

Caller Training

– a series of articles by Paul Bristow
(Training Director SDCCGB)

FORMATION MANAGEMENT (1) - Degree of Difficulty

Technically, the concept of “Degree of Difficulty” is not, in actual fact, a part of “Formation Management”, it is really a subject in it’s own right. However, I have included it here because an appreciation of this subject would be required when considering the calls possible from any FASR. Moreover a good understanding of “Degree of Difficulty” is quite essential as part of the caller’s “toolkit” and this is a good stage to introduce it.

As I have tried to emphasise, in my earlier articles, many of the most important attributes of a good caller rely upon him or her constantly watching the dancers, in order to provide effective control of Timing and Body Flow as well as allowing the caller to make full use of the method of calling that has been chosen – in most cases Module Calling. Formation Management is what many callers are thinking of, when the term “Sight Calling” is used but to be able to execute this task, it is necessary to understand – by prior consideration and investigation – “Degree of Difficulty”.

There are many ways to demonstrate what is meant by the phrase “Degree of Difficulty”. If you think about how difficult a call may be for a group of dancers, you will realise that it must depend upon many factors. The first most obvious factor will be the length of time that they have been dancing; newly graduated dancers may find even the simplest uses of calls to be difficult. The more experience a dancer gains, the lesser they will find any inherent difficulty in the simpler calls (or combinations of calls). At any stage a “difficult” choreographic routine will depend upon the degree to which the dancers are familiar with that particular call or combination of calls.

It is part of the caller’s job to determine the “Degree of Difficulty” for any choreographic routine and to use that as a guide as to whether or not a particular group of dancers will be able to execute the choreography “cold” or whether they will require some type of a workshop, in order to be able to understand that application. All dancers are individuals. Each of them will have a different set of “problems” that result from their own experience – or lack thereof. When you bring a group of differently talented dancers together, in a Square, the “average Degree of Difficulty” for that group will need to be assessed; you can only do this by watching the dancers, when you call.

Whilst there is some logic that you can apply to this “Degree of Difficulty” evaluation, there is no completely accurate calculation available. You could simply stick with the “Standard Applications” and you will enjoy a great deal of “success”, if the “success” that you seek is to use choreography that the dancers are bound to be able to achieve. However, most dancers like to be “stretched” and most callers like to extend their skills, by experimentation and then demonstrate their prowess. Indeed, the majority of Dancers expect and require something a little beyond the “norm”; i.e. they wish to be able to dance non-standard applications, or – as we call them – “Extended Applications”.

From a Static Square, the call of Left Square Thru could be difficult for some dancers. Equally, the call of Heads Left Swing Thru – called “cold” from a Static Square – may present problems for some. Both of these calls can easily be workshopped, fairly quickly (if needed), although some – more experienced – groups will be able to dance them without a workshop.

However, if – from a Static Square – you were to call Left Swing Thru, followed by Left Square Thru, you may see the Dancers in difficulties. Whilst this is a quite proper combination of calls – in terms of the definitions – it introduces the “Ocean Wave Rule”, which may not be familiar to some Dancers and (to make it even more complicated) this is being introduced from a Left Hand Ocean Wave, which is bound to be a very unfamiliar starting formation for this call for many dancers.

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There are many examples of situations where the “Degree of Difficulty” can become quite complex. If you ask dancers to do a “Half U-Turn Back”, which way will they turn? If you present the following combination to your dancers: from Facing Lines call – Pass Thru, Bend The Line, Do Half of a U-Turn back – where will end up? Chances are that most of the dancers will not recall that the direction of turn on a U-Turn Back should be the taken from the “direction of the previous call”. Many dancers believe that all U-Turn Backs should be “towards your partner” (this is only the case if there is no direction given by the previous call).

At the end of the routine shown above (Pass Thru, Bend The Line, Do Half of a U-Turn back) the dancers should be in a starting Double Pass Thru Formation.

Still on the same subject try calling (from Two-Faced Lines), Couples Circulate and then do Half of a U-Turn Back. Those dancers who are moving straight ahead, should turn to face each other, the others, who are walking through an arc, should turn in the direction of that arc. The next call could be Centres Walk and Dodge, which would put everyone in an Eight Chain Through formation.

Now you may feel that calling a “Half U-Turn Back” is a very difficult Extended Application and I would agree with you that – in many situations – it would be. So let’s consider something that is more likely to occur during “normal” calling, which might also cause some confusion.

The call Recycle is not essentially difficult. Let’s restrict it to Parallel Right Handed Ocean Waves and we should be on fairly safe ground. However, there are six possible Arrangements that could be found in that Formation, five of which are likely to give problems on an average Mainstream (or even Plus) floor. Yes, everybody will be okay if it is called from the “O” Arrangement (Boys on each end and Girls in the centre); this will be the Arrangement from which it was originally taught and from which it will have been called more than any other Arrangement.

If you call Recycle from any of the first four Arrangements, there is a good chance that the dancers will adjust themselves to finish as “normal couples”. This is the finishing Arrangement that they are most used to. However, it is only correct – for both couples – from Arrangement “O”. There is a chance that – if you call it from the final two Arrangements, where the adjacent end and centre Dancers are the same gender – you may get a correct result but then again you may not!

By watching the dancers, you will be able to build up a good idea of where difficulties can occur – sometimes you discover them “by accident”! What might be easy for one group may be difficult for another; there is only one way to find out for sure – call it and see! If you can find the courage to experiment with new ideas, so you will learn – but only if you are watching the dancers!

You need to be aware, in advance, of the potential “Degree of Difficulty” that can be experienced in all situations and for all movements. You should know where to expect it and how to extend the Dancers knowledge, when necessary. If you have a very strong floor, then you need to understand how to raise the “Degree of Difficulty”, so as to entertain the dancers. The caller needs to be able to “challenge” the dancers with his or her choreography, you should take them out of their “comfort zone” – at least some of the time – but however complicated your choreography may be, you must know how to get the dancers through it. Remember, **THE DANCERS MUST SUCCEED!**

This is a quite complex subject and my purpose in this article was to – hopefully – provide an idea of what is meant by “Degree of Difficulty”. Next time I will be talking more specifically about the subject of Formation Management, where “Degree of Difficulty” needs to be considered.

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FORMATION MANAGEMENT (2) – FASR Recognition

The term “Sight Calling” is often misunderstood. In most cases, if you ask a group of callers to state which of the five methods of calling they use, they will claim to be “Sight Callers”. This is very unlikely to be correct. If you know the outcome of any call (or of any combinations of calls), you are – at least in part – a Module Caller. In fact a true “Sight Caller” would NEVER know, in advance the outcome of any call, he would have to call a movement, see where the dancers ended up and then find another call to use; if you think about anyone actually doing that, it is frightening!

The fact is that there are two principle aspects to Sight Calling; these comprise: 1) Sight Resolution – i.e. watching to see where the dancers are, in order to know which Module to use to resolve the square and 2) Formation Management – i.e. knowing enough about the effect of each call to be able to use it as part of a smooth flowing, non-monotonous and enjoyable sequence.

FASR RECOGNITION – A newer Caller will often adopt a Sight Resolution system as a “safety harness”, this allows the new caller the time to develop Formation Management skills, the primary of which is FASR Recognition. Ultimately, this will result in the Caller creating “short-cuts” to whatever system they use in order to resolve the square. Eventually they will be able to identify ways to vary and improve the system they are using and develop individual routines to resolve.

Effective Formation Management and FASR Recognition would help to enhance your calling. Many callers continually use the same Modules and very rarely dare to experiment with other combinations. This leads to Dancers being able to predict the next call, which removes some of the challenge. Whilst there certainly are some advantages to this situation – where the Dancers know what is coming next – I believe that by using unexpected but confluent combinations the caller can provide the dancers with more excitement and by this means, be perceived as a more capable caller.

In many situations it is not necessary to be able to recognise all four parts of the FASR. The Formation is essential and – if you are going to make use of the relative position of the Boys and Girls, or use calls that can only be executed by opposite genders (e.g. Star Thru) – Arrangement must be recognised and correctly identified. Sequence and/or Relationship only become necessary, if you are trying to resolve the Square. However, the location of the Head or Side Dancers can be important, in certain circumstances. In general, factors that affect FASR Recognition could include:

- Which of the six standard arrangements (of Boys and Girls) do you have?
- Where are the original Head and Side dancers?
- Who was “active” in the preceding call?
- What calls can comfortably follow the preceding call?
- What calls can more easily be danced on the basis of the dynamic given by the previous call?
- What level of “Degree of Difficulty” can these dancers handle?

This is a lot to consider on a call-by-call basis. However, when you then add to this the fact that you need to evaluate the effect, on Formation and Arrangement, based upon all of the above that will result from your next call – and thereby start to compile a list of possible calls from where the most appropriate movement (or call) can be selected... All of a sudden the number of “plates” that you have “spinning” becomes so great that panic may set in!

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This is why you need to spend time considering these points in a controlled situation i.e. whilst you are not calling. What I am suggesting here is that you set your self a series of problems to solve – whilst you are spending your “one-hour-a-day” working on your calling, without Dancers.

It is essential that you learn and practice FASR Recognition. Unless you can recognise where the Dancers are, in terms of – at least – Formation and Arrangement, how can you ever hope to develop the skills necessary for effective Formation Management? This leads on to the next subject, which is to explain exactly what is meant by the term Formation Management and how it should be used.

FORMATION MANAGEMENT – Formation Management is an important skill, required of any caller. Although a great deal of emphasis is placed upon correct and effective resolution of the square, this is only a minor aspect of the dancer’s expectations. The major part of the caller’s programme will always depend upon their ability to create interesting and exciting choreography.

The problems that you might consider are (in simple terms) how to get the Dancers from where they are to where you would like them to be by the most effective and enjoyable route and by as many different methods as possible. If you always use the same call or series of calls to convert one Formation/Arrangement to another, then your calling will become “uninteresting” and “boring”.

Don’t forget to consider the effects of “directional calling”. This is a very valuable tool when it comes to Formation Management. An example of this would be to note the effect of the directional instruction “Face Your Partner”; how does this alter the Formation? However, be aware that in some Formations and Arrangements, the position of the “choreographic” partner is not clear.

This use of Conversions is an aspect of Modular Choreography but is also an essential part of Sight Calling. Both Module and Sight choreographic management methods are inextricably interlinked and callers who wish to deliver the best when they call will need to use aspects of both systems.

To give an example, let’s consider again the Facing lines. How can you convert these to Parallel Ocean Waves – using just one call? If the only answer that you can find is to call Pass The Ocean, then you do need to spend more time on research. Exactly how you can achieve this conversion will depend upon all the elements listed as bullet points previously but be certain that there are many, many more ways that this conversion can be achieved. Of course limiting yourself to one call to achieve this conversion is very demanding and totally unfair to the new caller.

However, anyone can identify simple conversions that they continually use, even calls or series of calls that they repeat to the annoyance (almost) of the Dancers. Try taping yourself, and then try dancing to your own calling – or at least listening to it. Look for repetition and monotony or – alternatively – just consider what other calls or series of calls you could be using in place of those that you are. Don’t be afraid to experiment – you can always do it differently and sometimes “different” will also be “better”!

One important part of becoming familiar with the concept of Formation Management, is to take the time to consider which calls (and series of calls) are independent of the Arrangement i.e. find the calls that are not “gender-dependent”, by working out which calls are “gender-dependent” (e.g. Star Thru, Boys Run, Courtesy Turn etc.). You can then create modules that you know will work for any or all Arrangements in a situation where all that you know, for sure, is the Formation.

In the next article, I will be suggesting ways that callers can use to practice Formation Management.

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FORMATION MANAGEMENT (3) – Practicing Formation Management

We all know that we need to keep learning new things in order to continue to develop our calling skills, if we don't we will "stagnate". It is important that we take every opportunity to "grow" as a caller and every time that we are able to call should be treated as an opportunity for Self-Improvement. One of the most effective methods that we can employ as a "Self-Improvement" device is to try and develop a training plan, based upon the elements of Formation Management.

To develop a good understanding of Formation Management, which will lead to you being able to make effective use of this as a tool, you need to take the time to investigate the many different ways that calls can be used beyond the methods that you are currently using.

In the last article I asked: From Facing lines, how many ways (other than by using Pass the Ocean) can you find to convert the Formation to Parallel Ocean Waves – using just one call? Hopefully, you will have spent some time on this and now have a list of "single calls" that will achieve this conversion. Below are just some of the ways that work at Mainstream.

These will work from any Arrangement:

- | | |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1) Spin The Top | 3) Half Tag |
| 2) Dixie Style to an Ocean Wave | 4) Partner Trade – once and a half |

These will work, if the Lines are arranged in Normal Couples – i.e. an "O" or "1/2" Arrangement:

- | | | | |
|--------------|----------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| 5) Boys Run | 7) Boys Trade | 9) Boys U-Turn Back | 11) Boys Walk, Girls Dodge |
| 6) Girls Run | 8) Girls Trade | 10) Girls U-Turn Back | 12) Girls Walk Boys Dodge |

From certain other Arrangements, the following will work – if you (and the Dancers) know where the Heads and Sides are. It's often necessary to "remind" Dancers of these criteria and I would always use the term "original" before each of these calls.

- | | | | |
|---------------|-----------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
| 13) Heads Run | 15) Heads Trade | 17) Heads U-Turn Back | 19) Heads Walk, Sides Dodge |
| 14) Sides Run | 16) Sides Trade | 18) Sides U-Turn Back | 20) Sides Walk, Heads Dodge |

There are of course many, many other ways that you can achieve this particular conversion, with a single call and you might want to spend a little time looking for some of these. This is only one of many ways that you can use Formation Management, to expand your understanding of the way that calls work and establish a "Self-Improvement" regime that will help your skill-base to grow.

The rest of this article lists other Formation Management based ways to develop your calling. Try and use these when and where you can BUT – at no stage should the Dancers be aware of what you are doing (unless – for some reason – you decide to tell them); from the Dancers point of view you should just be calling as usual, so if you find that the task you have set yourself to achieve is too much and is affecting your Timing or is too difficult for the dancers to be able to enjoy, be prepared to "adjust" your plan to ensure maximum "Dancer Success" and "Dancer Enjoyment."

1) FIND SIX ARRANGEMENTS OF A FORMATION – Every Formation has a maximum of six different arrangements of Boys and Girls. The task here would be to find a way to move the Dancers through all six Arrangements, with as few moves as possible. Try a different Formation each time – you can always return to any that prove "difficult". Take a moment to record what you have found whilst "searching", it will tell you more about how moves work.

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2) REMOVE ONE OR MORE CALLS – Quite often we “over-use” certain calls, because they keep “popping into our heads” before anything else. This can lead to monotony in your calling. If you have found the courage to record yourself, when you call, (and you really should) then you will be able to identify calls that you use too often. Your task, therefore, is to try and call an entire tip, without that call BUT you must find suitable alternatives; these can be other calls, or short modules or some Extended Application that will modify another call, to make it work as a replacement.

You would be wise to spend a little time preparing for this exercise. However, if you pre-plan too much you will not develop the “Micro-Programming” aspect (the call-by-call ability to develop alternative choreography). At some stage, you may find it useful to remove more than one call.

3) MOVE SPECIFIC DANCERS WHILST KEEPING ALL THE OTHERS AS THEY ARE – Try to move just the Head men to a different location, using a series of calls that returns everyone else to the same position; e.g. from Facing Lines in an “O” Arrangement with the Head Men on the left hand end of the line, you could call – Pass the Ocean, Boys Circulate, Boys Trade, Recycle and Sweep a Quarter. This will have moved the Head men but kept everyone else in the same place.

4) MOVE ALL THE OTHERS WHILST KEEPING SPECIFIC DANCERS AS THEY ARE – Try to keep the Head men where they are, whilst moving everyone else to a different location – e.g. “rotate” them all one position to clockwise. This is really just the opposite of the previous exercise.

For both 3 and 4 above, you would really need to pre-plan the exercise but keep an eye open for alternatives. Eventually you will be able to “see” ways to achieve the same effects that had not been meticulously worked out ahead of time.

5) CONVERSIONS – Your task on this would be to look at ways of Converting from one FASR to another; the most well known example of this is the “Magic Module”, which converts a Zero Box to a Zero Line (and vice versa). You should look at other conversions, either by pre-planning or by observing the effect as you call – e.g. how to convert a Zero Line to a Zero Wave?

6) EQUIVALENTS – Try and find alternatives to the calls that you use most often. The prime example of this is Square Thru Four (as anyone who went to GSI will have been told by Jon Jones), this should be replaced, as often as possible by modules that have an Equivalent effect.

7) TECHNICAL ZEROS – This is a fairly complicated subject but nevertheless one that is worth investigating, if you check back to earlier editions of News and Views you will find an article that I wrote on the subject that may be helpful. Remember there is a Technical Zero possible from every FASR If you can find enough of these, they will really enhance your calling. It is a powerful tool.

8) FRACTIONALISATION – You can use “once-and-a-half” or “half”, “one-quarter”, “three-quarters” or even (in some cases) “two-thirds”. When and where this can be used, with success, will depend upon your understanding of the call and how you deal with the “Degree of Difficulty”.

9) GLOSSARY OF TERMS AND OTHER IDEAS – such ideas as “reverse” and “a quarter more” found in the Glossary of Terms are possibilities; abstract ideas like “Everybody do the Boy’s/Girl’s Part”, can also be used to good effect, the limitation will most often be the “Degree of Difficulty”.

Effective experimentation is always a good idea but remember:

WHATEVER YOU DO, THE DANCERS MUST ENJOY IT!

In the next issue, I will be looking at more on the subject of Formation Management, in particular the importance of a good understanding of every aspect of the definitions.

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FORMATION MANAGEMENT (4) – Definitions and Call analysis

In order to fully develop your skills and make effective use of Formation Management, you need to understand the importance of a full understanding of Definitions. First, here's a little history:

DEFINITIONS – There have always been definitions of Square Dance Movements available and it is important to remember that these are not just intended to be used for the instruction of newer Dancers. Prior to the emergence of CALLERLAB, in the early 1970's, there did not exist any standard universal reference for definitions. There were many different definitions for the same movements, a number of different definitions had the same name and the definitions that did exist were quite often ambiguous or mentioned alternative, sometimes, "regional" variations.

One of the basic requirements of CALLERLAB was to establish a common nomenclature and thereby a universal set of definitions. This would enable Dancers to dance anywhere in the World, safe in the knowledge that their understanding of the Calls would be the same wherever they danced as it was at home. Nowadays we have the CALLERLAB definitions, in the form of an A4 printed booklet as well as the CALLERLAB endorsed Sets-in-Order American Square Dance Society handbooks – complete with pictures, which detail the definitions by which we all dance.

Part of the modern format of CALLERLAB is to have a committee for each dance programme, who take the time to review the definitions on a regular basis and – if they find a need to alter any text – they can pass it to the Definitions Committee for consideration. By this process amendments can be made when needed and – indeed – from time to time Definitions are updated. It is necessary for callers to check through the Definitions, regularly, to ensure that there have been no changes.

Each Movement has a Definition which is split into four parts:-

- (a) The "**Starting Formation**" - which can limit the use of a particular Call within a particular programme
- (b) The "**Definition of the Call**" - this details the actual Call itself, advises which hands should be used, tells you what the Boys should do or what the Girls should do, and stipulates how far you should turn and in which direction, etc.
- (c) The "**Styling**" - how the Call should be executed, in line with the artistic as opposed to the scientific analysis
- (d) The "**Timing**" - the number of steps that are required in order to execute the Call, comfortably (sometimes more than one value is given)

It is essential that a Caller is familiar with these Definitions and relates them, correctly, "verbatim" when teaching. Taking care to fully understand the wording used and the implications of each aspect of the text. If a new Dancer is correctly taught by the Definition of the movement He or She should be able to "Dance-By-Definition" without too much difficulty.

For the most part, every call will have an obvious "Standard Application"; you should obtain a copy of the Standard Applications book from CALLERLAB, if you are not sure what these Standard Applications are. Many of the Definitions allow for a great deal of Extended Applications. The Basic Programme, in particular, has great potential; it provides the opportunity to take the definition and use it to create an incredible degree of variety within the choreography that you present.

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As previously mentioned in the article on “Degree of Difficulty”, care should be taken by the Caller to be aware of the extent to which the average Dancer will be familiar with some of the more ambitious and possible extraordinary uses of the Definitions. If you intend to present choreography which relies upon a possibly more obscure use of a Definition, be careful to allow extra reaction time and where necessary give any directional cues and extra information to the Dancers to ensure that they are able to understand and correctly interpret (and thereby enjoy) the Call(s).

Don't forget how the use of such terms as “Original Heads” and “Original Sides” can be used to define the roles of specified dancers. Also the use of the terms “Boys” and “Girls” as well as “Ends and “Centres” can open up a whole new range of possibilities. Additionally, you must be familiar with the special rules and additional terms, which are presented in the handbooks. Sometimes these can limit what you do but there are also occasions when they can extend the options.

There is nothing more embarrassing or harmful to a Dancer's impression of your professional status and personal integrity than a lack of the correct knowledge of a Definition. It is essential that you spend a considerable amount of time on research in these areas.

The definition of a movement should contain the answers to most questions that may arise regarding its proper/improper use and thus a good understanding of the definitions is essential. Additionally, the definitions will quite often offer ideas about workshop material and unusual interpretations - use your judgement but do not be afraid to experiment!

CALL ANALYSIS – when it comes to looking at every call, take the time to use the “Call Analysis” sheet that CALLERLAB has formulated – a copy of this is printed in this edition of News and Views. If you take a moment to read this through, you will see that it is designed to allow you to work through each call and determine the qualities that it has.

This document features a very basic layout that will work as a primary analysis device. Even so it is an excellent way to begin the process of “unlocking” the potential of a call. A more detailed analysis would require much more space for certain categories and you would probably need another sheet (or perhaps several sheets) to list all the Extended Applications, for certain calls.

Other questions that you might consider are:

- Can the call be fractionalised?
- Is the call a gender dependent movement?
- Is it possible to use the “reverse” concept?
- Could you Sweep a Quarter?
- Could you use – “and a quarter more”?
- Is there any potential for “directional” calling?

For all Extended Applications, you should ask:

- What is the “Degree of Difficulty”?

This concludes the articles on Formation Management I hope that these have given you some ideas.