

Our Side of the Mic

An article sponsored by the Denver Area Callers & Cuers Association

Bob Riggs ... Winter 2022-2023

Happy Holidays and have a great New Year!

Lately, I have been having conversations about our dance programs, our club dances, and how the activity is changing. Our dance community is divided about how we can satisfy our current dancers and preserve the dance activity going forward.

The following are my opinions and comments on what we face as callers, and then some perspective on the thoughts of dancers. Our diverse community includes many callers who will disagree with me on some or all my points. I would welcome their opinion to be published under this headline in a future DAS&RDC Bulletin.

From a caller's perspective, I'm confused about what the dance community wants. Most dancers have expressed the desire for more club members who can dance what the current dancers have danced for many years, and they want them now!

I believe all callers struggle to teach students the skills needed to dance the target program with ease in the time allowed by club sponsored classes. For many of us, we don't remember how long it took to gain proficiency with the program we now enjoy. CALLERLAB recommends not less than 24 hours to teach 50 calls in the Social Square Dance (SSD) program and not less than 58 hours to teach the 68 calls in the Basic & Mainstream programs.

Many dancers with whom I speak want to climb the "square dance escalator" from Basic, to Mainstream, to Plus and beyond. They want to dance every tip at a dance, they don't want to sit out the star tips, i.e., Plus tips. They want to dance with those friends that are urging them to take Plus lessons. Also, many don't appear to care how well they dance each call as long as they can say they can dance Mainstream and thus are ready to take lessons and dance Plus.

My 48 years of dancing and 47 years of calling makes me desire to dance with and call for dancers who can smoothly move through the calls of any dance to good music with their friends. My friends and I don't really care how many calls are on the list or if the choreography is complicated or tricky. My definition of a good dancer is one who, at the completion of each call, is at the right place, at the right time, with the correct hand available, and gets there to the beat of the music. That implies we execute each call with the appropriate timing, body movement, and counter dancing (smooth interaction with other dancers involved in the call).

Let me explain a little about a call as defined and refined since the 1970s by CALLERLAB. Each call is documented with the starting formations, command examples, dance action, ending formation, timing, and styling. Callers who are considered good, use this information to blend the calls of a given program into flowing and entertaining choreography. For most formations (boxes, waves, lines, etc.) there are 6 arrangements of dancers (e.g., boy/girl, girl/boy, boy/boy, girl/girl, etc.). Many dances in our area are promoted as Mainstream dances where the caller can only use a

subset of these formations and arrangements to call to the capabilities of those attending. This means that much of the available variety has been absent from our dancing, and our dancers have lost the ability to experience the variety available when executing each call as delivered. Social Square Dancing (SSD), when called as the program is designed, increases the variety by utilizing more of the formations and arrangements for a smaller vocabulary of calls. The SSD philosophy is that if we can learn fewer calls, dance with more variety, and we can begin to enjoy dancing after a shorter learning time. And that we can continue to enjoy the resulting dance experience because of the variety available to our creative callers.

As most of you know, I am an advocate of using the SSD program for the primary destination of our recreational square dance activity. I firmly believe that if we are to rebuild our square dance activity, we must continuously add new dancers to the community and retain those currently involved. When square dancing was popular many years ago, we were teaching younger people mostly in their 40's-50's, in as little as 4 sessions. We had a shorter list of calls, i.e., less than 50 basics, and our clients were these eager young adults who learned rapidly and enjoyed the social experience with their peers. Callers utilized a wide variety of the available formations and arrangements to provide entertainment and challenge to the dancing experience. Over the ensuing decades, dancers & callers added to the vocabulary (more calls) and backed off on the use of the variety available within the calls. It has become accepted over the ensuing decades that a "better" dancer is one who knows more calls, not necessarily dance them properly.

For the future of our activity, we must cooperate to rebuild the base. The most efficient way to accomplish the rebuilding effort would occur if all mainstream clubs adopted the SSD program as their destination and actively recruited new dancers that were 5-10 years younger than their current members. A less efficient approach would involve clubs and callers that want to rebuild the activity to collaborate using SSD for both classes and dances (creating new clubs and dance events that focus on the SSD program), while the existing mainstream clubs that want mainstream as their destination would continue as they always have. Callers can continue to call the limited Mainstream variety as in the past. We could hope they are successful but suspect that over time these clubs will age out and disappear from the community.

Further, over time we do anticipate that there will be dancers who want more than the SSD destination provides. I anticipate that I and other like-minded callers will offer "transition to Plus" classes that include all the mainstream calls not in SSD and the Plus calls.

Finally, as a dancer I want to enjoy a dance experience with my friends. Long time dancers seem to have found their destination, i.e., the program they most enjoy with the friends they have made over the years. Those who have joined the activity in the last couple of years seem to have the idea that if they can get through the calls some/most of the time, then they must be pretty good dancers, even if their dancing is rough and faltering. With this assumption they then are easily encouraged to be interested in the next dance program, i.e., Plus. They have now joined the square dance escalator. The push to Plus has caused some fracturing of the activity because of the prevailing

opinion that they are not a good dancer if they don't dance Plus. Further, we see some dropping out because they don't enjoy it, they don't have the time to become proficient and/or don't believe they can live up to the expectations of their peers. This push for more commitment and complexity could easily further derail our dance activity and result in many more dancers finding other competing activities to enjoy.

These comments are mine. Allynn and I enjoy calling square dances of any program and cueing rounds for our dance community. I will call the advertised program for any dance through Advanced. We will provide rounds as appropriate to the advertised dance. My thoughts in this article are related to those who have asked what will happen to our activity, with so many dropping out. As a long time caller/cuer, we want to see the activity thrive long after we leave it.

IMHO ... Bob Riggs