

News From
The Valley Trailers Square Dance Club
Northridge, California
(May 14, 2002)

During the early 1990's, the Valley Trailers Square Dance Club of Northridge, California had lost much of its membership from earlier years. The club had also fallen on bad times financially. The then board of directors decided that something new should be tried in order to secure the club's future.

It was decided to try the Multi-Cycle new dancer program to see if this would bring in more revenue and class members. The President approached caller **Vern Weese**, who was familiar with the program, to teach the class and in September of 1994, the Multi-Cycle program was started using a 12 + 12 system through the plus program. For the first couple of years, very little improvement was seen in membership, although starting classes four times each year did increase the overall number of new dancers. In December of 1995, Vern left the area and **Mike Seastrom** took over as the class instructor. At about that same time, the Multi-Cycle program started becoming profitable. However, the level of the dancers graduating at plus after only 24 weeks was not acceptable.

In May of 1996, the program was changed to a 17 + 17 program. Three classes are started each year, always on the second Tuesday of January, May and September. Graduations are held on the first Tuesday of those months. The first 17 weeks the students attend Phase I from 7 PM to 8:30 PM and learn the calls in the basic program and about ½ of the mainstream program. At the end of the 17 weeks, those students (if they are ready) move to the 8:30 PM to 10 PM time slot and enter Phase II which consists of the remainder of the mainstream calls and all of the plus program. On the same evening that the above transition is made, a new Phase I class starts at 7 PM. This means that year around there are two classes simultaneously -- one in Phase I and the other in Phase II. When the program started in 1994, the club had just under 150 members. The current membership is just under 300 members. Financially, the club is now very sound.

The success of this program can be primarily attributed to the club members. They come 51 weeks a year to angel the new dancers. The classes sometimes must be cut back a week or two when Tuesday falls on a major holiday, such as Christmas or New Year's Day. On that 52nd Tuesday, the class may just go dark or may have a fun dance night, no instruction. Each of the three graduation nights during the year are also a fun night, with alternating tips at the Phase I level and plus level. That night also has special events such as contra and country western dances, in addition to the graduation exercise.

The benefits of the Multi-Cycle program are many. Probably the most important is the fact that you start a new program for each phase three times each year. If you have a new dancer who cannot keep up with the class, they can be asked to drop out then start over with the new class – not “next September” but in just a few weeks. If a new dancer has not fully grasped the Phase I calls after 17 weeks, they are asked to repeat Phase I. Likewise, if a dancer upon completing Phase II is not ready to attend plus dances, they are asked to repeat Phase II. It is surprising how many dancers voluntarily choose to repeat the phases.

Although many types of recruitment have been tried throughout the years, word of mouth is still the most effective. By starting three classes each year, you have three new groups of dancers to recruit for your next class. You are now tapping a new source of potential dancers. We have also obtained some students through the radio advertising program conducted by Open Squares Magazine, 1-800-fun4all.

Another benefit is financial. You have two classes attending and paying simultaneously twelve months each year. In the case of the Valley Trailers, we also have a workshop category of dancers. These are recent graduates or dancers from other local clubs that want more floor time. They pay the same as students and will not be removed from a square to make room for a student unless absolutely necessary. The club's angels dance free and are removed for students.

Since the inception of the Multi-Cycle program in September of 1994, the Valley Trailers have started 24 new classes and graduated 23 classes, one still being in progress as of May 2002. A total of 832 new dancers have attended at least one class (a high of 77 and a low of 13) and have actually graduated 315 new dancers (a high of 34 and a low of 5).

To bring the students into club dances as early as possible, the club dance on the third Saturday of each month has alternating tips -- mainstream and plus. When a student goes into Phase II, they are invited to attend the club dances and dance every other tip. Mike Seastrom contacts the guest callers each month to let them know where in the mainstream program he has reached with the Phase II dancers. This agenda has been particularly beneficial as it allows the new dancers to feel as if they are now part of the “square dance” world and encourages them to continue after graduation.

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