



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
(January 2010)

* * * * * S T A R T * * * * *



FUTURE OF SQUARE DANCING
Jim Mayo

We, Modern Western Square Dance (MWSD) callers and dancers, are pretty much in agreement that our activity is not thriving. Certainly it does not come anywhere close to the popularity it once enjoyed. There are several possible explanations for this. Summarized, they are society has changed, MWSD has changed, or some combination. We all know that society has changed. People do not have the free time they once had and they are much less willing to commit to anything which requires regular attendance. If we are honest, we will admit that MWSD has become much more complicated than it was in the heyday of its popularity. So we can agree that the way square dancing is at present does not match the needs of today's society.

Those who love square dancing know it could be adapted to whatever society needs. At some level we also know that square dancing will have to change if it is to see a revival. This form of dance activity will need to be easier to enter. Those who are involved now are not much interested in trying some new form. We like it the way it is. We want clubs with a commitment to membership. We want people to go through a course that teaches at least the 70 calls we all know. We realize that folks can not just "walk in" and take part. They have to go through the training - and we like it that way.

What we have not been willing to acknowledge is that training is not only the class. We know, but don't really say, that after class the new dancer will still not be able to dance comfortably at most of the dances that will be available. The new dancer will have to go for another year of dances at least, before they will be comfortable dancing with folks at an open dance - no matter what the advertised program.

If we made a "new" form of square dancing what could it be like? Where could it be started? Who would come? Would they be people we wanted as our friends? Most of "us" are older and were brought up in a different kind of world. It's not surprising that we do not recruit successfully in a new group of people. Perhaps we callers should try to find or create a different form of square dancing that would serve folks who are not just like us. If we did that, we should not expect today's dancers to recruit our new customers.

If we start with a blank page and redesign square dancing to serve today's people what could it be? I would suggest that it should be easier to learn and that it should not require people to show up at every session even while they are learning. It should provide an opportunity for folks to enjoy each other as well as the dancing. After all, that was one of the most important aspects of MWSD even though we never recognized how important it was until quite recently. A new type of square dancing should also continue to provide both physical and mental exercise. These aspects are both popular with our prospective new customer base. It would be good if we could find some organization to help us reach a new customer base. Ed Gilmore said "Find some people and do what you have to do to get them."

Where could we look for people? Churches are an obvious possibility. Much of what we have to offer is the kind of thing that churches stand for. We should not expect to recruit people away from the churches. We should offer a program that provides a social experience within the church. Another possibility is to look for support from community organizations such as service clubs, recreation departments, the YMCA or YWCA. They helped us get started 50 years ago. Or we could just use a community recreation facility and run it ourselves. I know of one such example that has been going and growing for a couple of years.

Why isn't this happening? I think it's because we don't want square dancing that is different from what we have created. We cling to the old model because this is what we know and feel comfortable with. Our caller schools still focus primarily on choreographic management and sight calling. They urge new callers to learn how to "provide variety." What that really means is keep it changing, never repeat a routine, and use all the calls looking for ways to use them differently. We seem committed to keeping square dancing complicated. Callers are not taught that they have to go out and find people and then give them a good time with whatever calls they can be taught easily. Most callers are committed to the belief that repetition is "boring". I would suggest instead that we call it "dancing".

One night parties are a good way to present square dancing to the public but they are seldom a source of regular work for callers. If they repeat, it's a couple of times a year, not the weekly or twice a month that we would like. They pay well and they could help us to introduce the idea that square dancing does not have to be difficult, but they are not an alternative for regular square dancing. To find that alternative we need brave callers to set out on a new course. Our CALLERLAB Winning Ways material describes some different approaches and I know a couple of these approaches that are surviving and thriving. I don't see many other callers or dancers that are interested in following those paths. Until we find some folks willing to break out from the old patterns, I doubt that we will see a rebirth of interest in the activity we have loved. If you are a caller having success with a different approach, I'd love to hear from you. Jimcalls@aol.com