

## **SQUARE DANCE TROUBLES 1995-1998**

by Jim Mayo

*Editor note: this series of articles is presented in sequence, and in its entirety. It is an interesting read however the purpose for the consecutive documents is to look at what was and what is – with an objective eye of hopefully finding a solution rather than just turning the wheel in a circle.*

### **SQUARE DANCE TROUBLES 1995**

**The only real problem in square dancing is recruiting.** Most square dancers are satisfied with their activity the way it is. They have no need for any change in the call lists they are dancing. Further, they are not willing to make any significant change in the programs they are dancing in order to improve recruiting. Neither are most callers.

The most promising population group available to us to recruit is folks over 50 whose children have left home. We should concentrate our promotional efforts on that group but even they are not likely, in large numbers, to make the commitment required to enter even the MAINSTREAM dance activity.

The two years of twice a week dancing that is needed to make dancers COMFORTABLE at PLUS dances will never draw large numbers of people. It never has. Our most successful recruiting periods brought people to comfort in available dance programs in one year of once a week dancing.

If we are to rebuild a prosperous square dance activity we will have to find many callers who are willing to work EASY programs like the Community Dance Program (CDP) or, at most, the CALLERLAB BASIC program. They must also **offer these programs as square dance destinations**. Nearly all of the callers now working are NOT WILLING to work with these programs on a continuing basis. They want only to use them as bait to lure people toward the more "interesting" programs the callers like.

All of the proposed alternate programs or program modifications are at least as large and complicated as the CALLERLAB MAINSTREAM program. **We should STOP CHANGING and/or SWITCHING the existing programs which serve the existing dancers very well.** None of the changes will have any impact on the recruiting problem.

If we want to help the existing dance activity, callers should concentrate on helping dancers have more fun. That means different things to different people. People who want to find interesting variety without being blown away by complicated puzzles are not now being well served. Neither are those who like to move smoothly with the music. Callers who want to keep the customers we have should invest their efforts in improved performance in these areas.

### **SQUARE DANCING IS IN TROUBLE 1996 - PART 1**

Square dancing is in trouble. Many people are blaming the division of dancing into "programs" as the reason for our trouble. They are suggesting that change, or even elimination, of those programs will solve the problem and return our activity to its earlier level of success. I don't agree and I am writing to suggest a different cause and another way of dealing with the problem.

I have been a caller for 45 years and have taught callers all over the world for 35 of those years. I have also been involved in organizations dedicated to promoting and protecting square dancing for most of that time. I have conducted several surveys of dancers and former dancers aimed at understanding what dancers experience and what they want. I have also spent hundreds of hours discussing the square dance activity with callers and dancers.

I believe that the troubles in modern square dancing have nothing to do with the establishment of programs of dancing. The biggest problem we are facing is difficulty recruiting new people. Everyone must realize that new recruits know nothing about what calls are on

what lists. The real problem is that entry into modern square dancing takes too long and too much of a time commitment. Another contributor to recruiting difficulty is change in modern family life. People with children and two jobs have real trouble committing to any continuing recreation program outside the home. We can't do anything about the demands of modern life. We can (if we want to) offer a more accessible square dance program. However, to be EFFECTIVE, entry into such a program must take a training period no longer than 10 weeks. It should fit into a community adult education program. None of the current entry programs for modern square dancing - CALLERLAB's Mainstream or PLUS, ACA's "Square Dancing" or the CALLERLAB Basic list - offers that short an entry training period. Furthermore, the training must also provide comfortable access to an ONGOING program. If what I have written so far seems reasonable, consider with me why we are not making that entry program widely available. Modern square dancing is serving the needs of existing dancers quite well. Most are happy with the dance programs they have. Some think there should be changes to help the growth of square dancing, but what they are doing is serving THEIR needs quite well.

**Callers are less satisfied.** Most of them took up calling because they loved choreographic puzzles. Many of them are constantly searching for more "interesting" dance patterns. They worry that the people they call for are bored. Callers tend not to believe that their customers can be happy with "just dancing."

Neither today's dancers nor today's callers want to make square dancing more simple. Unless we do simplify square dancing, we are not going to make it easier for people to become square dancers.

The second part of this article describes an easier program that might - if callers were willing to work at it - allow us to recruit the large numbers we want. We should not expect those recruits to then move on into our existing programs. Some of them might. Most, however, should be encouraged to enjoy this easier

form of square dancing. Perhaps, then, they will recruit their friends - just as people did 30 years ago when square dancing WAS easier.

## **SQUARE DANCING IS IN TROUBLE 1996 - PART 2**

There is a program of dancing available that might move us toward improved recruiting. It is more than just a list of calls. The Community Dance Program (CDP) includes several dance forms and a different ATTITUDE toward dancing. It is based on a limited set of calls and the use of contra, couple and circle dances. The CDP also makes dancing easier by a return to walking through unfamiliar dance elements. This program emphasizes the musical and dancing parts of square dancing in equal balance with choreographic variety.

Unfortunately, few of today's dancers or callers have any interest in promoting this program. It will never bring new people in large numbers into modern square dancing as we know it. Callers who thrive on complicated puzzles are not likely to be interested in returning to less complex choreography. Dancers who have survived the rush through beginners' class only to face the agony of joining experienced dancers in a club, will not find the CDP very rewarding.

**Without changes square dancing will shrink by attrition.** The needs of those who are now involved (both callers and dancers) will continue to be well served, **BUT**; we will not suddenly fill our square dance classes. No trivial change in the calls on ANY list will make any difference in recruiting. The people most likely to make that difference are new callers or the few existing callers who really do call because they enjoy making people have fun. They could embrace a program like the CDP to make the joys of square dancing more accessible to the younger members of our "harried" society.

The rest of us should stop haggling about minor changes in what calls are on which list. We should try, instead, to improve the skill of callers and the programs of clubs to assure that existing dancers continue to find square dancing satisfying. Callers should increase

their emphasis on smoothness and music even if this reduces the challenge in their choreography. (Variety need not be challenging.) Callers should also work to improve their skill in managing the difficulty and presentation of what they call so that dancers are not "broken down" so much.

Clubs should find ways to make their programs more "social" so that square dancing provides a way for people to enjoy each other.

**The most successful clubs even in today's troubling environment are those that promote social interaction along with dancing.**

Through this somewhat gloomy picture there is strong reason for hope. In the next decade many "baby boomers" will find their children have left home. They will be looking for things they can do together. Square dancing is a wonderful recreation for couples. We should focus our recruiting on these people.

The CDP is an excellent way for people to discover the pleasures of square dancing. If they would then like to become more involved, good classes teaching more calls with emphasis on dancing and sociability should be

available. We all know that people would have more fun in class if we taught one or two calls per night instead of the three or four that are now usually taught in beginner's class. People who know the CDP calls could more easily take the next step into modern square dancing.

Let us stop haggling about whether or how to change the programs we have which are serving today's dancers very well. Instead, let's make square dancing more accessible to the new people we would love to have join us.

### **SQUARE DANCE TROUBLES - 1998**

There are TWO serious problems in square dancing. **One of these is recruiting.** If we could find ENOUGH people willing to try square dancing, we could continue to throw away all the ones who don't like exactly what we like and still have enough left to support our habit.

**The OTHER problem is suggested by the comments about the first.** For the last 25 years, at least, the square dance community has accepted ONLY those people able and willing to make a commitment of two nights a week for a couple of years. (*Editor Note: this is a prevalence only in some areas. Most new dancer clubs, dance one night per week*) Most callers know that you don't learn to survive at open dances any other way.

Most square dancers are satisfied with their activity the way it is. They have no need for ANY change in dance programs. If a change would help recruiting, many would tolerate it. But many dancers - and callers - do not believe changing dance programs will have any effect on recruiting. These people LIKE the "challenge" of our dancing. They are willing to accept the breakdowns of their squares. They are the survivors. They are not the people that have caused the shrinkage at our clubs, dances conventions and festivals. **The problem is that so many did not like what we like and they have gone away.**

Since the early 1970's the focus of most callers has been on making dancing more challenging. We have tried to pass it off as "more interesting" but the way it has played out is that large numbers of squares in every tip break down. Most callers have neither the interest nor the skill to call so that most dancers win most of the time. The "stars" we have admired are the ones who present the most complicated dance routines. But even they see only the front squares.

**If we are to rebuild a prosperous square dance activity, we will have to find many callers who are willing to call EASIER dances.**

Perhaps these will be based on limited lists of calls like the CALLERLAB BASIC program. The names and number of calls is not important. Far more important is a change of attitude that restores the fun, sociability and dancing feel to square dancing. Nearly all of the callers now working are not committed to working with these goals on a continuing basis. They use the words as bait

hoping then to lure people into the "more interesting" programs that callers like.

All of the proposed alternate programs or program modifications are at least as large and complicated as the CALLERLAB MAINSTREAM program.

### **Forgotten Lessons Of The Past**

- None of the changes will have any impact on recruiting.
- In the days of our largest classes, nearly everyone who came to try square dancing stayed to complete the class.
- They were the ones who brought us next year's class.
- We didn't push them to learn three calls each night.
- When the class was over there were many dances they could go to and dance comfortably.

If we want to help the existing dance activity, callers will have to concentrate on helping dancers have more fun. That means different things to different people. Those who want to find interesting variety without being blown away by complicated puzzles are not now being well served. Neither are those who like to move smoothly with the music. Callers who want to keep the customers we have should invest their efforts in improved performance in these areas.

The real danger in passing the Target 2000 Proposals is that we will expect them ALONE to solve the problems we are facing. Without a MAJOR CHANGE IN ATTITUDE those proposed program changes will accomplish NOTHING. If we can change our attitude, the massive disruptions that will be caused by the proposed program changes are totally unnecessary.

Square dancing has the potential to be the perfect recreation for a huge share of the population of the United States and many other countries. For the last 25 years we have kept it suitable ONLY for a small share of those people. If we could offer more than the narrow,

single-track, complex form of square dancing that we now provide nearly everywhere, we could sell our recreation to a whole new generation of people.

**No market has ever been expanded by making the product more complicated.**

***Editor Note:** Although these three articles have a common theme running through them over a period of several years, the issues raised over 20 years ago, are still with us today. The recruiting issue, the time to dance, the complexity and the rush and dump of dancers.*

*We encourage all callers to look at their local areas and ask – what is the entry level for your area? Where can basic dancers and new dancers go to dance? Are your regional dances excluding those that do not dance plus? Does your local festival and big event for “square dancers” exclude new dancers because they are not able to dance the “full program”?*

*Jim has raised many points along a common theme, and yet, as he says, we all agree there is a problem and recognise it, we still have done very little to rectify and address the issues he raises.*