

56th National Square Dance Convention
Charlotte, North Carolina June 29, 2007
Attracting Younger Newer Dancers Panel
By: Justin Russell

First off, I appreciate everyone coming to this panel, because it means you truly care about this activity and want to see it continue to the next generation. Young dancers are the future of this activity so recruiting and maintaining these dancers are crucial. When you look at CALLERLAB; many of the Board of Governors and members of the Executive Committee started as youth dancers. The information I use today comes from my own opinion, other youth dancers from across the country, and from surveys done by young callers.

Questions Often Asked

- 1) How did you get into square dancing? An older couple from my church asked my family to come to lessons and for two years we said “no thank-you.” We finally decided we would go once so they would quit asking, and we enjoyed it and stayed. It has been 6 years now.
- 2) Why are you still square dancing/calling? I have been calling for 5 years and have called in 13 states. I have also been to the last 4 National Conventions. I enjoy calling and meeting new people. Dancers have been extremely kind and supportive over the past 5 years.
- 3) What do your friends think of square dancing? All my friends know that I square dance and when I first tell new people I get the usual jokes, but my friends are really supportive.
- 4) IS your family involved? My Mom, Dad, Grandma, and Brother all took the class at the same time. My brother stopped when he entered college but the rest of us dance usually once a week.
- 5) Are you friends involved? A square of my friends were involved but between school, work, and other activities I am the only one still dancing. Now that I divide my time between Denver and Memphis, I have become involved with the Colorado Rocky Mountain Dancers, a group of young dancers.
- 6) How have you balanced outside life and square dancing as a youth dancer? I go through phases of being really involved and then taking a step back. The summer is a big time for me since I am out of school and can travel more.
- 7) If you had to bring a friend into square dancing how would you do it? I don't think there is an easy way to attract new dancers because of the stereotypes that come with the name. Usually it takes a couple times and after awhile my friends come around. In a survey one girl answered, “I started square dancing to have the right to make fun of it.”
- 8) How would you describe your experiences with "adults" in dancing? How had this impacted you and maybe your friends in continuing to dance? Sadly, every youth has a story of being unwelcome into an adult group. Overall though I must say that square dancers are the nicest people and I am still in the activity because of friendships I have made.

Recruiting

The key to having a successful club is recruiting. In the past we have only used friendship as a way to attracting dancers. Now if you are like me, everyone you know either square dances or has told you a hundred times no! In a survey on the Yahoo! youth_squares list everyone said they started because of parents, grandparents, or friends. There has been other ways to recruit new dancers that were pretty successful. In CA, over 12,000 flyers were distributed through the schools. In NC, radio advertisement has been used to reach people who know nothing about the activity. I believe a youth club in most areas isn't a realistic goal. "Old" callers can not recruit and attract youth dancers, but I believe there are other ways to accomplish that goal. Family clubs are a good way to attract not only youth dancers but the parents as well. The teenagers who stick with it usually have other family members in the activity. (If it wasn't for my parents I probably wouldn't still be in the activity.)

Square Dancing in Schools: Helpful or Harmful?

When I was in fifth grade we had a six-weeks devoted to dances. I remember learning the electric slide and trying to square dance. It was a horrible experience because no one knew what they were doing. The caller was an old record and there was no excitement in his voice. The PE teachers did not care about the activity so it gave square dancing a bad image. Even today when I try to invite non-dancers I hear the same story, "I tried that in elementary school and it wasn't my thing." On the other hand, there as been some successful stories about callers going into the schools and teaching square dances to students. Clark Baker, an amazing caller from MA, goes and teaches seventh graders in gym class using contemporary music. Even if he doesn't get a mainstream dancer from that group, he at least showed the students a positive image of square dancing.

Music

Music has become a debate within the activity over whether to stay "traditional" or to become more contemporary and I say the answer is YES! While I am not a big fan of "Turkey in the Straw" some dancers/callers really like it. I like to use modern music but an entire night of techno is not enjoyable either. As callers we should learn to use a variety of music. I was trying to avoid corny phrases but: Be the Best you can be! If you are more comfortable performing traditional songs then DO IT! Young dancers will respond more to a caller who is in his element then one who is frontin'. (Frontin' is slang for trying to be something you aren't.)

In a survey taken at the 2003 National Square Dance Convention in OK City, 50 teenagers were asked what there favorite singing calls were. You may be surprised to see that some of these songs are "classics."

- 1.) Pink Cadillac
- 2.) Fisherman's Luck
- 3.) Light the Candles
- 4.) Neutron Dance
- 5.) Who's Your Daddy

- 6.) Devil Went Down to GA
- 7.) Butterfly Kisses
- 8.) Will It Go Around in Circles?
- 9.) Good Night Sweetheart
- 10.) Friends in Low Places
- 11.) Sold
- 12.) Sweet Country Music
- 13.) Old Time Rock and Roll
- 14.) American Pie
- 15.) Amarillo By Morning

In another poll taken from Yahoo! youth_squares the following were top choices:

- 1.) Pink Cadillac
- 2.) Sweet Home Alabama
- 3.) Want to Talk about Me
- 4.) Sold
- 5.) Living Next Door to Alice

As you can see, whether traditional or contemporary, young dancers want something with a lot of energy. I have found that the youth/young dancers open enough to try square dancing will also be open-minded about music.

Square Dance Attire

This has been an issue that I get asked about the most. What I think about the dress code? My answer is, "I didn't like it in high school and I don't like it on the dance floor." Now, I am not against square dance clothes! As a caller, I love looking out and seeing a floor of dancers wearing matching colors with their partners. I just don't believe it should be required. Square Dancing is a hobby and I want to be able to go from school to a dance without having to change into a "costume". While many dancers enjoy it, I do not believe it should be required because in doing so we are eliminating future dancers from the start.

And I never think it is appropriate to ask a dancer to leave the floor just because they are not wearing proper square dance attire. That is ridiculous and the people who do it are killing the activity.

Why Do We Dance?

This seems like a simple question...we dance to have fun! Then the next question is: what is fun for you? My idea of a perfect square dance is: casual clothes, DBD Plus, sink or float! Now, I know that is only my idea of a great dance. Others want a relaxed atmosphere, time to socialize, good music, a lot of food. So, sit down with club members, ask what kind of club they want to be? There is a middle ground that will be something everyone will enjoy!

I want to say thank-you to Kristy Jacobs and Sarah Reigelhaupt-Herzig for letting me use there surveys in my presentation.