

Hints for Improvement of Your Dancing Skill

By Vic and Debbie Ceder with some inserts and annotations by Harlan

- Being a good dancer has nothing to do with level—there are great Plus dancers and really poor C1 dancers. It has more to do with being a good team member. Dance your part and allow the others to dance their part. A truly good dancer will wait until the last moment for another 'team member' in his or her square to act, before offering help if necessary. **Please don't be the obnoxious dancer who must help every other dancer in the square whether or not they need it. Or equally as bad, if not worse, the dancer who stops and helps and by doing that misses his/her part of the call.**

- **If you need to help other dancers in your square, do it in a gentle manner. Don't forcefully push or pull them.** Often you can simply repeat the name of the call, verbally recite a portion of the definition, or point to where the other dancer(s) should go. Try to wait until the last possible moment just in case the other dancers didn't really need help at all. Perhaps they just needed a little extra 'think-time'. Often if a dancer is a bit confused just saying something like “Next to Joe” or “take right hands “will do the trick.

- Watch the dancers in your own square! 'Shadow dancing' off of counterparts in an adjacent square is *not* dancing, and should be discouraged. No matter who your counterpart may be that dancer is human and is quite capable of making mistakes, and watching them makes you not watch your square. Always attempt to dance your own part on your own brainpower. Only check your counterpart if it was a particularly difficult call or you otherwise got lost. If you find you are checking your counterpart more than you are dancing precisely on your own, then you are probably dancing above your level.

- Keep formations compact, and stay precisely where you belong until the caller instructs you to move. Don't rush or dance ahead of the music. There are no points for 'getting there first.' It is essential that everyone see the formations and spots involved. If you move quickly because you know where you're going, someone else may not have seen where you came from, what the initial formation was, or where they need to go.

- Touch hands whenever possible, especially in distorted formations. Touching hands helps to keep formations compact and allows everyone to see the identified formation and who is working with whom. At times when it is not possible to touch hands, identify distorted formations by pointing to the dancers or positions within your formation. When identifying formations such as Distorted Waves, stay in your spot (without turning your body) and reach forward or backward as necessary to try to form a 'bumpy' Wave.

- When the caller designates specific dancers (heads, sides, boys girls, leads, trailers, etc.) identify yourself as necessary by raising your hand or saying boy, girl, head, etc. Even when you know that you are a Head or Side, Beau or Belle, etc., the other dancers in the square may also need this information.

You may also need to identify yourself as a Girl or Boy if there are mixed sex partners in the square or if you inadvertently got switched with a member of the opposite sex.

- No yelling or arguing. It accomplishes nothing except to generate hurt feelings. Also, other dancers may not be able to hear the caller's cuing or the next call. Keep unnecessary comments and noises to a minimum, since any noise within the square can distract dancers, some of whom might have hearing impairments. When there is a live caller available, ask for his or her 'expert' opinion to settle any disputes. The caller is the final authority at the dance, even if you think he or she is wrong. Thou shalt obey thy caller. If you think the caller is wrong, it is usually better to talk to the caller in private after the tip, instead of yelling at him or her from the dance floor.
- Dance smoothly and to the beat of the music. No yanking, pulling, pushing, shoving, kicking, or otherwise jerky or distracting movements. Square Dancing is not a wrestling match. Be considerate of other people's needs. There have been a number of dancers who have dropped out of the square dancing activity because of injuries inflicted upon them by rough dancers yanking on brittle wrists, shoulders, etc.
- If you do not know how to do the given call, resist the temptation to wander aimlessly. By not moving, the other dancers will get the clue that you don't know what to do, and will try to help you. If you start wandering off, they might not help you since you will seem to know where you are going. It often helps to stop in position and say "where do I go" rather than wandering about.

Also, it is easier for the helpers if they know where you were at the beginning of the call. **On the other hand, moving *slowly* in flow direction is often the correct way to get near to where you need to be to interact with the next dancer.**

- **Often when dancers are lost they for some reason turn around—this is the worst thing you can do, since almost every call has you moving forward. DO NOT TURN AROUND—Stop—LOOK—And move forward slowly**
- **Keep your eyes up!!!!!!** Many dancers look at the floor while dancing. This is a very bad habit. Keep looking up and watching what is happening in your square, if you are lost, but looking up and slowing moving forward, you will almost always see a spot opening up where you will probably be going.
- **Again relax as much as possible, stop and look around for an open spot, do not turn around—or worse turn back and forth in a dither, if you need to, say "where do I go?" this will work most of the time**
- Resist the temptation to cheat or short cut. It is discourteous and annoying to the other dancers and the caller. You should be aware, however, that some dancers will cheat on certain calls. Cheats, unless executed 'cleanly' (i.e., not affecting the traffic pattern or the interaction with any dancers), may confuse dancers and thus cause the square to break down. Note also that many callers, myself included, do not appreciate hot-shot dancer's short-cutting calls, since it disrupts the flow and timing of the sequence. Please be considerate to the caller and other dancers and don't cheat!

Studying Hints

Preface:

“The problem-solving, concept-oriented direction into which advanced challenge dancing has evolved necessitates knowing precise definitions. No longer can a dancer have a mental picture of a call and "feel" his way through it by blending in with the flow of the other seven dancers because, for one thing, phantoms don't flow well. ""Bill Heimman 1989

The above applies to all dance levels now days—mainstream through C4. Harlan

The Hints:

- The most enjoyable, easiest, and best way to improve your dancing skills is to dance on a regular basis (at least once a week)! Either find a group with a live caller or find a group that is willing to work through taped material, but dance regularly. Also it is important to dance both the highest level you and at least the level below it regularly. I dance C4 but try to regularly dance mainstream, plus, advanced, and all other challenge levels. If the caller and choreography are good—all dance programs are fun.
- Study!!!! Get a couple of different definition books, since you may find that the material in one book is easier for you to understand (or may simply give you a different perspective) than in another book.

Harlan's big message (flashing lights and horns):

Often when talking about studying I run into dancers who say ‘but I don't learn that way, I learn by feeling the calls’. Now then, we all went through school and learned by studying, reading, and reviewing. No one learned their multiplication tables or went through a foreign language course by feeling them. It is true that you usually first learn calls (at least at mainstream and plus), by being walked through them. This is important, because you do need to first physically experience the call. This is like the lecture part of a class in high school or college. But then you need to internalize the information by studying it and reflecting on what it means outside of class. Most people did not memorize the lectures—they went home and studied their notes and read the related textbooks, reviewed for tests, etc. (there are exceptions—for instance I memorized every lecture I heard, but that is a little weird and unusual --Harlan)

- Make flash cards or verbally record the call definitions upon an audio cassette, using your own words to help you learn.
- Get a set of Square Dance Checkers. Pushing checkers helps many dancers understand the nuances of calls and concepts.
- Use Tamnations <http://www.tamtwirlers.org/tamination/info/index.html>

- The key to learning calls is being able to *verbalize*. Never look at step lively and say, "Yes, I know that." or "yes, they go over here and the others do this." Always say, "detour, slim down, circulate." Say it out loud or say it to yourself, but say it. Verbalize the call whenever you see or hear it. Quiz each other at supper - but always, always verbalize it. When you dance at any level, verbalize each and every call as you dance. If you do, you will be forming habits of the things you'll need at higher levels.
- Listen to teach tapes or dance tapes and try to visualize your position within a square, or simply try to recite the definition of each call as it is called.
- After (or during) each workshop, class or live dance, make a list of the calls that you had problems with and review that list during the week, looking up definitions as necessary. Be sure to ask your caller or tape group leader any questions that you might have.
- This is a big one: make a list of calls that you have trouble with—study them in particular. Every time you dance note what gives you problems. Ideally if you have trouble with a call at a dance, you will study it so that the next time you won't