

Square Games

Clark Baker, November 2002

Assume that you know how to square dance. Not only that, but that you are good at it. Perhaps you have already learned some Advanced and Challenge dancing. Perhaps you are even a little bored at the current dance, weekend, festival, or convention. Or perhaps you just want a slight change to make things interesting. What you need is a square game -- something you or your square can do while the caller is calling to the rest of the folks.

My ground rules for this type of dancer-led fooling around include:

- Obtain your squares' cooperation
- Do it in the back of the hall
- Don't bother others
- Don't disrupt the calling
- Don't come across as being better than everyone else
- Don't seem like you are having way more fun than everyone else

My main criterion for inclusion in the following list is that the particular square game can be danced in real-time while the caller is calling to the rest of the floor. This means that it must work with his choreography and timing.

Dance with phantoms

If you don't have enough dancers for a full square, form a partial square (1 to 7 dancers works) and try to dance the choreography. Sometimes it helps to identify your counterpart in another square so you can double check in the cases where you are uncertain or get lost. This especially helps with only one or two dancers in your square.

As the square fills up, dancing with 6 or 7 dancers should feel more like a full square, and your focus should be more internal to the square than external checking off a counterpart.

Skills you will need to develop include knowing what the overall formation is (e.g. Right-Hand Ocean Waves, Lines Facing, etc.) and your position in it (e.g. Lead Center in Right Hand Waves, #3 in a column). Usually it is not necessary to track the exact sex arrangement, but experienced phantom dancers can do a reasonable job on that. Another skill is dancing so that the square is always the correct size and shape with respect to the other real dancers. This will allow you to interact with the real dancers when you are supposed to. With only 2 or 3 real dancers in the square, it is important to know when they are adjacent to you, etc.

In squaring up, you have a decision to make with respect to diagonal opposites. With two dancers, you could both decide to be head men (i.e. opposite each other). This allows you to check each decision off the other dancer. Another alternative would be to be one head man and one side man. This would be harder, but you would always know where the men are, and hence where the women are.

Dance "no hands"

Unless you have tried it, dancing without using hands is a lot harder than you might expect. You lose many of the kinesthetic clues that may help you start a call or allow you to realize that you are heading in the wrong direction.

When dancing without hands, it can help if you try to make connections with the other dancers using eye contact.

I find it better to have the whole square decide to dance without hands instead of just one or two dancers. That said, my daughter shows her displeasure with me by refusing to use hands only with me.

Same sex square

Dancing a square of all boys or all girls can be fun. Half the dancers must correctly dance the other gender's part. Also, it can get confusing on calls like "Boy's Run". It helps to have the named dancers identify themselves by raising a hand. It can also help to memorize who is dancing arky before the tip starts.

Arky square

Take a normal square and have everyone Half Sashay. Now all the women are dancing the boy's part and vice versa. While this shouldn't matter for many calls, the ones it does have been internalized at such a deep, instinctive level, many will find Arky dancing difficult. Be sure to do both the patter and singing call, because singing calls usually have their own set of gender-specific calls waiting to surprise you.

Rotating Square

After each sequence the squares circles right $1/8$. This means you change gender after each sequence, but only half the square changes head/side-ness. One of the fun side effects is that the two people who are your partner and corner are always either your partner or your corner. You just need to remember which. It's a nice game to play for a group who is tired with "plain old arky".

Mirror Image square

The Mirror concept is on the C3B list. However, the basic idea of interchanging left and right occurs at Mainstream with Left Square Thru and Reverse Flutter Wheel.

The idea of dancing mirror image is to have the whole square dance with all the right actions interchanged with left actions. When you square up, the boy normally has the girl to his right, so a mirror-image squared set will have everyone sashayed from normal. Boys are still boys. On a Star Thru, the girl still goes under. However, boys use their left hand and girls their right hand.

Some think of this as the same kind of switch one must take when driving in England. Others are helped by thinking that they dance so as to make the dancing look "right" in a mirror. However you think about it, it takes some practice and it is a lot harder than Arky.

If you give this a try, be sure to walk some calls first. I recommend Allemande Left, Right And Left Grand, Promenade Home, Star Thru, Double Pass Thru, Track 2, Swing Thru, Wheel And Deal (one-faced line) and then some that don't matter like Boys Run, Ferris Wheel.

I find it is useful and important to try hard to get every little bit correct. Be sure to make all Pass Thrus left shoulder. The same goes for all Partner Trades (including the ends of a Trade By). Tapping your left shoulder, using eye contact, and making slightly wide adjustments can help. Also, be careful that all handholds are done properly. Be sure to dance the singing call. Practice a Swing first. Good luck.

Arky Mirror Image square

While it might seem like fun to combine both of these ideas, I haven't gotten a lot of fun out of it. Instead it just seems hard and annoying with few rewards.

The square starts out looking "normal", but in reality, every boy is dancing as a girl, and all rights are interchanged with lefts. People watching may not realize that you are doing something different, and will be hard pressed to exactly describe what you are doing.

Nose dancing

There are several ways to do this. My favorite is to start with a normal square set, have everyone face their partner, and place their inside hands on their hips so that the man's left and woman's right elbows point into the square. The remaining arms dangle straight down.

The elbows form your nose. For the man, your right "arm" comes out of your stomach and your left "arm" comes out of your back. For the women, it is reversed. Of course the arms don't really exist so all dancing will be without hands. Now, knowing where your nose is, and passing the correct "shoulders", try the following:

Heads Forward And Back
Heads Dosado
Heads Right And Left Thru
Heads Square Thru 2
Dosado to a wave
Swing Thru
Boys Run
Couples Circulate
Wheel And Deal
Pass To The Center
Centers Star Thru

See, you can dance that way. Now, go try it in real time to a real caller. While nose dancing is possible, it isn't great dancing because you are moving sideways most of the time. It takes a lot of concentration (usually your head is turned 90 degrees to match your "nose"), and a lot of energy. There is not a lot of opportunity for mistakes and recovery.

While dancing it, my mind always knows what the formation looks like and how the real dancers relate to that formation. If I relax my concentration and look at the square as if each dancer's body represent their facing direction (e.g. turn "nose" right-hand waves into normal double pass thru), I am immediately lost. It is a funny feeling.

You could also try having one dancer dance "nose" in a normal square.

Cutting in and out of a square

8 dancers are in the square, dancing normally, and one or more dancers are on the outside. At the correct time, one of the outside dancers slips into the square, causing an inside dancer to be bumped out. There are many ways to accomplish this, depending on the choreography and your skill level.

Before cutting anyone out you should make sure that they, and the square, are willing to participate. You should know if you are just cutting one person out, or if anyone is fair game. You should know if it is acceptable to do cut outs across gender lines. Once you are in the square you *must* know if you are a boy or a girl, and it would be useful if you know if you are a Head or a Side and where your home is.

If you are on the inside and sense that someone is cutting you out, wait until it happens. Don't jump out of the square because you think you have just been cut out. If it happens, you will know.

Make sure the square is dancing well enough to allow for cutouts. A cutout can disrupt the square and cause a weak square to break down. Then, you will be in the square and know that you caused it, and have to square up and dance with them.

Don't do cutouts when the caller is using your square as his sight square (unless he can accommodate it (e.g. John Sybalsky)).

Be aware that not everyone has the same skills at cutouts. You may cut someone out who can't get back in. Then you are inside, stuck dancing when you really want to do cutouts and they are outside, standing, when they really want to be dancing.

Initially, trying to cut someone out of a square seems harder than jumping onto a moving amusement park ride. If it would just stop for a minute and let you think, you could do it, but it is in constant motion. Knowing how certain calls work and where specific dancers will end is the key to doing cutouts well. For example, Square Thru 4 is just a 1/4 Out. On a Heads Square Thru 4 you could easily step into the ending position of the dancer you want to cut out while they are dancing the Square Thru 4. Others calls like Circulate and Acey Deucey have easily predictable dance actions and allow you to step into an ending position (usually the trailing end) before the actual dancer gets there. Some callers have combinations of calls which they often use (like

Swing Thru, Boys Run). Certain of these can allow you to know where your cutout dancer will end before they actually get there.

A way to get started with cutouts is to get 3 head men, two dancing and one on the outside and agree that you will do cutouts among yourselves. You know you will always be a head man, and one dancing head man will always be near the out head man.

As you gain skill in cutouts, more points go to really smooth or really clever transitions.

Have 1 or more dancers dance Gemini

If I am an extra dancer, I will sometimes join a square in motion by putting my arm around the waist of an existing dancer and having the two of us dance as a single dancer. This is the same as the As Couples concept on the Advanced list.

The Gemini couple takes up a little more space (it is wider than your average dancer), and can be misleading to the other dancers. However, if the Gemini couple dances well, and with the right square, it can work and be fun.

You can have more than one Gemini couple in the square, and could even put together a whole square and dance Gemini. The more Gemini couples you add, the harder it is to keep up with the caller who is timing his calls off the other squares. Of course a caller could have the entire floor square up Gemini and alter his timing to match the whole floor.

You can do the same thing with two dancers one behind the other (i.e. In Tandem), but it isn't as much fun. Sometimes I will join a square for a few calls by following real close behind a dancer who may not even know I am there. This is especially fun on Square Thru and Swing Thru, but doesn't work well for other calls.

One time I started dancing behind another dancer and soon another dancer joined on behind me and another and another. This had the effect that the original dancer had a "tail" of 4 other dancers. It took a while for the tail to clear in calls like Square Thru. We had a caller who would alter his timing for us and it all worked out ok.

Have 1 or more dancers dance Twosome

Twosome is a concept on the C3 list. It is similar to As Couples or Tandem, but one dancer in the pair is always to the north of the other dancer. As they move around the floor, their relationship will change from couples to tandem, but they will have a consistent facing direction and one dancer will always be north of the other.

Since Twosome is harder than As Couples or Tandem dancing, replacing one dancer in a normal square with a pair of dancers who dance twosome is hard. As long as the square knows what is going on, the difficulty is mainly for the twosome pair.

16 dancers could square up, all as twosome pairs and try to dance. Unfortunately the caller would have to alter his timing so this would only work if everyone danced this way, or if there were only one square at the dance. It would be good twosome practice.

Trade dancers between squares

Certain calls, like Grand Swing Thru, provide a great opportunity to trade two dancers between squares. Depending on the spacing of the squares, as long as the two dancers know they want to trade (perhaps by eye contact), even calls like Trade By (have the end boys walk straight ahead accomplishing a Reverse Swap Around between the squares) and Circulate (have the lead ends walk straight ahead) can be used to accomplish trades between squares.

Trading with your diagonal opposite in the other square is good (e.g. Man #1 in one square trades with man #3 in the adjacent square). Trading with someone else can be a problem, especially if you want to trade back. Often you won't be near the person ever again.

On a circulate (wave or column) the outside dancers can 1/2 circulate, trade, and continue their circulate in the new square. This is slick, but can be disorienting.

Having traded over, what next? Probably you will enjoy everyone wondering where you came from (especially your new partner) and wondering where the other dancer went. Next you will want to trade back. Or, go exploring and trade to yet another square. Remember that you must make sure the squares are strong enough and that you aren't upsetting anyone (including the caller).

In order to prevent trading from degenerating into meaningless mayhem, the goal should be to get back to home by the end of the patten tip, or perhaps to exchange all the dancer between two squares (especially if each square is dressed alike).

You must make sure that the dancer you are trading with knows that something is going to happen. It is very disorienting to suddenly be traded to a new square. Your mental picture of the square and where you are in it is now completely wrong.

Trade dancers within your square

This relatively new idea has a pair of dancers (often you and your partner) changing places with each other, signaled by one dancer in the pair establishing eye contact with the other and snapping their fingers. This finger snap indicates that they each have the other's part and usually takes the place of a Pass Thru or Pull By. After snapping your fingers, each dancer in the pair does a U Turn Back to accomplish the Pass Thru, Pull By, or Partner Trade action.

If the dancers in the square are in the habit of observing their diagonal opposite you should warn them that it will change. If you are playing the game with your partner, you must remember to change gender each time. All this while remembering to dance. It can get confusing on a Square Thru 4 when you "snap" your partner in the second hand (remember that was a left pull by so use the right hand next, and change genders) and then she "snaps" you on the 4th hand.

Some more simple examples: If you are going in for a scoot back, do a pass thru instead. Couples Circulate can become Crossover Circulate. Instead of a hinge, do a cast off 3/4, or go backward 1/4!

For an arm-turn trade, you can just stand still. If you do this in the middle of a swing thru or other call, this may confuse people who are waiting for you to trade. To avoid this, it's fun to turn backward 90 degrees and then forward 90. This maintains the timing and flow, and the other 6 people in your square may not even realize that you have traded.

Of course, multiple people can "snap" each other. Perhaps then the game is to keep dancing while remembering what part you have. Or the game could be to try to have everyone snap their way back to their original part before the singing call.

Hexagon dancing

This is my latest fascination. Hexagon squares (6 couples arranged in a hexagon) have been around since 1968, but have only received use from a handful of callers. I observed that all calls are possible, and that a hexagon square can dance with the same timing as a normal square.

A explanation of how this works can be found [here](#).

Bigon dancing

Hexagon dancing adds two couples to the existing 4. Bigon dancing takes two couples away from the existing 4. It is harder than Hexagon dancing. At first I thought it was too hard to think of and that it couldn't be danced in real time. All motion around the center of the set happens at two times the normal speed (instead of 2/3 normal speed in hexagons). However, several folks at Tech Squares have been successful in doing Bigon dancing. And, it only takes 4 of you.

My hexagon paper and Justin's animations give some hints as to how to think about this type of dancing.

Czech Line Dancing

This was invented by [Milan Vancura](#) who showed it to us at [iPAC 2005](#). He describes it as follows...

This game is not in a square. Make a line facing caller at the bottom of the hall, doesn't matter about gender or amount of people. Everyone imagines his own phantom square in which he/she acts as a man #3 (the head man who is watching caller in a normal square). As the tip starts the whole line is doing the same action, it looks like dancing N-some (see "dancing Twosome" for the explanation). You can also make a column instead of line and try to act as a girl #4 (for example). It depends on agreement of people in a line.

It is a good exercise to dance with Phantoms and also an interesting feeling to see the line working "as one man". You can also play it when you have 5 people who can't establish the square.

Windmilling

Not exactly a square game, but useful when you have too many dancers for a square and still want to keep most dancing. Jimmy Johnson wrote to me and said:

One other one we use when we have one couple extra, but don't want to have them sit out is what we call 'Windmilling'.

The extra couple starts standing behind one of the head couples, but is not involved in the dance. Each time the square is resolved and the dancers promenade home, the extra couple steps into the place of the couple they were behind. The displaced couple moves one spot counterclockwise to stand behind that couple and wait their turn to return to the square. This way, everyone rotates in and out, and dancers change from heads to sides as they go.

Conclusion

Hopefully I have given you some ideas on how to spice up your dancing. If you try some of these and they work for you, let me know. If you know of other Square Games that I haven't described, please tell me about them.

Astute callers may be able to use some of these Square Games as gimmicks that provide variety and fun without teaching more calls or calling harder. It all depends on how you present them and how hard you make them. For most dancers, a little goes a long way.

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