

# 44<sup>th</sup> CALLERLAB Convention

## Handling Structural Failures/Why Squares Break Down

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### **Introduction**

As callers, we try to call in a way that keeps most dancers moving successfully through the square. Only in rare circumstances do we “push the dancers” to the breaking point on purpose (unless we have a real attitude problem!) Most of the time we want them to be smooth and get to the corner or partner at the right time. This doesn’t always happen, and when the squares break down we need to look at **reasons why** they broke down, what **our role** in the breakdown is, and **what steps** we can take to prevent future breakdowns.

### **1) Why squares break down**

There are many reasons why squares break down, but in general they can be divided into two categories: Hall issues and dancer skill issues.

With regard to hall issues there are three general problem areas: the floor surface is difficult to dance on (too rough or too slick), the floor is too crowded, or the dancers can’t hear. The first two problem areas are usually out of your control, but the third area is almost completely in your control.

Even halls with terrible acoustics can be managed by mixing the sound correctly. Generally speaking, the worse the acoustics in the hall, the more your music needs to be brought down against the voice. In the most extreme cases, the music may be hardly heard at all, but your commands will be heard. This is never ideal. Most callers and dancers dislike halls with poor sound qualities, but being heard clear enough for the dancers to execute the call successfully is the most important.

The other reason dancers break down is due to a mismatch between their skills and what the caller is calling (assuming the caller didn’t call something in error). This doesn’t indicate the dancers are weak, but that the caller hasn’t matched his or her calling with what the floor can handle.

### **2) What our role is**

As callers, we are ultimately responsible for the dancers’ success or failure. If we call too fast, too hard, or have bad sound mixing, the dancers will struggle and eventually squares will fail. These three causes are straightforward and correcting them is just as straightforward: slow down, ease up, and turn the music down.

However, these are not always the causes of squares breaking down. Sometimes the dancers are just not prepared for the program being called. They may have health or other problems that present difficulties to dancing. We need to discern the reasons for the failure and take appropriate corrective action.

### 3) Steps to prevent breakdowns

a) **Prepare the dancers for your material.** If you are calling to your group of dancers, make sure they are taught well and that they are prepared for your material. If the dancer breaks down on something you called but did not train them on, it is not their fault. This applies to dances as well as lessons. For example, I like to use a variety of different openers from a squared set. Because these opening sequences are not in common use, I warn the dancers and perhaps walk them through them before I use them. For example:

Heads Spin the Top and Turn Thru, all Slide Thru  
Sides Box the Gnat and square thru 2  
Heads Pass Thru and Wheel Around and Lead to the Left

Many dancers might break down if I called these openers cold. Most dancers need to be prepared for such choreography. There is nothing difficult about the calls, except that the dancers may not have heard them from those positions. You will need to build up their skills through scaffolding. Scaffolding is the process of breaking up the learning into several chunks. For example, to “scaffold” the dancers into successfully executing this sequence

Heads Spin the Top and Turn Thru, all Slide Thru

I might break it down like this:

- 1) Call sequences that end in a Turn Thru from a wave, such as “Swing Thru, Turn Thru, Left Allemande”. This will get them used to the motion of the Turn Thru from a wave.
- 2) Call Spin the Top from parallel RH waves with the boys on the end. This may take a few times to get them to remember how.
- 3) Call Spin the Top from RH tidal wave with boys on the ends of each wave.
- 4) Call Spin the Top from an 8 Chain Thru. Most dancers aren’t ready for this call from facing couples.
- 5) Finally, from a squared set, call Spin the Top, Turn Thru, Slide Thru. The slide thru is important because it is hands neutral and gives the dancers a place to go without wandering off after the Turn Thru!

#### b) Move dancers if necessary

i) **Arrange dancers within the square.** If you have any say in which squares dancers dance in, spread the new dancers (or struggling dancers) into separate squares. Avoid having them congregate in the same square. If you have two weak couples in the same square, put them opposite each other, not next to each other (have them both be heads or both be sides). Couples that are opposite interact with each other far less than with their adjacent couples. This is because most choreography is done in a full square in groups of eight, not just the four dancers in the middle.

ii) **Move weak dancers to the front.** As we all know, weaker dancers tend to square up in the back of the hall, while stronger dancers square up near

the front. If you see the dancers in the back are having difficulty, ask them to move closer to the front, perhaps in front of the front squares. Three things will occur: they may be able to hear you better, they may become more alert because you have singled them out, and you will be watching them more closely, giving them more of a chance to succeed. Don't ever do it in a way to embarrass anyone; suggest it in a positive way. You can say something like "the sound is better in the front, come closer."

iii) **Talk to your angels ahead of time.** Encourage them to mix around the squares each tip. Have them avoid repeating the same squares all the time. If the squares don't naturally mix, call a few scatter promenades to break things up.

iv) **Dancer training.** Among all the things you can train dancers for in being successful, the two most important are these: Take hands and commit! We know the dancers should always take hands with the adjacent dancer once the call is complete. New/weak dancers rarely take hands and are subsequently lost or out of position for the next call. Touch is important. Touch gives us a sense of where we are in the square and our relationship with others. Touch also serves to keep the square closer together. Tight squares are usually more successful than big, loose squares.

The second part – commit – is to remind the dancers to *do something*, not just stand there or drift. Have them take an action, even if it's not the right action. If it is not right, there will be a teaching moment and the action can be corrected. If they don't do anything, then the square is guaranteed to break down. Doing something allows the *possibility* of success. Sometimes the dancer will find the right place to land as a process of elimination.

v) **Walk throughs.** Don't be afraid to approach a square that was having difficulty with a certain call and offer to walk them through during a break. Most dancers are appreciative of the extra effort from a caller. Show them how to do the sequence and then use it in the next tip.

### **Ways to have squares recover during a tip**

If a square starts to break down, you can encourage dancers to keep moving! Even if the square isn't right or in sequence, they are still moving. That's why it's called "dancing". If the square is too far-gone, have the broken down square get home, then have the heads "Slide right to a line". Then bring them back in the dance sequence by getting the rest of the floor into normal lines.

One way to avoid squares standing around broken down is to quickly end the sequence. Most sequences are under 45 seconds. Find a way to resolve quickly, allowing everyone to get back in the game again.

### **Conclusion**

As callers we have many tools in our toolkit to help the dancers succeed. Our knowledge and judgment is the difference between a floor that is happy and successful and one that is broken down and frustrated. Imagine every person on the floor equal to a million dollars in your pocket – wouldn't you do everything you could to help them succeed?

Happy Calling!