

# STYLING

Walter Brough

walter@heardmontsquares.com

## *"The ART OF SQUARE DANCING/TEACHING FROM A NEW CALLER'S PERSPECTIVE"*

### INTRODUCTION

There are as many techniques of teaching as there are Callers, but are all Callers good teachers? If they are, *why* are they, and conversely, if they are not, *why not*? However, for the purpose of this discussion let's agree that we can all improve. How's that for being politically correct? Additionally, I will use my experiences in dancing and that of becoming a Caller/Teacher as the example for this presentation.

The most daunting task a new caller experiences comes when asked to teach a class of new dancers/beginners. Many times new callers fall back on how they were taught or rely heavily on angels to do much of the teaching.

Bob Osgood, in his Caller Teacher Manual, stated, "*UPON THE SHOULDERS of the CALLER/TEACHER REST the FUTURE of the SQUARE DANCE ACTIVITY*" I believe that this is a forgotten axiom. Additionally, all Callers should realize that the reputation of the Caller is tied, in part, to how well his students dance. We spend so much time talking about why we are losing dancers or why recruitment is down, or classes are too long, or the list of calls is too long, and we have forgotten that when new dancers join the Square Dancing community for lessons they expect to learn to dance and want to emulate those who taught them. How many new dancers quit following lessons because they realize they still cannot dance? Or because the more experienced dancers don't want to dance with them, so they dance together and get discouraged because the square stands more than it dances. We have an important responsibility to nurture these dancers who identify with us as their Caller/Teacher.

On returning to Square Dancing when the empty nest syndrome hit, Judy and I, and several of the new dancers in our graduating class, experienced much of the above. Following our graduation and a styling wake-up call (another embarrassing story), I ventured into becoming a Caller. I have made it my mission and goal to teach Callerlab material and the ART of Square Dancing which includes styling, counter dancing, smoothness, and timing, along with the calls. Additionally, I have studied old manuals which have been of great value to understand and teach the ART of Square Dancing. I have taught classes every year since I became a Caller and teach workshops every week.

We all know that teaching square dancing is made up of the following three components: definitions, timing, and styling. This session is about "*How I effectively teach styling to dancers and why it is important*". When I inquired about this session I had in mind to come and learn, not be a presenter. Somehow, the low profile I had in mind slipped out the door. So here I go.

I began by stating "There are as many techniques of teaching as there are Callers, but are all Callers good teachers?"

I want to begin first by defining my interpretation of the definition of styling and why it is important. Styling is the universal language to communicate our dance form, which allows all

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people, worldwide, to dance together and dance safely with people of all ages. **Styling is the Dance part of Square Dancing; otherwise, it is not Dancing**

In my experience there are three factors which are contributing to a decline in good styling.

1. **The Caller:** A new dancer can only develop styling techniques if the Caller is teaching correct CALLERLAB styling. Additionally, a Caller can only teach what he or she can execute correctly. Teaching correct styling takes practice to learn and to teach, unlike teaching the definitions or timing of each call.
2. **The Caller – Angel Synergy:** It is a given that smaller classes lend to better interactive teaching, and the larger classes do not allow for Caller interaction or observation of the styling techniques of each dancer. The practice of using Angels became the Caller's substitute teacher. However, unless the Angels are good at styling, the student will be no better than the Angel.
3. **The Caller - Club Synergy:** Callers are placed under enormous pressure by club management to get the new dancer graduated and the funds moving to the club treasury. Changes must be made to keep new dancers in the fold. Can the Callers be a catalyst for change?

Let's take each of the above and dissect it. Let me share with you what I have done to insure that Styling is given the importance in my teaching that it requires and that the new dancers deserve.

### **The Caller:**

Experience taught me that to teach, I had to practice what I preach – I had to dance what I taught. I did not ever again want to be confronted by a dancer for poor styling habits, but more importantly, I did not want my students to ever be embarrassed because of my poor styling teaching skills or lack of current styling knowledge.

As a new caller I have attended several Caller schools and am very grateful for the opportunity. However, I soon realized that becoming a Caller/Teacher are two parallel paths with common links, but different skill sets, and both need to be learned in the same time frame. I set out to find information that would help me understand what is required to become a good teacher as well as a good caller.

1. Each Caller school I attended had several pages addressing teaching and included the Callerlab Mainstream Definitions. However, a very important paragraph appears in the Scope section of the document and reads, "*These definitions are neither a new dancer manual nor a new caller manual ...*" I soon found that teaching from this document required me to develop my skill sets as a dancer, and to develop a personal teaching manual. This was a daunting task until I found *The Caller Teacher Manual by Bob Osgood*. I believe that Callerlab should resurrect and update this manual as a teaching manual for new Callers. I have used this manual and have been developing a personal computer version for my own use and have added the styling key points to remind me to teach them to new dancers.
2. I soon learned that teaching required more than teaching the definitions, especially where styling was concerned. For example:
3. **Swing:** Pages 13 and 14 of the "Basic and Mainstream Definitions Revised October 7, 2011" do an extensive outline on the styling for the swing. I wonder how many Callers have read and analyzed this methodology and then actually danced to this procedure. I believe

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that we do this call so much by rote that teaching the specific styling of the swing is not done, or left up to Angels who have never read this document. Notice when you dance with a newly graduated dancer and many who believe themselves good dancers, and see if they understand how to do the swing correctly, much less how to get into the swing, or how to get out of the swing, and put their partner in the correct position for the next call.

So much for the dialogue - what am I talking about? Just this: For example the swing: Before I began learning how to teach the swing I did not understand that there are two types of swing approaches: what I call a static swing and a moving swing; and it seems to me that we combine them into one example swing and expect the new dancers to recognize the difference; even though they seem minor, in my opinion they are not. The static swing occurs most often at the end of a singing call, when the dancers are home and the caller calls "Swing" before the Tag. The other occurs any time the dancers are moving and meet opposite their home position. This is where the Caller, or Angel who has been taught correctly, should demonstrate these two variations of the swing.

Let's look at my interpretation of differences between the static and the moving swing.

- a. **The static swing:** we demonstrate all the position features and then should reinforce that they do not move from their home position and a buzz or walking step is ok (I prefer the buzz because I use this as a pivot point and it keeps me from interfering with the other dancers in the square). Also, if I see a dancer having trouble I move in and show the woman how it feels when it is done correctly so she can get her steps down and I can, by example, show her partner his part. I then have a woman Angel to demonstrate the woman's part and help him understand his effect on execution of the call. I only use Angels to help who have achieved Angel status in my club and are awarded an Angel badge - more about this later.
  - b. **The moving swing:** most often comes during a right and left grand. In this instance two things must happen simultaneously that are not in the static swing: They must, on meeting, both step to the left in a turning motion while embracing the dance position, and not use a buzz step because it stops the dance movement and disrupts the timing. It is important to teach continuous movement by using the walking step in the direction of the moving circle. The swing can then end in a twirl or promenade position as the dancers move to their respective home positions.
4. There are many other calls that require special attention for example:
- a. **Promenade hand holds:** How many times in a circle left or to promenade do you have to reverse the hands on the women to palms down and not use a death grip. Heaven forbid the woman that gets a man with a bone crusher for a grip. This is true of new and more experienced dancers who have not been taught proper styling.
  - b. **Dosado:** Teach the new dancer the back to back styling and they go to their first dance and are assaulted with a swing dosado.
  - c. **Ocean Wave, Swing Thru, Pass the Ocean, Spin Chain Thru:** The struggle to maintain the timing of calls while moving between hands up and forearm grips is a great timing disrupter. As long as Callers and Angels continue to ignore the styling recommendation dancing becomes a contest and not fun.
  - d. **Cast off 3/4:** Linked elbows are dangerous movements in as much as strong dancers do not seem to know how much pressure they are exerting on the adjacent dancer (many times women). This is still being taught in our area (mostly by Angels). I teach my

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dancers to keep their elbows in tight against their bodies when they hear the call "Put Centers In" and hold their hand out for a hand hold and not accept a linked elbow.

- e. **Styling Regional Differences:** I believe that as a Caller, licensed by Callerlab, that I have a responsibility to teach Callerlab material and teach it effectively. Recognizing regional differences may be an acceptable political position for Callerlab to take; however, it puts the Callers teaching Callerlab material in a difficult position with his peers when trying to convince them to teach the standard because it gives them an out. Also, it places us at cross purposes with dancers taught by other Callers teaching non-standard styling. While I accept that regional styling exists, it is important that the standards stand alone and regional changes are discussed by the committees and they come to a position to include or not include the non-standard for the square dancing community as a whole. My position is that Callerlab standard styling allows us to dance effectively world wide and dance safely.

**The Caller/Angels Synergy:** I have adopted the practice that I use only experienced dancers that have learned, and adopted and dance the Callerlab styling standards. Additionally, they understand my expectations for the new dancer and the following:

1. They know and believe that my goal is to teach the new dancer current Callerlab material, how to have fun while learning, and translate that into a life-time Square Dancing activity. They are committed to me and my dedication to Callerlab material.
2. There is only one teacher, and they insure that during the lesson that the focus on what is being taught by the Caller, and then emulated by the Angels.
3. They understand that I am an interactive teacher and by that I am on the floor teaching and interacting with the dancers, especially when someone is having difficulty. We take time at breaks to work individually with them or even after class.
4. When dancing, the Angel's responsibility is to help the dancer into position and not become the dancer's crutch and also keep the new dancer attentive to the teaching.
5. The Caller and Angels work together to be enthusiastic in ways that make the learning experience fun and keep it in the proper perspective as a fun learning experience.
6. Our first challenge is to teach them to laugh, laugh, and laugh some more, mostly at themselves, but occasionally, even at someone else's expense. It is always done good-naturedly, and these times, built upon over the weeks, will begin to help put glue in the cohesiveness of the group.
7. Judy and I attended a dance Deborah Carol Jones was calling and she taught and had fun with the lost square. Debora called it "Flaming Chicken on the Barbie" When my new dancers started dancing to patter routines I taught this to them, and they had fun with it all through the lessons. No one had time to think about who broke the square down; they laugh and enjoy learning and keep on dancing. Make learning a fun experience.
8. Confidence building in the new dancers is a wonderful thing to see and be part of as a Caller and Angel. Repetition, repetition and more repetition builds confidence.
9. The Caller has to be transparent and we share life stories with the new students. Some about ourselves, others, and sometimes the Angels dancing with them. All of us started where they are now and all have succeeded beyond their expectations and some who have even soared!

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10. We, Caller and Angel, must have the patience of a saint and can never lose our cool with the dancers or show disappointment. We will have challenges, but challenges must be handled with finesse and directness. Never leave the new dancer wondering exactly what you mean. We show them what is expected and when there is any confusion I demonstrate it with them until the one or 20 understand.
11. We stress the friendship factor, a sense of belonging to something where they will have more fun than they ever thought possible, and laugh so much that they will feel better than they have in a long time. It isn't long until they begin to experience all of that and want more.
12. We are very careful with our new dancers upon completing the mainstream program and don't let them venture beyond their capability and get discouraged. While not wanting to hold them back, we encourage them with enthusiasm and genuine desire to see these folks enjoy square dancing. It should matter little if they want to, for a time, stick to familiar surroundings or venture out to other clubs and special dances or even around the world if it is at all possible.
13. Additionally, I host a workshop each week following the completion of the lesson cycle to build into dancers, through repetition, the Callerlab styling and counter dancing that we have introduced; yes - introduced, they know and we know they have not arrived. Truly have any of us?
14. I have never had a new dancer tell me that the lessons were too long they will come as long as I am willing to teach. New dancers having fun as students and dancers is the best recruiting tool we have.
15. I am licensed by Callerlab and teach Callerlab material. I believe that there are hundreds of Callers working at this convention to make square dancing flourish. I respect their judgment and appreciate the hard work they do and show my appreciation by teaching what they produce. I am an advocate of all Callers licensed by Callerlab teaching the techniques of styling in accordance with the Callerlab recommendations, irrespective of their geographical location.

### **The Caller - Club Synergy:**

Clubs need Callers to teach and Callers need clubs. However, the Caller is the key in teaching, and his leadership is vital to help new and experienced dancers learn and stay current. It matters little if we are Callerlab or other Callers' Associations; our goal should be good styling standards which produce good dancers who can dance with anyone successfully. Teaching new dancers current styling practices is the easier task. However, how to get the experienced, who may be rough dancers or using poor styling techniques, on board is the greater challenge.

Nothing works like praise. Select several good dancers, preferably a square, have a meeting, or social at home, or go to dinner with them, but find a non-threatening atmosphere and ask them to be your team of Angels. Let them know that you want to work with them to develop and refine their skills so that they will be a positive influence on the new dancers. Get this group to take ownership of the goal with you for the new dancers and the club. Introduce them to the styling concepts in the Callerlab Basic and Mainstream Definitions and help them understand the importance of the styling concepts.

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This is what has worked for me, and I believe it will work for you. Dancers will dance smoother, use counter dancing, techniques will improve, and they will be noticed, and the desire to dance well will become infectious in the clubs where you call.

*Remember - the dancers you teach are your trademark.*

### **Conclusion:**

Why is styling important?

Styling allows all dancers the uniform confidence that the timing of all the dancers in the square will be the same and that the dancers will be in the correct position to effectively execute the next call.

What you teach a new dancer they will do for a lifetime of Square dancing. Styling taught from the beginning is a secret ingredient that unlocks smoothness, timing, counter dancing, safety, and is the cure for rough dancers.

Styling is the universal language to communicate our dance form, which allows all people, worldwide, to dance together and dance safely with all people of all ages.

***Styling is the Dance part of Square Dancing otherwise it not Dancing***