

New Dancers

More than twenty years (a decade) ago I had a calling experience that taught me a lot. I thought I had written an article about it but I can't find it in my computer files so I am writing about it now. I called a dance for a club in Vermont with about 8 – 10 squares. During my first tip I realized that two squares at the back of the hall were having trouble. I went back after the tip to talk with them and learned that they were recent graduates visiting from a club across the state. There were, I believe, about 6 couples of new graduates and a couple of the experienced couples from their club who had helped with the class.

I urged them to dance in the front of the hall for the rest of the evening so I could more easily help them to succeed. They took me up on it and spent the rest of the dance right there in front of me and I tried to be sure that they succeeded. It was one of the most difficult dances I have ever called – and one of the most rewarding and educational for me. Their class had lasted for 30 lessons and I knew their caller was experienced and a good teacher. That night I learned that even well taught new dancers are not going to have it easy at an open dance for experienced dancers.

I made the rest of the evening as straightforward as I could. I used every call in the most common way and I even adjusted the timing sometimes to help them succeed. It still took everything I had to allow them to have a successful night of dancing. It was a Mainstream dance and they had been taught every call that I used. But it was a different hall and a different voice and a different way of using the calls than their teacher had used. It made me realize that we take way too much for granted.

I talked with my fellow callers about this experience and none of them were surprised. Under the surface we all know that visiting a new caller and unfamiliar dancers is a real struggle for new graduates. Even dancing with the club at their own dance is scary but to visit a bunch of strangers – wow! That was more than a decade ago and the new dancers had been through a 30 lesson class of full 2 hour or more lessons. Do you think graduates of today's shorter classes that have often been mixed with club dances are prepared to join the club? Are you surprised that so few of them join us? Would you be willing to dance what they can do comfortably while they gain enough confidence to join your club? Do you really want more modern square dancers?

Our Gift To Society

We, MWSD, have a wonderful gift for modern society. Over the last couple of years I have become steadily more aware of our need for social interaction. I hear frequent mention of it in the media and, if you look, you can see signs of it all around you. People want to interact with each other and today the chances for that are shrinking. Our activity could offer one of the best opportunities for that interaction – if we could stop making it more difficult.

Club square dancing provided exactly that kind of social contact when it began after WW II and we thrived because of it. Today society is different but the need for people to do things together is, perhaps, even greater than it was 70 years ago. We could serve that need and in some places we do. Unfortunately many of today's SD programs make it very difficult to take part. Our choreography is much more challenging and our social interaction has shrunk. Even the dancing is less comfortable and learnable than it was.

We've talked about this and we have even designed experimental programs that we hope will make us more accessible. Unfortunately, we have mostly ignored our most valuable asset. We, callers and the remaining experienced dancers, keep thinking that choreography is our most appealing aspect. It is NOT. Sociability is. People want a place to meet and be involved with other people. The square dance club is nearly perfect for that if we didn't make participation so difficult.

Over the last 30 years or more we have made a huge increase in the complexity of MWSD. Only if you can handle constantly changing dance routines are you welcome in our clubs. Even singing call routines don't repeat. The number of parties that clubs run has shrunk and the club management group has also shrunk. It doesn't take as many board meetings to run a club as it used to. Those meetings weren't necessary. They were social opportunities.

We have clubs, even today, that are thriving and growing. In many cases they have made the dancing easier and the social interaction opportunities more available. We mostly don't want to hear it. We know that choreography is king. That's what we talk about at our conventions and what we teach in our schools. If a club runs an easier entry program, we send our recruiters there to see if we can "cherry-pick" any hot shots who want to move over to our choreography centered group. MWSD could be a huge social interaction center if we would only let it.