

Square Dancing – Is It Broke? – Can We Fix It?



Keynote Address

June 27, 2003

52nd National Square Dance Convention

Oklahoma City, OK

Tony Oxendine

Sumter, South Carolina

A few weeks ago I was calling a dance in SC. In the front square was a big burly man about 6'2" and 250 lbs. He was stereotypically southern... Big shoulders, crew cut, and a full beard. I think his name was either Bubba or Leroy. He was appropriately attired in a pink shirt, white tie, white pants, white shoes, and HOT pink socks. He was wringing wet after dancing one tip. You know the kind -- kicks, twirls, jumps, back flips. He was ---- How do you say- Boisterous. After a few tips, I figured that he could handle a little jab so I asked him, "Bubba (or Leroy - I forget now) -- How long have you been dancing?" He replied, "Pretty near 5 years." So I said, "With that in mind -- if someone had told you six years ago that on a typical Saturday night you would be standing in a roomful of people wearing a pink shirt complimented with white pants, white tie and white shoes -- you would have called them crazy." Well that's kind of how I feel this morning.

I have many friends in his room that have known me for years. For those that don't know me, I'll give you my square dance life history in a couple of paragraphs.

I started dancing in a teen square dance club in 1972. I was 11 at the time. In 1974 I attended a caller's school in Merrillville, IN – almost as a joke. My caller didn't want to go by himself. I knew a couple of singing calls so I figured "What the Heck".

By 1976 I had four clubs in SC that I called for and taught lessons for. I was still a full time college student attending USC (the REAL one) – calling 5-6 nights a week. I had already decided that I wanted to pursue calling full time, so I set up my first cross country tour (working my way from SC to the National Convention in Anaheim). The good news - I was gone over 2 weeks, drove almost 6000 miles. The bad news – I had three dances (total – one in Lexington, KY, one in Omaha, and one in Lake Charles, LA). I made a whopping \$225. In the process I wrecked my car – By the time I got it repaired, I barely had enough money to make it home.

Anyway..... By 1980, I was out of school, and decided to become a full time traveling professional caller and festival doer. For many years, I drove well over 100,000 miles a year – gone for weeks (months) at a time. In 1988, I was elected to the CALLERLAB BOG, and in 1994 I was elected Chairman of the Board serving two terms. I am still a member of the BOG (serving my last term).

That brings me to today. My topic is "Square Dancing – Is It Broke? – Can We Fix It?"

Before I go any further, I need to tell you that I'm not really sure of anything. I have a lot of questions, but very few REAL answers. I do, however, have some observations, and some suggestions and even more questions. Perhaps some of my observations and questions will make you angry. My intent is not to anger anyone, but to make you think. With that in mind, here I go:

First of all, I truly love the square dance activity. That's why I decided to make it my livelihood (it sure isn't the money). Square dancing has been a huge part of my life for over 30 years. So my observations are out of love.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that square dancing is declining (has been in fact for 20 years or better). Clubs all over are folding. Classes are almost nonexistent in many areas. Some states have even had to fold their state convention. Many long-lived festivals nationwide have ceased operations. Look around you – There are roughly 8000 dancers in attendance here. In 1983 at the Louisville Nationals, there were over 30,000. So in 20 years, our National convention has experienced roughly a 70% drop off. I would hazard a guess and say that this percentage would also apply to the number of dancers nationwide. In any other business, if one's sales dropped that much, the CEO would have auditors, designers, even family members locked up in some room trying to figure out how to either make the product better or how to market it differently.

Someone once said (may have been Einstein) that the best definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again expecting a different result. That's what we've been doing (at least some of us). Many of us are actually doing nothing – expecting someone else to do all the work. It speaks highly of all of you that you have taken the time out of your convention to be here. That shows that you care.

To partly answer the topic of this speech. I don't think that square dancing is "broke." It's been around for centuries in one form or another. While it may not be broke, it certainly needs, in my opinion, some tweaking. Now here's where I may start stepping on toes. Too many of us are too quick to blame CALLERLAB for the woes of square dancing, and are too quick to figure that CALLERLAB has all the answers.

An observation: CALLERLAB's job should be the maintenance of the square dance programs. It shouldn't rest on CALLERLAB's shoulders to fix the woes of square dancing. That burden should rest on all of our shoulders.

In my travels and conversations – I have called in 49 states (Idaho comes up next year for my 50th) and almost 20 foreign countries. I have observed five of what I view as problems. They are not in any specific order of importance, because they

all tie into each other. I am going to offer my opinion (notice I didn't say solution) on each.

- New Dancers
- Programs
- Image
- Dress
- Music
- Marketing

Without **new dancers**, square dancing cannot survive. We have always survived on a 50% retention rate. Even back in the 70's when square dancing was HUGE, 50% was pretty much the norm. Nowadays the retention rate is probably less than 50%. That in itself isn't so bad, but almost everywhere, class sizes (if in existence) are very small. It's one thing to have a class of 10 squares and keep five. It's a whole new picture to have a class of one square and only get one couple out of it.

Jim Mayo, a prominent New England Caller, gave me the following:

"Actually retention rates were always low. I started keeping records in 1960 after Gilmore (Ed) told me to at his school. Everyone who tried square dancing in the next decade finished the class which, by 1970 was already more than 20 lessons. Of the graduates, half never danced again. Of the remaining 50% half did not return for the next season. We grew because we were so successful at recruiting. That began to fade in the late 1970's. By the mid-1980's recruiting was a major problem and MWSD began shrinking from lack of new people."

So how do we get new dancers? Now that's the 64,000-dollar question. We have always relied on friends bringing friends bringing friends. Unfortunately, most of you are like me – All my friends already dance! Perhaps that method would still work, if you approached it as friends bringing STRANGERS bringing friends. Regardless, we must find alternate ways of recruiting new people.

There have been areas that have used radio and newspaper advertisement with mixed results – some good, some not so good. Putting on exhibitions is still a good idea. There are many people that have absolutely no idea what square dancing is all about. Don't wait for the local malls to invite you – Go there and offer your services. You might be surprised that many of these places (malls/downtown areas/etc.) are starving for different forms of entertainment.

A method that I have not seen promoted is this..... Get your square dance club involved civically in your town. Sponsor road clean ups. How many times have you driven down a freeway and seen a sign that says "Litter Removal for the next 3 miles done by XXX group". Now how many times have you seen a square dance

club's name there? What about doing a food drive for the homeless? Or a shuttle service for elderly shut ins. ANYTHING to get your picture in the paper (or radio/TV) to allow you to tell people what a great activity we have.

This would do a lot to dispel our other problem – **IMAGE**. People either know nothing about us or they figure we're still dancing half drunk in someone's barn. Sometimes we don't do ourselves any good in this regard. We have to understand that to the "real" world, our clothes look kinda funny. Now to each of us, we all look "normal" but to "civilians"?????? So if you're doing an exhibition in the public – CONSIDER not having everyone dress in full square dance regalia. Have some of the dancers wear western attire, or heaven forbid – even casual clothes. Show the people watching you that you really are normal people.

I guess this brings me to one of the hot potatoes in the activity. **Square Dance Attire**. Should we? Shouldn't we? CALLERLAB and other national organizations are considering the following dress codes:

- *Proper Square Dance Attire* - can now be short-sleeved shirts for men – Dress jeans or slacks for men and women
- *Traditional Attire* – Square dance dresses or Prairie skirts for women Long sleeve shirts and dress slacks for men

Not very long ago, I was calling at a major festival. During one of the morning sessions, a local round dance cuer came to the workshop dressed in very nice dress slacks and an equally nice blouse (do you women still call them blouses?). The organizers of the event asked her to leave because she was dressed inappropriately. Perhaps there are some of you that would agree with this. In my opinion, she was dressed appropriately enough for church. If it's nice enough for church – it ought to be nice enough for us. PERHAPS we place too much emphasis on attire. I don't know of any other group that REQUIRES its participants to dress in a particular type costume – With the exception of sports teams.

We have to be aware that to the general public – we look funny. Our attire recommendations are throwbacks to the 40's and 50's. Back then, if you looked at women's "dressy" dresses, they weren't that much different than what they wore to go dancing – just add crinoline. Consequently they didn't look THAT different. The long sleeve notion dates back to non-air conditioned days. Women didn't want to grab a sweaty arm. Not always (especially if you're like me and live where the humidity is 110% all the time), but most of the time now our halls are air conditioned, and sweaty arms are getting more uncommon. Besides, nowadays it wouldn't be politically correct to accuse a man of having sweaty arms and not allow room for the girls to have "glowing" arms.

Am I against square dance clothes? Absolutely not! I think that our costumes are a big part of our heritage. But in order to survive, square dancing, like everything else must change with the times. In days past, the husband worked (in a sport coat and tie), and the "little lady" stayed home – cooked, cleaned house, and took care of the "younguns". Now typically, both spouses work (40+ hours a week), and the "Little lady" is probably more likely to go to work in a suit than the husband. As the great poet and songwriter, Bob Dylan wrote – "The times, they are a changing".

My suggestion..... Live and let live. If someone is more comfortable in square dance clothing – GREAT. If someone else feels more comfortable in jeans and a dress shirt (long or short sleeve) – GREAT also. I think that some may worry that people will start showing up in shorts, sandals, and tank tops. I don't envision this as a problem. Peer pressure should fix that. We should approach dressing for the dance the same as dressing to "go out on the town". It should police itself.

Well..... If I've upset some of you dancers, I may as well upset some callers.... Let's talk about **MUSIC**. ***I don't believe that we can attract today's people with yesterday's music.*** Many callers (and dancers) feel that if it isn't "Turkey in the Straw" – Fiddle/ Banjo music, it ain't square dance music. I don't know about you, but I don't know of anyone that has their car radio tuned to "K-O-R-N" listening to that great top 40 tune "Dive for the Oyster". I'm not advocating hard rock music for dancing. But to dance – all you need is the proper BEAT. The instrumentation is irrelevant. There are many great dancing square dance tunes out there with all types of different rhythms and "feels". It doesn't have to be just fiddles and banjos. We can actually dance to guitars, harmonicas, horns, even harps!

So callers.... Dress up your record case. We have two great square dance record distributors here at this convention that would be more than happy to help you.

Well... As they say – "In for a penny – in for a pound". Callers – LIGHTEN UP! Somehow over the last 20 years or so, we've forgotten that square dancing actually is two words – One of them is DANCE. Square dancers want to DANCE – not "checker move". We callers have choreographed ourselves almost into oblivion. In our quest to not be boring, we've become too complicated, and many of us have sacrificed the dance for the material. I believe that people come to a square dance to "get away from it all". Going to a dance allows people to get away from the stress of their day to day lives. Let's not add more stress. As a wise man once said (maybe it was Moses) "If the music is good and the figures are smooth – They will come".

Many of us blame the ills of square dancing on the **PROGRAMS**. The problem isn't with the programs – it's the use (or rather ABUSE) of them that is the problem. Is this a normal scenario? You convince someone to take lessons. They stay (anywhere from 20 weeks to almost a year depending on the area) and then graduate. Almost immediately, they're pressured to learn the next level (normally Plus). In fact, most people don't think they're dancing unless they're dancing Plus. How's this for another scenario... A brand new graduate comes to your club dance. They get there at 8:05 so they miss the first tip. After the rounds, they are able (around 8:30 or so) to dance the second tip. Now the caller announces that the third tip is gonna be a Plus tip. So they have to sit that tip out. After the Plus tip, it's now almost 9:00 and they have been at your club for an hour and have danced a total of one tip. I guess they're having a big time??????

It's my belief that if your club holds Mainstream lessons, then your club should dance Mainstream ONLY and should not give Plus lessons. Plus clubs should give Plus lessons. Mainstream clubs should give Mainstream lessons. Otherwise, your new students spend the majority of their time "learning" square dancing rather than enjoying square dancing.

Our square dance pyramid is getting way out of kilter. For stability, the base should be the widest point. Our base is new students. New students should graduate at Mainstream. Instead, our pyramid is beginning to bulge in the middle, and become pointed at the base – kinda like a diamond. Diamonds are pretty, but have you ever tried to stand one upright? Not very stable... That's what's happening to our activity. It has become very unstable. It hasn't tipped over yet, but.....

We are forcing our new people to rush up the level ladder. Now here's the problem.... HUMAN NATURE. They don't want to stop. I believe that there are more people (in the US) in Advanced lessons than in Mainstream lessons. There might very well be more people in C-1 lessons than in Mainstream. Now I have nothing against Advanced and Challenge – I call both. In fact, I specialize in C-7 ☺. I think that the activity needs all the upper levels. But... Somebody has to help maintain the triangle's base. Not to generalize, but typically, once someone learns Plus, we lose them as recruiters at the Mainstream level. The same applies for someone learning Advanced – we lose them at Plus.

The problem is that we have made our activity best suited for the person who wants to keep on going up the ladder. Our activity is such now, that, if you don't dance multiple times a week, you can't keep up. What about all those people that can only dance once a week or twice a month. Where are these people now? They were in lessons (maybe graduated) and then quit...

Several years ago, the CALLERLAB Foundation hired a marketing firm to conduct a survey to determine exactly why ex-dancers quit. The bottom line---- It was too difficult and required too much of a time commitment.

We want to attract "younger" dancers, yet we make it almost impossible to keep them. Let me use myself as an example. I'm pretty much the type person that you want in lessons. My wife and I are both in our 40's (Ok late 40's for me), we both work, we have children, but our oldest is a built in baby sitter. Offering me free lessons isn't an incentive. I'm of the generation that if something is free – that's about what it's worth. If I take my wife and kids to a movie – it costs me almost \$50. What do I care if lessons cost \$10 per night? Since money isn't the issue – what is? It's time! If I stay in lessons (assuming they're short enough – you'll NEVER sell me on something that's gonna take $\frac{3}{4}$ of a year to learn) and graduate, I may be able to come to club dances relatively regularly. However, I won't be able to do the Tuesday night club, the Wednesday night Plus lessons, the Thursday night review session, and the Saturday night special. I have other things to do – kids, other friends, maybe even bowling. I just want to take my wife out for a fun evening. I don't want a new lifestyle.

So do I think that square dancing is broken? Well... It's bending in the middle right now. If we don't address these (and other) issues pretty soon, it's going to break. If we act quickly, I believe that we can fix things. If we wait for it to finish breaking, then who knows??? **I do not believe that square dancing can continue in its' current form.**

There is a grass roots movement going on in the calling circles right now to try and shorten the entry level for square dancing. Right now, if you don't dance Plus, in many areas, you won't be able to find a dance. There's nothing wrong in dancing Plus, but Plus should not be the entry level for square dancing. Our activity needs to be structured so that the people can enter the square dance world in as short a time period as possible. IN other words, WE GOTTA MAKE IT EASIER FOR PEOPLE TO GET INTO THE "MAINSTREAM" OF DANCING. Here, Mainstream isn't a level, but the entry level of dancing. 40 weeks to learn anything is WAY too long. We need to figure out a way to get people into the "Mainstream" of square dancing in half of that (or less). More on that later....

I mentioned earlier that I didn't believe that the "friends bringing friends bringing friends" theory wouldn't work any more. Actually it will **IF** we change things around a bit. The primary reason that it won't work in today's square dance structure is that by the time our new dancers graduate and go through workshops in order to get into the club's "Plus" level, they've lost their enthusiasm for recruitment. After all they've just spent the better part of a year in some type of lesson – They're not going to want to bring their friends in and start another year long process. BUT..... If the structure of the club was such that upon graduation

these new people were able to immediately go out and recruit their friends for new lessons, the idea will work.

How you wonder??? I think that a perfect method is the MULTI CYCLE PROGRAM. If you're interested in this, you can get more info at <http://www.dosado.com/articles/cltenplu.htm>.

This also gets us away from the old "classes in September" syndrome. I guess that there's a good reason (other than "that's the way we always did it") for only offering lessons once a year – but I surely don't know what it is. We lose the perfect vehicle for recruitment. Assuming we keep enough people through graduation... They're all hyped up on square dancing AND we make them wait another six months before we allow them to share their new activity with their friends. After that period of time, these folks are now dancing Plus, and they don't have the time, energy, or enthusiasm to recruit. Probably one of them is President of the club by now – because none of the "Old Guard" wants the job.

So.... I guess by now that you believe that I think that square dancing is broken beyond repair. I don't think that any more than you do. Most of us are at this National Convention because we enjoy square dancing. I enjoy dancing, but I still truly enjoy calling. I am very blessed that I love my job so much. I still enjoy going to work. Many people work all week just looking forward to Friday so they can be off for a couple of days. Me.... I can't wait for Friday (or Monday or Thursday) to go to work.

Thus far I've given you a lot of problems and very few solutions. I believe that square dancing can be fixed. Many of us may not like my idea of "fixing". That's OK. As I said in the beginning, I don't know that I have solutions – Only ideas. Maybe you have some that will work as well or better. I do know that that what we're doing right now isn't working. We've been doing the same thing for years, and it just isn't gonna work!!! Many people have spoken about "marketing" square dancing better. Many clubs and associations have tried varied forms of promoting our product – mostly with poor results. If marketing isn't the answer – Maybe it's time we offer a "new and improved" square dance. Let's change the product!

The problem with this is that many of us are very reluctant to change. We get so comfortable in our little square dance world – We don't want anyone to upset the applecart. I offer to you that your level of comfort just may be too difficult to sell.

We need some type of change!!! The only success stories in square dancing that I know of are the clubs and areas that are doing something "different". The only problem is that they are too far and too few between.

It's really time to say "Enough is enough". Primarily, we dancers have been relying on CALLERLAB to lead the activity. It's time for all of you to step up to the plate. We're losing dancer organizations as well as clubs. LEGACY closed its' doors a year

or so ago. Now the only national dancer organization is USDA. These folks are working very hard trying to promote and help our activity. But they need help! If you're not a member – Join. If you are a member – Participate.

There is so much that we need on a national level for square dancing. To my knowledge, no one is really sure just how many square dancers there are – nationwide or worldwide.

It would be really nice to somehow (costs money) have a nationwide toll free number that people could contact to find out about classes/clubs in a particular area.

So, to recap: Here are my observations and suggestions.

Relax the dress code. Remember, everyone may not be comfortable in crinolines, panty hose and dresses. But if that's the way you like to dress, then by all means, BOYS dress that way.

Get your club involved in the community. I have heard it said that square dancing is the most politically correct activity in the world. Where else can brick layers, lawyers, teenagers, and even politicians all "join hands" for anything? But it's a moot point if no one knows about it.

Recruit. We need to build our base back up. Without a proper foundation, our little pyramid will topple. But remember – Take care of your new students and club members. Don't make them feel inferior because they ONLY dance mainstream.

Get involved in your local/state/national dance organizations.

Communicate with your caller. Let him/her know your concerns. If square dancing is going to prosper, callers and dancers must work together.

Lastly, **Try something different.** Our old way just isn't working. Be open for change.

I don't expect everyone to agree with me – Maybe no one does – That's OK. If everyone thought like me, we'd all be callers, and we'd have no one to call to. But if I can make you sit down and think about things – just a little – then perhaps somebody will do something. Change in anything is inevitable. Let's not be so steadfast in our thinking that we refuse to be open for new ideas. If it weren't for new ideas, we'd still be in barns instead of convention centers.

Thank you for your attention.