

Environmental Factors Denigrating Square Dancing

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 most of 2001-2006. ACA really appreciates the positive comments, encouragement to continue, and contributions from callers and dancers all over the country and from 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 dance programs.

This month's ACA Viewpoint discusses the thoughts of Ms. Pat Latta who resides in the Capital District of New York State. Pat believes that the decline of square dancing partially lays in the attitudes and internal, possibly "hidden agendas" of square dance leaders.

Pat has been dancing for about 20 years and has watched the activity decline over the years. Pat says that when she started dancing, people would take their square dance association schedules and look over the weekend dances and would CHOOSE which dances they wanted to attend each night, based upon who was calling. Today, with all the clubs disbanding and the quality of dancing slipping, it is hard to find even ONE dance on Friday or Saturday night.

The New York State Convention was canceled about 10 years ago, which was a terrible loss to New York and area square dancers. Today, the closest they have to a "state convention" is the New England Square and Round Convention of which Pat is proud to be helping as their Secretary.

Pat believes that part of the problem is the attitude of the square dance leaders who are resistant to any changes! They don't want to see anything changed from 40 years ago when they first started dancing. A one floor/dance "level," forget it. They don't want that.

Pat made the "outlandish" suggestion of making conventional dance attire "optional" in the summer months, thinking that might encourage more folks to attend dances during the hot months. The furor was so intense that you would think Pat committed a mortal sin or committed treason and sedition.

One of the square dance leaders said at a meeting, "If it comes down to that, I'm done dancing, they'll be coming to our dances in short shorts!" Can you just imagine, SHORT-SHORTS? With the age and physical state of most dancers these days, that was a ridiculous comment. Nevertheless, the rest of the "old-school square dance leaders" on the board went along with that and considered Pat a radical for even making that suggestion!

Today some square dance leaders have made dancing so restrictive and regimented that younger people come to one or two lessons see the "writing-on-the wall" and you never see them again! This restrictive attitude and the idea of lessons for a year to learn the mainstream and plus are killing square dancing.

Pat argues that lessons could be done like line dancing or old-fashioned square dancing where people right off the street can come in and learn to dance. The caller could begin by calling simple and teach a "real" call as the evening progresses. If a square breaks down, stop and teach that one call and continue with the night until it happens again.

Everyone leaves after having a nice time. No one is committed to weeks and weeks of lessons. New dancers can learn enough to encourage them to come back for another week of fun. At one time square dance lessons USED to be fun. Pat suggests that callers and clubs can use a sign-in sheet and after these people have attended a certain number of "dances" be presented with a paper saying that they are now considered "square dancers" and can feel free to join the club if they wish. The caller would need to call dances on that basis. Pat argues that until lessons are fun once again, square dancing will continue to denigrate itself.

Pat also noted that callers no longer teach any dance etiquette. Some beginner dancers think nothing of leaving a square if someone enters it that they'd rather not dance with joins. Other people cut right through a square to join another. If someone is fooling around in a square, the instructor never says something like, "that's fine, if you want to do that after these folks learn the moves, but until then, they have to learn the right way." Dancers aren't taught the difference between a hand hold, such as in a grand-right & left and a fore arm hold such as in a swing-through or allemande left.

ACA advocates that square dancing has the potential to be of interest to all dancers. The lack of dancer courtesy, refusal of square dance leadership to change with the times, an outdated and mandated and ever burdensome and out of step dance programs are simply driving people away and hurting square dancing.

Why not make it fun and easy and kill these sacred cows?

The American Caller's Association is very grateful to Ms. Pat Latta for presenting these problems to be communicated and discussed. Her willingness and desire to revitalize square dancing is praise-worthy. ACA

thanks her for taking the time to communicate to us.

Any individual, club, caller, or association who wishes to communicate his/her opinions on this subject is encouraged to contact the American Callers' Association at Loulet@aol.com or Dr. Patrick Demerath at pdemerath@troy.edu. Please visit our website and newsletters at AmericanCallers.com/news.

Until next time, happy dancing.