

Square Recovery

by Tim Marriner

New dancers often question how callers keep track of everyone on the dance floor while calling. Describing what happens from the vantage point of a caller, an analogy to a flock of birds or a school of fish is the best description. They both follow the currents flowing effortlessly left and right. If one goes in a different direction it attracts an eye. Callers usually see the flow of the entire room and when someone goes array it is noticeable. The trick is evaluating what action needs to be taken to maintain the square. Square recovery is really a two way street; dancers need to figure things out to keep dancing, and callers need to be aware of issues on the floor to determine what actions need to be taken to assist dancers in repairing the square.

On the dancer side of the street, there are several steps that can be taken to help maintain the square. First and foremost, dancers need to take hands, wherever possible, with the dancers beside them. Maintaining contact keeps the square small and allows formations to become visible in order to apply the next dance action. That means dancers need to be looking up and forward as most dance actions happen in the line of vision. If a dancer becomes confused or unsure of where they should go, one of the worst things they could do is stop listening to the caller. Usually if a caller is doing something strange they apply extra verbiage to get the dancers through the tough combinations known as helper words. Dancers need to listen intently to these clues. Any distraction at this point could lead to a breakdown. The first instinct of a dancer when faced with unfamiliar calls or combinations is to look down trying to think their way through the material. This usually ends up with one missing the next call as the action of looking down prohibits the ability to see things transform right in front of them. Keeping hands in the ready dance position helps others ability to lead without pulling, pushing, or physically turning one in the proper direction or possibly walking past the end point of the action. If a dancer is turned around, others can provide direction by pointing or gesturing the dancer to change their direction. Simply moving a free hand up and down can remind the ones next to you to take hold in order to maintain the formation. Talking is disruptive, creating a bad habit of reacting to

the verbiage within the square rather than listening to the caller, often prohibiting others nearby from hearing the next calls.

Newer dancers need to be aware their reaction time usually is not as fast as others, so a loose hand hold is necessary in order to quickly let go to apply the necessary hand work for the actions. More experienced dancers should not over anticipate actions nor move too fast past less proficient dancers before they have determined what to do. Nobody should take short cuts nor add extra flourishes to calls as this can add to further confusion for newer dancers.

Another good habit is moving to the beat of the music which is the beauty of the dance. Square dancing is not a race nor is it a walk. Small gliding dance strides are much preferred over a full walking gate. Little bitty steps make little bitty mistakes. If one is unsure, don't stop; move forward with smaller steps extending a right hand observing if someone is reaching out, then move to that spot.

Usually the square should have symmetry; lost dancers should find the balance and fill in the missing space. If a dancer becomes lost they should also look within the square to assure everyone has somebody. They should also observe other squares to figure a way for the sets to look like the others. These are all ways to check for correctness. Dancers can also track their opposite dancer to mimic what they are dancing on ones side of the set. In this same regard, there are dancers in a nearby set that should be dancing exactly what is being danced on the entire floor.

Dancers can track where they should be relative to their own square by observing another set.

It takes the teamwork of all eight dancers in a square to keep moving sometimes. Occasionally, one couple is out of position. Dancers need to be familiar with the normal couple arrangement, apply that to the rest of the square to keep dancing. Sometimes two couples are out of position resulting in the set not looking uniform to the rest of the room or to the rest of the square. Often a quick couple rotation is all that is needed to continue the dance. If at the end of the sequence couples and/or partners are out of position, dancers should let go if necessary and repair to a squared set at home as quickly as possible.

If all things break down, dancers should not mill around or stand still looking at what is going on. Rather, they should find their way back to their original home

spot as quickly as possible to prepare to make lines at the sides of the hall or be ready for the start of the next sequence as the caller works the floor. Talking or standing still looking for an answer usually prohibits the square from dancing even the next sequence.

Dancers need to keep smiling, as nobody is perfect. All dancers have lapse of memory or get distracted from time to time. Shake it off. Dancers should not waste time trying to figure out who went wrong. Let it go and focus attention on the next sequence.

As mentioned before, square recovery is a two way street between dancers and callers. Dancers need to know how to help without hindering others, and callers need to observe what is necessary to allow a repair to happen or call actions that will neutralize the possible breakdown. Callers first should instill all the above good habits upon new dancers and remind current dancers as necessary to aid in their ability to keep dancing. Proper training usually leads to a better dancing experience. Next, a caller needs to be able to view all of the dancers they are calling for. Starring at one square or helping one set does not mean the remaining dancers are having success. A good caller always surveys the dance floor while calling, searching for problems that may occur. Good caller judgment is vital to maintain a high success rate on the dance floor. There are ways a caller can improve dancer success by evaluating what is happening on the floor after an action is called, then adapting what to call next in order to provide better success for those having difficulty without hindering the other sets.

If a caller notices, for example, one person out of position while calling, it would do the square a disservice by calling an action that requires all four couples as the whole set would probably breakdown. Instead, calls like Forward and Back, or Partner Trade, can sometimes reverse an individual into finding their proper direction. If one couple is out of formation, often a Bend the Line and/or Forward and Back can turn compromised dancers in the right direction. If one couple is looking out in lines, a caller could call “those looking out Partner Trade” to assist those caught looking the wrong direction. If one person is sashayed, facing lines can be asked to Pass Thru then have the Boys or Girls Fold or ask the Ends to Fold followed by a Slide Thru, centers Trade, and Bend the Line which can temporarily repair the problem in order for all to keep dancing. If, however, the square is not

repaired upon completion of the sequence, at the very least the square is still moving. Dancers should then be reminded to return to their original home position. A comment like, “everybody sneak home” works very well.

When two couples are out of position, it does no good for the caller to use four couple material until the rest of the square can be repaired. Using lines as a reference point, a caller might continue to call two couple actions that could result in the out of position couples to realize they are out of position and do something to correct the problem. Flutter Wheel or Reverse Flutter Wheel along with Sweep $\frac{1}{4}$ to form lines can sometimes cause dancers to either correct themselves or perform the action wrong again to momentarily repair the situation. An old mantra exists that often refers to this situation as, “When in trouble, do it double!”

Other factors can exist, such as one half of the square being in waves while the other is in two faced lines. A caller can use a gimmick like “if you can, Recycle, if not, Wheel and Deal,” which can usually keep all squares moving.

Unintentionally, more than two of the same sex could wind up on the same side of the square. Actions equivalent to an Acey Deucey or Quarter Thru can sometimes resolve the issue or various combinations of Boys Trade, Girls Trade, Boys Run, Partner Trade, and/or Bend the Line may also be necessary to split the same sexes in order for lines to be formed. Be extra careful that what is necessary to help repair a set does not negatively affect remaining squares.

There are several other strange possibilities that dancers could find themselves arranged improperly. A creative caller can often figure quick ways of repairing the situations. A word of warning; don’t sacrifice the whole floor by being over fixated on repairing one square. The remaining dancers paid to dance too. Callers need to use good judgment as to how much work that should be diverted when trying to assist a fumbling square.

Lastly, if a square totally breaks down, a callers needs to shorten the sequence to resolve or get everyone into normal lines at the sides of the room announcing to everyone there are “Lines at the Sides, all move Forward and Back.” This is the squares cue to slide right to form lines to carry on with the dancing pattern. A caller should not ignore standing squares; it only discourages them. Callers should observe that set to determine if a weaker dancer is hindering or if there is a

physical issue with a dancer in the square. Keeping the material straight forward can often regain confidence for the set to improve for the next sequences.

Sometimes it is necessary to mix the dancers, if possible, to another set by progressing them into other squares. Observing the possible scenarios of newer dancers or less proficient dancers gathered in the same set, a caller could also deliver calls that keep the less proficient dancers apart. If this is not an alternative, a caller can choose to simply shorten the patter portion of the tip. Dancers are customers that need to be provided a quality fun filled entertaining dancing experience. Constant breakdowns are embarrassing for dancers and frustrating for the rest of the square. Callers need to do what is best to limit this stress.

Callers need to learn and develop the methods to keep squares moving without disrupting the flow of the floor. From a dancers perspective this will look like a magic trick. The dancers will be baffled how they managed to get through the material unscathed in spite of their inability to keep up. As part of the entertainment, callers with high choreographic skills like to move dancers near the edge of a breakdown, sometimes even look over the edge, only to pull them back at the last minute; saving the square with a surprise get out. This is an acquired art that can be learned through observation and lots of practice.