

Styling

by Tim Marriner

Modern Western Square Dancing of today appears to be totally enamored with choreographic content, concentrating much of its attention on individual calls rather than the actual dance. Essential elements such as etiquette, history, protocol, and styling are usually sacrificed under the guise of time constraints or too much required teaching material. The mechanics of how individual calls work is vitally important, but equally important is how each call flows with connectivity from one formation to the next in a seamless dance pattern. Square dancers should not only be shown how to dance a particular action but also the proper manner or technique by which it is done. Styling should be an intricate part of the square dance activity. Without styling there is no dance. Good styling improves performance and enhances the quality of the overall dance experience. The fact of the matter is, it really does not take that much more time to show a dance action thoroughly with proper styling.

Events such as Folk Dance Parties, Western Dance Parties, or Hoedowns are usually not the place to worry much about proper styling. The focus of these parties is geared to learning a few steps without too much teaching. Still it can be said to hold hands mans palms up, ladies palm down without gripping and shuffle feet in the direction you are dancing. Hoppy and Skippy will still be bouncing along the whole time. If the event is a new dancer session, all these bad habits need to be addressed.

Styling should be taught and demonstrated as soon as a new dancer session starts. Dancers need to be shown proper posture; standing straight with their heads held up to observe what is happening around them. They need to be shown what a normal couple arrangement is, how to hold hands between the couple, and the importance of maintaining hand contact with their partner and others around them even if not active. New dancers need to be told repeatedly to take available hands after each dance action. They will also need to be shown how to keep their hands in an available dance position rather than letting them hang to their sides or worse yet, in their pockets. When a Boy runs around a Girl for example, he is expecting to find her hand readily available about waist level beside her, not behind her. Of

equal importance is the understanding of when to let go. On the Right and Left Grand action dancers need to learn not to hold the hand after they are past each other; something that will turn the other dancers out of position for the next oncoming dancer or possibly inflict pain. This hand action is best not to be described as a pull by as that tends to lead the dancers to believe they need to yank each other past them. Explaining how to take the hand and releasing it while pass shoulders will help the dancers tremendously on any action that requires this process.

Remember you are teaching a dance. Therefore, new dancers need to be shown the proper gliding shuffle step that puts weight more on the balls of their feet rather than a walking step that puts weight on the heel first then stepping forward on the toes. On the right surface this shuffle dance step sounds great! Dancers will also need to be told to stay level headed without bouncing, as this action can wear one out fast, not to mention the harm it could do to the knees.

Every action has a particular technique that should be conveyed to dancers that will enhance the dancing experience. A simple yet often rushed dance action such as Bow to the Partner can demonstrate how styling should be applied to improve dance quality. From a squared set with normal couple handholds, each couple turns towards each other. The gent bends slightly at the waist maintaining eye contact while acknowledging his partner. The lady can either bow or slightly curtsy also maintaining eye contact with her partner. This call can end with the two dancers facing or blend into the next action called. If the next call is to Bow to the Corner, the couple will turn back towards the center of the square and slightly more towards their corners to bow as previously described without necessarily letting go of hands with their partner. These two actions really do serve a greater purpose when used at the start of a hash call. First it musters attention for everyone to get started and secondly it brings to focus who the partner and corners really are. This can be a beautiful start to a dance if called properly. However, if the caller rushes through these two dance calls without allowing the dancers time to perform the whole action they will get into the bad habit of simply turning their heads to nod or worse yet, do nothing at all.

A Dosado can be fun if it is not overused and it can also provide a lot of variety. Having the men place their hands behind their back looks and feels good. The

ladies can either do the same, or if a skirt is worn, can flair them out while maneuvering around the gent. Unfortunately, on average a caller uses over 100 Dosado commands during one 2 hour session, so the dancers make up new ways to do one. Swaying left and right or the Highland fling usually is done just to be different but it significantly affects timing and body flow. If a Dosado were called only when necessary the dancers would be less apt to find other ways to dance the action.

The Promenade action is often taught by asking the partners to shake right hands then join left hands underneath while moving in the line of dance direction. Certainly this is all correct information. However, if this is all that is said, nothing is mentioned how to hold the hands. It really does not take too much time to add the man's palms are held up as a platform for the ladies to rest her palms down upon with fingers pointing outward, away from the body, in the direction they are dancing. Again, remind them nobody is gripping hands or clasping their thumbs over the others hand. Each time they take this formation they need to be reminded all of these steps until it becomes second nature. The instructor should be able to visually see each couple while they promenade around the square. If someone is not performing the action correctly even after providing all the proper styling techniques, don't scold them from behind the microphone. Take the time to show them during the next break. The dancers really will appreciate the one on one attention rather than be called out in front of everyone. Creating good styling habits from the start is a lot easier than trying to break one later.

Take the time to read and show the styling hints offered in the CALLERLAB definitions. These techniques will assist the dancers in learning the calls properly and will provide more pleasure in the overall dance experience. There are other techniques that also need to be addressed while discussing styling. Describing what square breathing is and how it can be utilized is also very important to explain for new dancers. If for example, the heads are asked to Promenade half way around the set, the side couples should move forward towards the center allowing the head couples space to get around them. They should then be reminded to back out of the center after the heads are across. There are several calls that require the set to grow apart or together in order to properly perform the action. Describing this phenomena during an appropriate teach will provide assistance to the dancers while performing the moves.

Another important aspect to share with new dancers is to remind them to keep their sets small. Usually a smaller square is a more proficient square as calls tend to pull the square apart. It is a good idea to explain to dancers how to move closer to the flag pole center of the set after performing a call that tends to spread them apart. Taking hands with adjacent dancers is the first step. Next, the square needs to tighten up with the other side of the square by moving closer to each other. These minor adjustments can be the difference between success and failure, allowing the action to be performed with proper timing in order to keep up with the rest of the squares in the room. A good caller develops a sense of timing for each call, but a great caller knows how to adjust the timing ever so slightly to keep the whole floor moving smoothly depending upon the existing conditions and ability of the dancers.

There are also dance actions that require balance, support, and resistance to perform. Where appropriate demonstrate these actions. Allow the dancers to feel the difference. One element often neglected is something called Counter Dancing. There is a space that two dancers occupy that is maintained while performing some dance actions. While dancing these kinds of actions, if done improperly, the space is moved creating a loss of balance between the couple and the rest of the square. An action such as Run requires one dancer to move into the vacated spot even if they are not actually the active person doing the move. This adjustment is really a part of the call but often times is not referenced at all. Taking the time to describe how counter dancing works, where relevant, does not take long and really helps the dancers understand and perform these steps properly.

Subtle hints described while teaching a dance step can make the step easier to perform. By simply asking the boys to slide a bit to the right and turning their body slightly left face while chaining the ladies will allow him to receive the oncoming girl better than if he were to stand firm like a stick in the mud. The body mechanics or kinesiology of dancing should flow smoothly from one call to the next without abrupt changes in direction or jerky movement. Another action where this is present is Dixie Style to an Ocean Wave. The dancers moving towards the center shake hands, pass by each other, while the other dancers slide to the right ready to take left hands to move into the center. This call in and of itself has lots of counter dancing and flow when performed well. If the dancers are having

difficulty with a particular move, it might not always be the individual things it takes to do the action but how it is being performed that is creating difficulty.

The Square Dance activity has often been described as a hand dance. While that may be a good salesmanship technique to get men involved, there really is a lot more dancing going on than is currently being taught. Styling involves much more than how to hold hands. As an instructor, take the time to study proper styling and offer this to the dancers. With just a little effort the styling aspect can be introduced to provide years of comfort and enjoyment for the dancers. Always remember to lead by example. By exhibiting good dance techniques while dancing, anyone watching should be able to appreciate the flow and connectivity of all the dance actions with style and grace that truly makes Square Dancing a beautiful art form.