

Square Dancing In The 21st Century: A Definitive Guide to Modern Pattern Dancing

By Scott Brown

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Gold Rush Square Dance Productions

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Contents

Acknowledgements	xi
Preface	xiii
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: A Road Less Traveled	3
Chapter 2: Identifying the Problem with Square dancing	6
Chapter 3: A New Approach	11
Chapter 4: The Psychology of Accelerated Learning Systems	15
Learning a New Language	16
A Word on Memory Retention.....	19
A Dancer's View of the Teaching Order	20
Anchor's and Triggers	21
Class Killer Calls.....	23
The Importance of Wheel Around	25
A New Teaching Order	26
Chapter 5: The Importance of the Singing Call	28
Utilizing Naturalistic Trance	28
Positive Reinforcement.....	30
Social Importance.....	30
The Importance of Closure	31
Winning the Game.....	31
Chapter 6: Program A	33
The First Night	33
The First Call (Do Sa Do).....	35

Wheel & Deal from Lines	66
The Third B Program Tip.....	66
The Fourth B Program Tip.....	68
Trade By	70
Final Notes on Program B.....	71
Chapter 11: Program C	73
Program C - Tip 1.....	73
Program C - Tip 2.....	75
Program C - Tip 3.....	76
Program C - Tip 4.....	77
Program C - tip 5.....	79
Program C - Tip 6.....	81
Program C: Overview.....	82
Chapter 12: Implementation	83
Appendix 1.....	95
Program Overview	95
Appendix 2.....	98
Singing Call Figures for New Dancers	98
Appendix 3	102
Understanding the Psychology of the First Tip	102

Introducing the Corner	36
The Allemande Left	36
The Promenade.....	37
The Right & Left Grand.....	37
The First Transition	38
Couple Orientation.....	38
Phase 1 Patter	39
Wheel Around	40
California Twirl.....	40
Star Thru	40
Phase 2 Patter	41
Swing Your Girl	43
Phase 3: The Singing Call	43
Chapter 7: The Second Tip	47
Tip 2 Patter: Part I.....	48
Square Thru.....	49
Ladies Chain & Courtesy Turn	49
Tip 2 Patter: Part II	50
Chapter 8: The Third Tip	52
The 3rd Singing Call.....	54
Chapter 9: Program B - Part I	57
The Alamo Ring.....	57
The Second B Program Tip.....	60
The \$1,000,000 Dollar Question	62
Chapter 10: Program B - Part II	65
Cross Run	65

Preface

Modern Western Style Square Dancing is in trouble. Its future has become more and more uncertain as a continuous decline in the dance population over the past 20 years has left the community scrambling to find ways of reversing this downward trend.

As square dance record producers, my son Shawn, partner Lisa, and I love this activity and believe it to be an important expression of the American spirit. With a rich history dating back to our founding fathers, square dancing is synonymous with America's identity and cannot be allowed to disappear.

It is with this in mind that we developed the Modern Pattern Dance Project in an attempt to provide a solution to the current trend. We do not suggest that this program is the final or only solution, but that it is one solution that works.

We recognize that the introduction of this new program will generate some controversy within the established dance community. We also know that there will be many who criticize or dispute our methods, finding them to be too progressive, or too much work.

We are not suggesting that everyone adopt these methods or this system. We only ask that they consider the mechanisms behind it that have made it successful. It is our sincerest hope that the material being presented here will provide the foundation for a rebirth of Modern Western Style Square Dancing in the future.

Thank You

Scott, Shawn, and Lisa

Introduction

This program is the result of over 30 years of my experience in the field of entertainment, square dance calling, and martial arts instruction. It utilizes techniques that have been developed to work on both the physical and psychological level, to ensure the most dynamic and efficient learning process for new students entering into the activity of Modern Western Style Square Dancing.

The emphasis of this program is on efficiency, effectiveness, and dancer retention. It has been designed to shorten the length of the traditional class to 12 weeks or less and still produce a strong dynamic and enthusiastic long-term dancer. It is suggested that graduation, if applicable, occur at the end of this 12 week program, at which point, clubs may wish to introduce dancers to Plus workshops if they wish to continue forward.

It must again be emphasized that this program focuses on Mainstream dancing only. It is designed to produce a strong Mainstream dancer in 12 weeks or less. It is not designed to produce a Plus dancer over the course of nine months, which is the current trend. The Plus program is a separate program established by Callerlab and therefore should be addressed separately as recommended by Callerlab.

The effectiveness of this program is heavily dependent upon the attitude of the dance leader and club implementing it. As with any program, a negative approach will bring about less efficient results. It also should be noted that the techniques employed here, while they may seem trivial or unnecessary to some, are extremely powerful and have been tested time and again in many fields of education.

The mechanisms behind these teaching techniques can be extremely complex and would warrant a dissertation for a thorough understanding. This however is not necessary for a dance leader using this outline to get the desired results. I will take the time at different points throughout the program to explain the mechanism and purpose behind many of the techniques I am asking dance leaders to employ. It is my hope that by understanding how some of these techniques work, instructors will develop more techniques over time to assist in the learning process.

One final note: A square dance caller is not necessarily a good dance leader. A dance leader must also be an instructor, an entertainer, a promoter, and an inspiration to new dancers. If you are a dance leader and you are not doing your best at these things, then you are shortchanging the people who have put their trust in you, and are part of the problem we must all now face.

Chapter 1: A Road Less Traveled

In recent years, a great deal of effort has gone into finding a way to shorten the traditional induction process for Modern Western Style Square Dancing.

Research has shown this to be necessary if we are to successfully market our activity in today's world. It was with this in mind that the following program was developed based on a new approach that may at first seem unorthodox to the reader and traditional dance leader.

I was raised in a family of Martial Artists. Both my mother and father held Black Belts in multiple disciplines of Combat Martial Arts during a time in the late 1960's and early 1970's when such things were very uncommon. My father taught martial arts for over 30 years and trained me from childhood to eventually take over his school when I turned 18.

While in high school I discovered Square Dancing and by the time I was 18, I was a member of the local Callers Association and calling dances regularly around the area. Dancing is not unusual for someone with a martial arts background to pursue and is actually quite common among martial artists. The 1958 Hong Kong Cha Cha Championship was won by one of the most famous martial artist of all time, Bruce Lee.

It needs to be understood, that unlike many callers who began their career early in life, square dance calling was secondary in my life at that time, and provided me with a means of escape from a life of martial arts, which all but totally consumed me.

In 1984, at the age of 18, I took over my father's martial school and taught for the next 22 years. During that time, I continued to call and pursue dance. I went on to study and teach Ballroom, Swing, Country Western, Latin, and Clogging. Few dancers were ever aware of my background in Martial Arts, as I always tried to keep the 2 lifestyles separate.

In 1991, I decided to pursue an education in Science at California University of Pennsylvania. While attending University as a full time Biology Major, I got

involved with a group of magicians and started performing Stage Magic as a hobby. It became too difficult to continue my regular calling in the region due to the travel distances involved, so I taught martial arts and began doing magic shows as a means of income to get by on.

It was during the time I was working as a magician, that I was introduced to a great deal of information that never reaches the general public. Much of this information deals with techniques of misdirection and something known as psychological subtlety.

As I continued to pursue stage magic, I began to learn about such things as Traditional Hypnosis, Neural Linguistic Programming or NLP (a form of waking hypnosis often used in advertising), Psychological Anchors and Triggers and their effects on people, and Psychological Misdirection Techniques. It doesn't matter whether you believe any of these things are real or not, these techniques are employed everyday by advertisers, salesmen, educators, trainers, psychologists, and hypnotists, as well as professional magicians for the purpose of accomplishing their goals. Just because you have never heard of it doesn't mean you're not susceptible to it or affected by it.

In the summer of 1996, I graduated from California University of Pennsylvania with a degree in Biology and immediately went to work as an analytical chemist for Reccra Environmental Laboratories. My son Shawn had just been born and I was anxious to start a new career in a science field. I continued to teach martial arts in my spare time, but now found it possible to return to calling and teaching square dancing at the local level. I continued to call and teach locally for the next 10 years or so while Shawn was growing up.

In 1997, I launched Gold Rush Square Dance Productions and produced my first record for the square dance community. I went on to produce my second record the following year. With the introduction of CD's , Mini Disk, and a number of other new formats in development at the time, I decided to take some time off from producing music until the industry settled on a universal media format.

When Shawn turned 12 years old, he began to express an interest in dancing. He took lessons and started dancing right away. He then went on to pursue Round Dancing the following season. Shawn's love of music and the activity soon led him to try his hand at calling. To help make things easier for him, I began putting the words for singing calls on the screen in Karaoke format and began releasing square dance music again. All Gold Rush songs are now released in the Karaoke SD format which has not only proven to be helpful to new callers, but experienced ones as well.

At age 13, Shawn began recording his own singing calls and by 16 he was producing his own music. By 18 years old, Shawn had become an accomplished musician, dancer, caller, and producer with over 40 singing calls to his credit. He is currently the most recorded teenage square dance caller of all time.

It was Shawn's zeal and passion for our activity that led me to where we are now. Shawn loves this activity and sees it as an important part of our cultural identity. To Shawn it is a symbol of the freedom of American Expression and must be preserved at all cost, even if that cost invites criticism from peers within the established calling and dance community. It is his dedication to this activity that has led me to devote almost all of our time, energy, and resources, in the last 3 years to finding a way to save it. The Modern Pattern Dance Program is the result of these efforts.

Chapter 2: Identifying the Problem with Square dancing

About 3 years ago, Lisa, Shawn, and I began doing independent research into the problems facing our activity with the goal of identifying these problems and finding a solution. Up till then, we had read countless articles, and listened to countless opinions from within the dance community discussing the problems facing Modern Western Style Square Dancing today, with no one offering a definitive answer or solution to solve them.

As record producers who want to see this activity not only survive, but return to a state that can once again support the full time callers and producers who have dedicated their lives to it, we decided to conduct our own research in hopes of finding a solution.

We began by carefully studying the history of the activity over the past 50 years. We were looking for patterns, trends, benchmarks, peaks and valleys that marked influx and decline, and anything that could point us toward a possible solution.

We went to contra dances in the area and asked people about Western Style Dancing to get their opinion. We asked the non-dancing public what they thought about our activity, and what it would take for them to give it a try. We sought out former dancers and asked them why they left the activity and what would make them consider coming back.

We examined other areas of the United States where clubs were having success at growing the activity in their area. We looked at other countries in Europe and also looked at Australia and the differences in their programs compared to ours. We studied other teaching systems such as Blast Classes, The Nest, The ABC Program, The ACA One Floor program and listened to what national callers and the more successful dance leaders were saying.

We read through much of the material currently available from Callerlab and the Alliance of Round, Traditional, and Square Dance (ARTS) and looked at

different forms of marketing and promotion. We tested several web based venues for marketing and various types of multimedia and print based advertising. Finally, we tracked all special dances and classes in our area for 3 years to get an accurate assessment of our current state of decline.

The reason we went through all of this trouble, was so that when we eventually presented a solution, it would not be just another shot in the dark. So much useful information was accumulated during our research that a complete assessment of our findings would warrant nothing less than a Doctoral Dissertation. Our current problems, however, are not so much a matter of academic discussion, but a real crisis that needs to be addressed now if we are to preserve this activity for future generations. We will therefore present for you our findings in a way that is useful to understanding what has to happen for this activity to survive.

It is important for us to pause here and point out that our research indicates that, in its current form, Modern Western Style Square Dancing will not survive and will be gone in 5 to 10 years. That is not to say that the activity is doomed and all hope is lost, but the current form of the activity certainly will be lost unless dramatic change is introduced now. We recognize that there will be those who disagree with that statement. However, we challenge anyone to do their own research and come to a different conclusion. Remember the key words here are "in its current form."

A large part of our research was centered on identifying the needs of the modern dancer. Below is a list of what we found to be most important to new dancers and return dancers looking at our activity.

Instant success, We live in an age of instant gratification, such as convenience stores, the internet, fast food, and on demand programming. People expect to be dancers the first night, not 9 months from now, or whenever we decide to accept them. This must be addressed first.

Flexibility, Again, people have more choices today than ever before when it comes to their schedule. Square dancing must accommodate this need as well.

People need to be able to learn without committing to a long-term program. Life gets in the way today. Dancers need to be able to come back after soccer season and pick up where they left off, continuing to whatever level they are working on.

Image Like it or not, people are concerned about their image today. Social media has brought us closer together than ever before, and the term “Square Dancing” alone is enough to send most people running for fear of being laughed at by their friends. As soon as people see footage of a National Convention on my cell phone they want to try it, but they are not going to tell their friends about it. We need a new Image.

Accessibility Living in a modern world we have 24 hour access to the internet and can buy a big screen TV at 3:00 AM at the local Wal Mart. Telling dancers to come back when classes start is pointless. You need to take them now, while there interested.

Identity Dancers need to find their place in this activity and not be told where their place is. What is fun to 70 year olds is not necessarily fun to a 30 year old. Discouraging dancers from twirling or using flourishes inhibits their expression and limits our ability to meet their needs.

Modern Music If everyone liked the same music there would be only 1 radio station. Variety is absolutely necessary to retain new dancers.

Choice Dancers need to have a choice of dance levels below Plus.

Health and Wellness This factor we found an important part of marketing to the public. It ties in with image and needs to be mentioned.

Dress Code As far as we are concerned, this subject is hardly worth addressing because an influx of new dancers will ultimately result in a new standard of dress.

So What Does This Tell Us?

First, for the activity to survive, it must identify and meet the needs of today's perspective dancer, which will in turn, result in a new form of the activity being born out of these needs. This new activity will have a different structure and image than the current one, and while it preserves the art form, it will not necessarily preserve all of the traditions associated with Modern Western Style Square Dancing.

This new structure can no longer require long-term commitments from new dancers or refuse to recognize them as dancers. It must be accessible, taking new dancers on a weekly or bi-weekly basis. It must be efficient, shortening the learning process to weeks rather than months. And it must be 'cool' and acceptable so that they go tell their friends about it and bring them back week after week.

Callers and dance leaders will need to be retrained and made familiar with the tools and psychological techniques involved in accelerated teaching systems, as well as universal media formats necessary to their trade. They must become familiar with digital formats, computers, cell phones, social media platforms, and become skilled at applying them to their trade. This needs to become a part of caller school curriculums and training programs nationwide.

Dancers and clubs will need to accept that today's dancers have different needs than in the past, their philosophy on the activity will be different as well as their approach, their commitment, their attendance, their taste in clothing, their idea of fun, and their desire to progress to different dance levels. Although a club might dance every week, a dancer may chose to come only once or twice a month or for 2 consecutive weeks every other month. Likewise some groups from the club may only dance from September through January and return the following September, as they have other commitments during the other part of the year. Some dancers may chose to twirl more than others or wear modern western dresses and clothing. These things must become acceptable.

Most important, clubs must reintroduce and offer Mainstream and possibly even Basic level dance programs on their regular club nights. Dancers must be allowed to dance at a level that is comfortable to them and not be pressured or criticized for their choice. Bullying dancers who want to dance at the Mainstream level to dance Plus is no different than forcing dancers who dance at Plus level to dance Advanced in order to be accepted. Many dancers simply chose to not dance at the Plus level or pursue this level. The key word here is “many.”

One thing we found for sure is that only about 30 percent of the new dancers who started with us are driven to pursue the Plus program. Even though we strongly recommend they pursue Plus if they want to dance at other clubs that only offer Plus, they simply don't care. This is a big part of the problem that the current Plus dancers refuse to understand. I have actually had Plus dancers tell me, after I told them that we introduced almost 60 new dancers to this activity in just 6 months, that if they don't dance Plus, they don't count. What those Plus dancers fail to understand is that at our current rate of growth, in another year they will be the ones who do count.

Chapter 3: A New Approach

It is clear by now, that all previous efforts to correct our current course have been ineffective, and the problems facing our activity are much more serious than a dress code issue or publicity campaign. Once Lisa, Shawn, and I came to understand the true nature of our current state of decline, we set out to develop a system that would address the needs of today's perspective dancer, and hopefully offer a viable solution. To do this we decided it was best to address each need individually starting with our image problem.

One of the biggest obstacles we faced with getting people into square dancing was the term square dancing itself. Most people associate square dancing with stereotype images of elementary school gym class, barn dancing, Bugs Bunny, and Hee Haw. It is for this reason that I coined the term Modern Pattern Dancing.

Over the years Shawn and I posted multiple videos of square dancing footage that we shot at conventions and dances on you tube. We created several test marketing videos to promote modern western style square dancing in the past, and although our previous videos sparked much interest from the current square dance community, they were not overly successful at generating interest among the general public. It wasn't until my son Shawn created a video called Modern Pattern Dancing, which was a term we had been tossing around for some time, that our numbers changed.

Shawn's video generated over 5000 hits on you tube in just a matter of days. The video focused on our activity from a different perspective, highlighting different forms of square dancing such as kaleidoscope, hexagon, rectangle, and progressive squares. We decided to start using this name for the promotion of a new system we were developing to address the previously mentioned needs of the modern public.

I began putting together an accelerated teaching system based on my experience as a martial arts instructor, square dance caller, and hypnotist. The system had to allow us to take new dancers on a weekly or bi-weekly basis, and get them dancing at the Mainstream level in 12 weeks or less.

It had to allow new dancers to attend at their leisure and pick up where they left off if they missed a week or several weeks in between. It had to be independent of all existing club infrastructures and not require angels for success. It had to allow for integration of new dancers with the existing club dancers on the very first night. It had to be fun, cool, exciting, and socially acceptable so that new dancers would bring their friends like in the days of Pappy Shaw. Finally, it had to be tested.

We procured a hall in a county in Western Pennsylvania that had no pre-existing square dance community. We made up some fliers announcing a new dance class Monday nights, 7:00 PM at our location, stuffed them in mailboxes, and called anyone who we thought might be interested. We opened our doors and waited to see who showed up.

We didn't have enough for a square, but decided to go on with the project anyway and teach the 4 people who came. After all, it was Modern Pattern Dancing, not square dancing anyway, so why not work in 2 couple groups of four. The following week we had six, so we worked in groups of three couples teaching the calls in the accelerated format I designed. By the end of the month we had a square. An older gentleman who already knew how to dance heard that a new club opened and decided to dance with us on Monday nights and be an Angel.

Pretty soon more and more people showed up week after week to give it a try. They were telling their friends about us and their friends were bringing friends. Not everyone could come on a regular basis due to other commitments, so they would come back periodically to pick up where they left off.

After six months, we realized that over 60 new people came through our doors and started dancing with us. Of that 60, some of them were from out of town

and could not return, but about half of them reached proficiency at the Mainstream level after only about 6 to 8 weeks. Another 10 had made their way through the first 50 calls or Basic list.

I also need to mention that after a couple of months, word got around and dancers from the area who once belonged to clubs that were no longer dancing began to come dance with us as well. They did not mind the new format as it allowed them to re-enter the activity at their own pace and dance at their comfort level. They also brought friends, including dancers who had not danced in years, but wanted to get back into the activity. They knew that at our club, they could do so without the pain and expense of having to go through formal lessons all over again.

At the time of this writing, it is not yet possible to provide long-term assessments of the program's success; however we can provide you with some preliminary results. After 12 months, we have been able to establish that the program has resulted in an average of 10 new dancers per month being introduced to the dance activity for the first time, or returning to it after having left the activity at some point in the past. These numbers are significant as they seem to indicate a growth trend that is unsurpassed by the current programs being tested in other parts of the country. The results have also demonstrated an unusually high number of youth and family involvement. It seems that younger dancers continue to provide more dancers by getting their friends involved.

While we cannot guarantee that these results will be experienced by all clubs employing this new system, even as few as 2 new dancers per month being introduced or returning to the activity is enough to stem the current decline and turn things around. An average of 2 new dancers per month equates to 24 per year; more than most clubs have seen in decades. If only 50% of the clubs in my area were able to introduce 24 new dancers per club over the next year, the new dancers would outnumber the current active dance population in just 1 year.

The chapters that follow will deal with the technical aspects of The Modern Pattern Dance Program and are provided as a guide for dance leaders looking

to implement the system. Some of the information provided is highly technical and not for the casual reader. Much of it is unorthodox from the perspective of an experienced caller, but the mechanisms and purpose behind these techniques will be thoroughly explained.

I am asking callers who are interested in utilizing this information to please be patient while reading and take the time to thoroughly digest and understand some of these very complex principals. The techniques and principals presented here could insure the future survival of our activity. Do not take them lightly, or dismiss their effectiveness.

Chapter 4: The Psychology of Accelerated Learning Systems

The purpose of this book is to introduce the reader to a set of strategies and tactics that will allow callers and dance leaders to teach the Callerlab Mainstream program far more efficiently and effectively than ever before. The general target time frame for teaching the program is 12 weeks or less, with most new dancers reaching proficiency in just 8 to 10 weeks in. This system has also been designed to facilitate a continuous weekly influx of new dancers, and to allow dancers who cannot attend regularly to pick up where they left off.

If you think all of that sounds impossible, you are certainly not alone. I cannot begin to count how many dancers and callers have insisted over the years that it could not be done. I recently had a National Caller tell me that it is not possible to teach the Mainstream program in 12 weeks. I asked him how he knew this. He replied because of the way the list was designed. I then went on to explain that the solution was simply in redesigning the list and the traditional teaching method.

By the same right, for every 20 callers who say that it can't be done, there will usually be one who will claim to do it all the time. Usually, their claims are just dismissed offhand by peers or dancers who cannot believe their validity. The inability of a dancer or caller to accept these claims stems from something called a Psychological Anchor, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

If I were to fill a glass halfway with water and ask 20 people to describe what they see, some will say a half empty glass, while others will say it is half full. Of course, the answer is dependent on the perspective of the observer. The perspective that is missing here is that the glass is simply the wrong size. It is this principal that allows magicians to perform their tricks.

Unlike other programs being utilized today, this program was developed from the perspective of the new dancer and not the experienced one. The teaching order follows a progression that is logical to the student rather than the instructor. The program utilizes powerful psychological triggers and anchors