

News From Martinez, CA
Martinez Swingers - Saturday Classes
(September 2009)

What?...a Saturday morning square dance class? Why not! People take walks, run, ride a bike, walk the dog, or go to a gym for exercise on Saturdays. Why not learn to square dance and get the same benefits and meet some great people at the same time. The Martinez Swingers of Martinez, California has joined with the Martinez Adult Education (MAE) to offer such a class. Each Saturday morning from 10:30AM to 12:30PM dancers from the Martinez Swingers, acting as "Angels", join with the class members for the two-hour sessions.

Offering this class through the MAE has some big advantages. The hall is available at no cost, the class is included in the MAE catalog of offered classes; (which is mailed to thousands of local residents), and the MAE office handles all sign-ups and registration fees. Other advertising is done with flyers and free calendar listings in local publications and shoppers. There is no financial obligation to the club, just their support as "Angels". The Caller/Instructor is an employee of the school and is paid by MAE based on a percentage of the registration fee. Other districts may pay the instructor by the hour. Our district requires the Caller to have a TB test and be fingerprinted for employment. Most adult education programs are extensions of the local school district that are looking for class ideas and instructors to add to their itinerary of classes.

This all started in May 2006 with the idea of presenting an ABC program in the fall. It was the first class session of five weeks and was followed by another five-week session. At this point we had dancers who wanted to continue, but no place to go. They had danced with the "Angels" from the Martinez Swingers for the last ten weeks, made friends and wanted to continue dancing with them, but the club was a Plus level club. Another five weeks were added, bringing the class closer to a Mainstream level. At this point they were invited to join the Martinez Swingers and their Caller agreed to continue the lessons without going all the way back to "circle left".

It was time to rethink the program, to try to make the transition from class to Plus workshop smoother. The present program now consists of three; five-week sessions, and each session is two hours in length. Session I has no prerequisite. Sessions II and III, however, require the student either to have completed the previous session or have previous square dancing experience. There have been several "empty nesters" that were rejoining square dancing and joined Session II as they remembered the early basics.

On the first day of each session an 8-1/2" x 11" bound workbook is handed out to each student or couple. I designed this book to correspond to all the calls that would be taught for that particular five-week session. A definition is given for each call and the calls are grouped by the week they are taught. The intent of the booklet is for reference only. Some liked the idea of knowing what was coming, and others used it to refresh their mind when they got home. The teaching order generally follows the teaching order suggested by CALLERLAB. The very first class day of Session I has the most instruction to cover many of the basics. From then on, four to six calls are taught each Saturday. The teaching is fairly intense with only two singing calls, one at the beginning and one at the end of each class. By the end of Session II, they have been taught all the calls in the CALLERLAB Basic and Mainstream Programs.

There are thirty calls in the CALLERLAB Plus Program. It would be very difficult or impossible to teach all these calls in a five-week session. Session III includes about twenty-five of the Plus calls, bringing the dancers to a proficiency to merge comfortably into a Plus workshop, where the Caller will teach the remaining calls on the list and reinforce the previously learned calls.

Dancers who have attended all three of the sessions are invited to "Angel" the next class and are encouraged to bring new dancers. This endeavor has been greatly responsible for the increase in class attendance. To be sure we were heading in the right direction, I passed out a survey at the end of Session III asking the following questions: 1) Was the Saturday time slot convenient?; 2) Did you feel the class pace was sufficient?; 3) Were the Angels helpful?; 4) Was the instruction understandable?; 5) Was the class a good value compared to the cost? An area was also provided for general thoughts/comments regarding the class. We were so pleased that the majority of the responses were very, very positive.

The support of the Martinez "Angels" has been outstanding. Their friendliness and enthusiasm have been extremely instrumental in the success of these classes and it is the plan to continue with this program, as we get ready to start the sixth class session . . . on Saturdays.

If anyone would like more information or to discuss any of the above please feel free to contact me at BSwerer@aol.com or 510-724-7712.