Calling Square Dances in the Twenty-first Century

By Scott Russell

Editing and additional thoughts from Susan Davis

My goal as a dance caller:

People should be smiling and dancing to the music.

Thoughts on calling technique:

Kathy Anderson:

Know your dance by heart.

Keep it moving.

Call with the band, get your groove, feel it with your body.

Larry Edelman

Your goal: to be heard and understood.

Articulate, watch and stress key words, partner/corner, left/right, etc.

Call rhythmically. Stress key words with volume and pitch.

Scott Russell:

Start with spare/clear information calls.

Add more patter/syllables as dance progresses.

Go back to spare calls when changing pattern, or beginning tag.

Leave more space between calls at the beginning of dance (not possible w/NE style squares). Compress timing as dancers master pattern.

Drive the dance without leaving the dancers in the dust.

Make sure calls come before the next “choice point”.

Use preparatory and organizing calls as needed

-Now settle down

-square your set

-wait for the call

-find your corner

-break that swing

Use pickups (on off beat) to signal and drive calls.

-**Go** forward up 6

**It’s a** lady round the lady and the gent also

**Now** the lady round the lady, but the gent don’t go.

Use rhyming patter. It’s fun, helps you remember the dance, and helps signal what’s next.

Forward up 6 and six fall back, two gents round the inside track

Forward up 4 and back you fall, sashe on to the right of the hall.

Programming:

Choose dances you can teach and call, and that the dancers can learn and do.

Use previously learned figures.

With a mixed level group, lean towards forgiving dances (Grapevine Twist is still fun when you go the wrong way. Tic Tac Toe not so much)

Modify dances to make them easier and more in line what folks are used to.

Use simple choruses.

Add simple tags.

Why “we” don’t like squares:

1980- “They’re boring and there’s too much standing around.”

2015- “They’re confusing and take too long to teach.”

Programming for specific audiences:

Squares at a contra dance:

Don’t apologize

Get info out early- “Thank the band, thank your partner, find a new partner and form square sets.

Leading couple dances are often unsatisfying for contra dancers. They are not used to the loose phrasing, and with making these simple patterns fun. They feel like there’s too much time standing around. You can make these more active by having a follow up couple (couple 1 go on to 4, couple 2 lead on to 3).

Two strategies for contra dancers”

1) New England style squares: They use figures and timing that contra dancers are used to

Use figures taught earlier in the evening to make teaching go faster.

Add easy tags after the figure

2) Now for something completely different:

Find dances that are out of the contra dance mold, but have fun and pleasing patterns.

Scott’s favorites:

Texas Star

Friendly square dance

Couple 1 prom inside ring (visit and chat w/ couples as you pass

Couple one arch over other couples (holding inside hands, gent on inside)

Couple 1 swing in center, others circle 6 hands round

Wild Goose Chase (Grapevine Twist)

Accumulative Lady Round 2 and the Gent Drop Through

Heads and Sides Tunnel of Love

Forward Up 6 family

Little Sisters (can also use this as a tag)

Deep in the Heart of Texas (Ralph Sweet) whole hall figure (doesn’t need to be singing square)

Calling at community dance events

(dances for drunks and children)

Know your audience and the nature of the event.

Make sure the organizers know what they want and what you do.

Make sure organizers have communicated to attendees that there will be group dancing for all.

You cannot err on the side of too easy.

Get them moving.

Don’t worry about strict phrasing.

Minimize changes of direction and the need to know left and right.

Minimize dizzy sequences. Folks don’t mind watching others in set and clapping to the music.

Dance selection:

1) Very easy circle mixers, often done as “keepers”

2) Virginia Reel type set dances. Mix and match parts. Casting and reeling the set are the most difficult parts of these. It’s ok to leave these out, and have the top couple sashe to the bottom to end the round of the dance.

3) Big sets- Start in big circle. Do easy big circle movements: circle L and R, into center and back, ladies in/ gents in and “step it on out”, promenade the ring.

Call “find another couple and circle up 4”. There’s no need to deal with odd and even couples. Use symmetrical moves, such as circle R and L, stars, do si do (or dance around) partner, do si do corner. With even and odd figures, let them decide on the fly. “ Put one lady/person in the middle, that’s birdie in the cage, She hops out, put her partner in (bird hop out and the crow hop in). You can repeat for all four people, (buzzard, hoot owl, etc.). To progress, just call find another couple and circle up four. You should be able to call circles, stars, do si do (dance around), and birdie in the cage without preteaching.

Call promenade in one big ring, and use some of the simple big set moves. You can come on the floor and lead “snake ‘em up”. Be very careful with this! You will have folks who can’t move too fast, and there is a crack the whip effect that speeds up the line at certain spots.

4) Very easy square sets

Use the most basic opening, chorus (see big circle)

Easy leading couple figures, birdie in the cage, stars, take a little peek.

If group can handle a partner change, a simple divide the ring dance like Uptown Down can work (John McCutcheon always did this at the end of his concerts). Make sure the corner change is easy (“bow to your partner, but swing your corner and promenade your corner to the gents home place).

I also like to use the Friendly Square.

Use very simple keeper endings/tags.

I like Army/Navy.

Calling at all square events:

It’s great that we’re having more all square dance events.

Be aware of your audience. What’s the mix of experienced traditional square dancers, contra dancers, somewhat reluctant spouses, exuberant youth, musicians who dance occasionally, etc.

Make sure you open with dances that are failsafe. There’s nothing worse than having a teaching meltdown and frustrated dancers to start your event.

You can use the first dances to assess the skills of your dancers: How quickly do they learn? Are they dancing on the beat/phrase? How well/quickly do they respond to calls? What confuses them?

Use your teachable moments to encourage good style and technique, rather than teaching complicated patterns.

Programming:

Use a mix of square sets, big sets, mixers, and other formations

Square sets:

Leading couple

Accumulative (gather in 4/6/8)

Dances with lines (forward up 6/8)

Heads and sides

Serpentine/ “dishrag” (grapevine twist, duck for the oyster, double bow knot)

Divide the Ring dances

Use a mix of silly/social dances and pattern driven dances.

Vary and build onto chorus patterns

Use tags and hash on the fly.

Big sets: Open in big circle, with fairly simple whole set figures, circles, forward and back, Alemande left to right and left grand, gents keep going ladies turn back, etc.

For small circle figures, start with simple figures including ones taught for square sets. Teach one or two new, trickier figures each time you do a big set.

Ending: In big circle, use some of the opening figures, plus figures like tunnels, dip and dive, grand march.

Other formations:

Circle mixers are nice social openers.

Non-contra longways sets in the Virginia Reel family

The Shuffle (great for groups with unequal sex ratios)

6 Hand Reel

6 couple Thread the Needle (from Phil Jamison)

Dances:

Friendly Square (“Marching through Georgia” singing square, modified by Scott Russell

An easy, loosely phrased, social square

Couple 1 promenade around the inside of the set (ccw)

Encourage visiting and exchanging pleasantries with each couple they meet.

When Couple 1 returns home, they take inside hands (lady on right) and make an arch (gent on inside of set, lady on outside) and move the arch over each couple in turn (ccw).

 As Couple 1 finishes arching over the couples, they swing as the other 3 couples circle around them (“Circle 6 hands around, couple 1 swing in the center of the town).

Chorus of your choosing

Repeat for each couple in turn.

Grapevine Twist/Wild Goose Chase (traditional)

Accumulating dance

Couple 1 go to couple 2, gent leading partner

“split that couple and lead (to left) around lady (back to center)

“Double on back on the inside track” (make a clockwise loop on the inside of the set.

“Split that couple and lead(to the right) around the gent” (and back to the center)

“circle up 4” “Gent 1 drop your left hand, and lead on to the next”

Gent 1 leads line of four on same pattern through couple 3, then gather in six and lead through couple 4, gather in 8 and circle to home.

Variation “Friendly Wild Goose Chase”

Couple 1 to Couple two and circle 4, gent 1 leads the dance through couples 3 and 4 as above. Instead of circling 8, couple 4 swings in the center as others circle left around them until home. I often add the whole hall “Deep in the Heart of Texas” figure from Ralph Sweet

The swinging couples in each square face and put both hands together to form tunnels. The leading gents lead the line of six around the room through various arches. Then call all go home and swing.

Tunnel of Love:

Heads and sides (repeat pattern HHSS)

Head couples forward and back

Heads forward and form an arch (put both hands up and join hands with opposite)

Side ladies tunnel through (to opposite)

Gents pull those ladies up to you (sides swing opposites as women cross), head gents bring opposite home to them and swing.

Alemande left (new) corner, do si do the one you swung,

Swing that (new) corner, promenade to gents home place.

May repeat with gents tunneling, women pulling gents to them, and promenading to the ladies home place.