

**News From
Multi-Cycle Success Story
Hillsboro, NH
(May 5, 2003)**

There is some good news for square dance clubs that want to grow. A solid solution is available to help any club willing to be smart and progressive. But the club must have people who are willing to make some fundamental changes in programming and attitudes. The Multi Cycle system offers two or more starts for new dancers each year. Clubs using this system reach more people more often. New dancers are tireless, enthusiastic recruiters and they tap into new networks of friends and associates not just once, but two or more times per year.

I want to tell about a success story using the Multi Cycle system with the addition of some enhancements. I must warn that this is not a quick fix. A solid effort is required initially. Changes in business procedures and a progressive attitude are a must. Club and caller must both give up the old way of thinking and be prepared for a new and interesting experience. It took two or three years for the plan to reach "critical mass" and become self-feeding in my club.

Recruitment is always necessary but a group that recruits more than once a year has a distinct advantage. People who cannot start in September or who must drop out in mid-season can now join or come back in January or May or whenever the club decides to make new starts. Thus we can bring them into square dancing or get them started again before the enthusiasm fades and they find another activity.

Four years ago, I presented the Multi Cycle plan to three clubs that I was working for. Two of them hired another caller. One, the Riverside Squares of Danvers, Massachusetts, had bright, forward thinking people who gave me a raise and decided to put the plan to use. Riverside was then a healthy club with successful dances and road trips but was beginning to feel the pinch at class and workshop night. They saw the writing on the wall. Something had to change because the old system was not working.

(As a side note, NECCA, the New England Callers Council used its annual clinic to host Multi Cycle proponents Mike and Gail Seastrom who presented this concept to all who were interested. Only one other group, the Sage Swingers of Maine, took the bait and are now prospering.)

Strong recruitment efforts and some new advertising efforts yielded a reasonably good group even the first year. For the next few months we prepared ourselves for our first January start and our new evening schedule. The first major change was to start calling new recruits new dancers to reduce the separation between club and class. Teaching was just a walk thru and lessons became sessions. Learning was disguised as fun. From the first night, we are all "square dancers." Badges are given out immediately and inclusion became one of our greatest allies. Additionally, new dancer sessions were held open longer to give more people chances to join us.

Hard work and a lot of fun brought us another group of new dancers for our January start. We treated that as a second season. At least half of the new group was made up of friends of the September starters. Our second season also inaugurated our new schedule:

7:00 to 8:00 PM Phase I New Dancers; 8:00 to 9:00 PM Phase II Dancers; and 9:00 to 9:45 PM Plus Dancers

Phase II dancers picked up right where we had left off the previous week and were encouraged to be there for the Phase I sessions for review and support of the newest dancers. At this point we found ourselves dancing three to five sets on Wednesdays and enthusiasm was beginning to catch on.

Our first two seasons brought about new realizations and other changes. The Wednesday club night became more relaxed and entertaining. I knew, and the club soon realized, that with only one-hour teaching segments, we could not move people through Plus in one year. This allowed me to slow down the entire process. I could teach more slowly, keep the dancing fun, and move away from the previous rush/rush approach. In a Plus club, this was a tough nut for those traditional thinkers used to doing business in the same old way. Several of them suggested that I work in a few Plus calls to get new dancers up to speed. I refused and we moved on.

The first year yielded other changes. One was the "no graduation" concept. Since we no longer referred to Basic and Mainstream, "Square Dancing" became the program. Our September and January Phase I dancers do not finish Basic during their first season. Nor do the September and January Phase II dancers finish Mainstream. Instead we have turned the whole process into a continuum, learning a little each week and dancing as much as possible.

The Multi Cycle System also offers new dancers the opportunity to repeat a program quickly if they are having problem. As the caller/teacher, I can now recommend to a dancer or a couple that they repeat a phase rather than move on. No dancers are left behind this way. We keep more dancers, I have more control over dancing quality and the result is stronger, happier dancers. Going on to Plus becomes a caller decision not a dancer decision unless they want to go elsewhere. Troubled dancers can relax knowing that they will not fall behind or out and that they can choose a comfort level based on ability or need. Several times I have used this discretion and I find that it works.

We have learned that many of our newest dancers have only one night per week to dance. Wednesday is their night to dance and they rarely dance on weekends even when we mention and encourage weekend dances. This once-a-week dancing seems to yield more family involvement. The group now includes children, teenagers, parents and grandparents. This has been absolutely wonderful and just plain fun.

In December of our second year, prior to our fourth season we held a New Years Party/Pot Luck and Dance. New dancers from September and clubbers invited friends and family to join us for an intro-to-dance night with tips for non dancers and dancers alike. Potential January Phase I dancers got an opportunity for some fun. Some joined us a few weeks later and became square dancers.

Seasons three and four (the second year) we were dancing 4 to 7 sets on Wednesday nights. The excitement was great and we were growing and happy. September of 2002 began our fifth season with more new dancers. Eighteen have stayed on for Phase II. January '03 began season six with twenty more dancers for Phase I. We have 6 to 9 sets dancing at the 7 o'clock hour. There is noise, enthusiasm and dancing and we could outgrow our hall in a couple of seasons.

In three years the Multi Cycle Program has taken hold. Riverside Squares is one of the healthiest clubs in North Eastern Massachusetts. We are achieving real continuous growth. The face of dancing is changing within the club and, despite the fact that our goal is still to bring dancers to the Plus level, two more results have emerged: 1. Some dancers do not wish move on for a variety of reasons, and 2. The Plus training has been extended and now takes two or three years.

As a caller, this has been a rewarding, emotional and hardworking experience. I have more control over the process and we are no longer rushing dancers through the programs. I'm more relaxed because I am not trying to hurry dancers along to attend a convention or festival or even to become members of a Plus club. I'm working harder but having more fun. Enthusiasm is rampant. The Multi Cycle plan is like a time machine turning back the clock to when we were all square dancers, not Plus, Advanced or Challenge dancers. We still present a familiar form of dance but I am not preparing dancers to be siphoned off into upper level programs. The bottom line is that we are slowing things down without dumbing down the dance. We are making our activity more available, more often to more people. With a forecast of growth, not decline on the horizon, I'm one happy camper with a hall full of dancers.

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