

The Four Points of Square Dancing

By Patrick Demerath

The AMERICAN CALLERS' ASSOCIATION in its attempt to be of service to all callers, dancers, and associations has provided current, timely, and effective information on new dancer recruitment, winning ways to retain club dancers, and pitfalls that drive square dancers away, for the past ten years. ACA really appreciates the positive comments, encouragement to continue, and the contributions from callers and dancers all over North America and abroad to continue these initiatives. ACA will continue to provide information that will help the square dance community recruit, retain and retrieve square dancers as well as encourage the dancers to speak out on the cumbersome and segregationist dance programs.

This month's ACA Viewpoint was communicated from caller Jim Steele in Richmond, Oregon. Jim believes that something should be said for what is going on with Square Dancing and offers his views on why square dancing is declining. Jim purports that communications from both callers associations blame the dancers, which is a false hood. Jim believes that there are more dancers per capita right now than we have ever had in the history of square dancing. He believes his ideas may make a lot of Callers mad and be outraged at him, but he doesn't mind taking the heat.

Jim has been square dancing since 1952 and calling and teaching since 1960. He owned a recording company and was an "On the Road Caller" for 10 years in the 70's. He possesses the expertise and experience to advance what needs to be said, which he labeled the "Four Points".

The First Point: Square dancing has always had to have callers. Dancers have always been there, and many callers have not honored their needs violating the foremost concept of Marketing theory. Jim continues that callers have become so disconnected and have forgotten the needs of the dancers. Callers have their own agendas and have become dictators of recreation that they are taking it down with them. Some callers have forgotten that square dancing is supposed to be fun. For many callers square dancing has become a job and nothing more.

When dancers want to venture outside the box and have fun, callers are quick to tell them they are wrong, and they must do it the right way. Jim's leading question is: "Is the callers' way always right?" Dancers are there to have fun. If callers don't let them have fun, dancers will leave and will be lost. If dancers want to patty cake or if they want to jump on their foot backwards, let them have fun! Then and only then will dancers bring their friends! If callers don't let the dances have fun, dancers will dance away along with their friends and will be lost to square dancing. Is it worth it to have it the callers' way? Are the callers' ways always right? No! Jim cautions! Callers must stop dictating their ways! Teach dancers the right way, but let the dancers have fun! Teach them how to have that fun, as this is what they are looking for.

The Second Point: Jim's second point purports that callers have broken the back of the square dance world by making a business out of calling. State and National Callers Association's have pushed many club callers out of calling by "worshipping" big name travelling callers who set the agenda for all callers without even consulting the club callers who build square dance clubs. The result is that square dancing is losing callers, dancers and clubs. Many clubs have callers who call for more than one club and do not assume any leadership or responsibility for their clubs. They call the dances and collect the money, go home and onto the next event.

Square dancers are looking for leadership. Callers often do not have the desire to provide leadership because it's not in the price of the dance. This is wrong! It's the same way with teaching. Callers teach for two or three clubs, collect their checks, and go home. Dancers become loyal to the caller who teaches them. Callers do not seem to care about them because it's not in the paycheck to care, as many callers are there just for the money. Clubs need caller leaders. Callers teach dancers, and the dancers want callers to care and be a part of their clubs of which most of callers are not. This lack of caller concern and leadership is why clubs are progressively dying.

The Third Point: Callers feel that they have to treat dancers as less than equal or dumb? Callers believe that they need to change the dancing list to make it faster to teach dancers. Callers claim that they can teach people to dance in a weekend. All these callers are doing is frustrating dancers and giving them reasons to quit and not tell anyone else about dancing because it wasn't fun for them. Now we all ask ourselves "why is dancing going downhill so fast?" Stop the insanity! Use a good 12 week program as it works well. Teach people to dance and have fun. "Fun" is the key word. Callers would keep moves the same or send out a questionnaire and let all the callers (nationwide) decide the dance program. Stop letting the professional and national callers make all the decisions. These callers are detached from the square dance club world. They have no idea what is really happening within the clubs that are struggling to keeping the "fun" and themselves "alive". These callers are just interested in their own businesses. Let the club callers do what they do best, which is to teach people to dance and be their friends. Let's all promote club callers again instead of callers who do it for the money and glory. Once club callers had big clubs, big dances and large festivals. Now many clubs can't even pay the bills! Why? Read on...

The Fourth Point: Callers get three or four people to sign a piece of paper saying they have called for a certain length of time and taught so much. They get a title saying “caller coach”. This title allows them to charge more money and make them appear more important to other callers and dancers. The sad thing is that these caller coaches get together for a weekend and charge anywhere from \$250 to \$500 or more and tell people (or less experienced callers) they are going to teach them to be a caller in one weekend! Let’s get honest and serious. Callers cannot teach someone to call in one weekend! There are too many things that need to be taught. Choreography, timing, music, and leadership must be absorbed. It takes months or even years to learn these things. Some callers have become so arrogant that they feel they can take anyone’s money and teach them to call.

Not all people can call. Callers are doing potential callers and square dancing injustices. Stop this insanity! It’s killing callers and hurting dancers. Caller coaches must give marginal caller candidates back their money and coach them to be good dancers and support clubs.

In conclusion, Jim states there are more points to be brought out and more things to be said. He recognizes that some callers may be upset or outraged by his comments, but at least they are thinking about it. There always have been changes in the square dance world. Remember club callers are the leaders and teachers of square dancing. If they don’t take the bull by the horns, callers will lose the one thing that they cherish the most. At the same time, if you are a national caller in business, you will soon be gone too.

Callers must take back the leadership and put their heads together and come up with a good 12 week program that teaches the moves that we have now and maybe drop many moves. Jim argues that as long as callers make it fun, dancers will stay and dance. He advocates to make their feet feel like dancing when they walk in the door, or they will walk away. Remember we need the dancers to share the fun of square dancing with their friends!

Square dancing is in a time when it should be growing in leaps and bounds, but most of callers can’t even get a class together. With the severe recession economics of today, people are looking for recreation that is inexpensive and family orientated. In the 1940’s and 1950’s after the wars, people wanted something to do. Callers worked on ideas to promote square dancing and not themselves. Callers cannot control the clubs, area councils, state association or the national association, but they can control what they do. Let’s get back to having club callers teach dancers, and support letting dancers have fun their own way, not the callers way. Stop trying to make dancers and callers in one weekend! Give them time to learn and have fun. The keyword is fun!

Jim recently survived severe life threatening medical problems which got him thinking that he needed to say some of these things. Jim knows that the different dancing levels/programs with their lengthy and stressful programs are a hot point, but urges callers to concentrate on things they can do right now to help preserve our square dance activity for the future.

The American Callers’ Association is indebted to Jim for his leadership and his heartfelt communications. In cooperation and support of Jim’s Four Points, the American Callers’ Association will work with square dance organizations to reverse the negative growth and energize and restore square dancing to prosperity.

The Board of Directors of the American Callers’ Association invites each of you to visit our website and newsletters at americancallers.com/news and communicate with us. Give us your ideas! We will listen!

Any individual, club, caller, or association who wishes to communicate his/her opinions on this subject is encouraged to contact the American Callers’ Association (mac@americancallers.com) or Dr. Patrick Demerath (pdemerath@uwa.edu). If you wish to contact Jim Steele, his email is jjsteele55@yahoo.com.

“Until next time, Happy Dancing!”

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