relaxation and freedom of expression. It's sort of a bridge that requires talent, hard work, rhythm, and imagination," says Guggenheim.

Several California doctors are recommending tap to patients as a substitute for jogging. Dr. Ramon Spritzler, a Los Angeles internist and cardiologist, says he's looking into it as a cardiac exercise for patients.

Tap seems to be attracting people of all ages and income levels. Louis daPron, an internationally-known choreographer since 1941, who's still going strong in the 1970s and has been compared with Astaire and Robinson, did choreography for Donald O'Connor, Ginger Rogers, Bob Hope, Ann Margaret, the Smothers Brothers, and Ruby Keeler. He teaches at the Dupree Dance Academy in Los Angeles, where his students start as young as three years old. "It's like Ritz crackers—an obsession," says daPron. He's currently teaching the new Mouseketeers. "Those are good little kids. Who knows if they'll ever match the talent of Fred Astaire

and Gene Kelly? The oldest is eleven; the youngest is maybe eight, she has her second teeth. Seven of those children tap very well. Three don't have any tap, but have compensating talent. Disney put together this group for the revival craze. They're adorable."

According to choreographer Anita Mann, one of the most promising young tap dancers today is Michael Jackson, eighteen, of the Jackson Five (now the Jackson's) singing group. Michael's idol is Fred Astaire. He watches Astaire films and tries to style himself after Fred. "The rhythm is natural. It's in my blood. Tap is so graceful, really beautiful," says Jackson.

DaPron jokes, "I was not very good at arithmetic. In tap, as soon as I count to eight, I can go back to one." He insists you can tap at any age. "It's a very nice, gentle type of exercise, no sore muscles. It lets you work your body into it. You might get sore shins because of little-used muscles in the front of your legs—when you dance on the ball of your foot. It might get a little stiff, but it's not. I can't walk; I need a hot bath." Then there's more changing of direction, which requires more strength and more jumps up in the air, and pretty soon you're able to dance to get warm. You'll probably get out of breath before you get warm and perspire."

Tony Wing agrees that exercise is the primary reason most of his students between the ages of twenty and sixty take tap. "A lot of my women students used to go to the health spas and let these machines work over their bodies; now they take tap dancing and say it's a lot more fun."

What's the future of tap dancing? "I think it will take its place as part of Americana. There will be more interest in it, because tap's a very sparsely populated field right now. Whenever there is a vacuum, in America, somebody fills it up, because this means there's a tension there. Tap is financially rewarding, too," predicts Daniels, who is currently developing several youngsters. He now has one little girl who practically is doing the stuff that Eleanor Powell did, and the child is only ten.

"I feel the young kids are getting a little bored with the rock element and are looking for something new," says Roland Dupree. "Of course, there really isn't anything new."

Tap only recently is being recognized as an integral part of American culture. Inevitably, its popularity as an art form—or just plain exercise—can only increase. ●