

HINTS FOR CALLERS

by Ed Foote

These Hints are based on suggestions made at my Callers School. Many of the Hints are common knowledge or common sense which, unfortunately, are seldom found in print. Thus, callers often say "Gee - no one ever had me think about that before." It is hoped these Hints will help stimulate your thinking so that you may improve thru self evaluation.

Starting the Dance

1. Empty your front pockets before the first tip. Bulgy pockets do not make for a neat pleasing appearance.
2. Call beside a table if possible instead of behind it. This gets you closer to the dancers and makes them feel you have more rapport with the floor, almost as if you are in the square with them. A table in front creates a psychological barrier between you and the floor.
3. If you are going to be introduced for the 1st tip by an MC, you square up the floor - then hand the mike to the MC. Do not have the MC square up the floor.

Reason: As you square up the floor, you will be able to get an idea of the sound in the hall, balance of music and voice, amount of volume, etc. You are now comfortable to begin the first tip. But if the MC squares up the floor, then you are given the mike "cold" and must immediately start calling and make any adjustments as you call. This puts you under pressure and can detract from the opening impression you make.

4. If you are an MC, let the caller square up the floor - then you introduce him.
Reason - see #3 above.

5. If you are an MC, never introduce someone with the music playing. This distracts from what you are saying. Likewise, if you are being introduced, take the needle off the record before the MC begins.

During the Dance

1. When you square up the floor at the start of a tip, have the music louder than normal to generate enthusiasm.
2. Don't be a "music jockey" during patter calling. This means cranking the music up loud after each command is given and turning it back down as you say the next command. This is distracting to the dancers, and implies you do not have enough ability to carry the floor in a normal manner.

Note: Occasionally turning up the music is ok, such as during a longer call (Spin Chain Thru) or for the Left Allemande. But some callers will jockey the music every call or two, and this is excessive.

What You Say and How You Say It

1. Smile - be happy. The dancers will relate to you much better if you smile. Anyone can look like an unsmiling statue while calling, and unfortunately many callers look this way.
2. Get excited when you call. This will get the dancers excited about your calling. Also, it will often cause dancers to miss your other mistakes.
3. Good choreography presented in a weak quiet voice usually will not "sell" to an average Mainstream or Plus floor, because the dancers will not believe what you said. They will hold back and break down as a result. Be loud and project extra loud on anything unusual.
4. If you do not know whether you are calling loud enough, you probably are not.
5. At the end of a tip, when you say "Bow to Partners, Corners too," etc., keep your voice upbeat and enthusiastic. Some callers let their voices drift downhill and go quiet here - this loses any enthusiasm you have established during the tip.
6. The call is RIGHT and Left Thru, not "rut", nor "rit". Enunciate the word "right".
7. New callers: Beware the tendency to want to say something on every beat of music. Where possible, give commands and then be quiet, letting the dancers hear the music as they do the call.
8. New callers are taught to say "Swing Thru two by two", to help with their timing. Fine, but once you are comfortable with your timing, eliminate saying "two by two" - it makes you sound like a new caller. Either say nothing - this is best - or choose some other phrase. Ditto for "Without a stop Spin the Top."
9. Never turn your back on the floor - for any reason. The dancers consider this an insult. Do not even turn sideways - you have now turned your back on part of the floor. If you are concentrating on something in your mind and you feel watching the floor will be distracting, then raise your eyes and look at the back wall.

Teaching at a Dance

1. Practice the words you are going to use on a teach before teaching the call, especially if it is a call you have not taught before. Otherwise you run the risk of seeming unprepared.
2. If you teach a new call, use it repeatedly in that tip, and continue to use it during the dance. The dancers feel their time has been wasted if they are taught a call and then do not hear it.
3. Do not walk the set to a Left Allemande when you are walking the set thru a figure. This is a waste of time - you want them dancing, not walking. When they have completed the walkthru of the particular call to your satisfaction, either drop the needle and dance them to a Left Allemande, or tell them to square up and get them dancing from home position.
4. Be sure to walk the figure you teach from both heads and sides starting the action. If you do a walkthru from facing lines with the heads on the left side of each line, then also walk the figure with the sides on the left side. Ditto if you start the walkthru from a zero box: have the heads face the corner and begin the walkthru, now repeat for the sides facing the corner and doing the walkthru.

It is amazing the number of callers who walk a call from only one starting set-up, then call another starting set-up during the tip and can not understand why the floor is broken down.

Choreography

1. When you say "Up to the Middle and Back", give the dancers time to do it. Make a pause. Many callers will give this command and then immediately give the next call - this is awkward for the dancer both physically and mentally.
2. Experienced dancers do not need "up and back" called from facing lines very often. Too much of this will turn them off. Callers who teach a lot of beginners will often call a lot of "up and backs" at regular dances without realizing it.
3. Balance in an alamo ring. If you call it, give the dancers time to do the balance before going on to the next call.
4. Eliminate Do-Sa-Do before any arm turning motion, such as Swing Thru, Spin Chain Thru, etc. unless the dancers are so weak that this is necessary to prevent the floor from breaking down. Any dancer out of beginners class should be able to "heads Square Thru - Swing Thru" without the crutch of an intervening Do-Sa-Do. Remember that Do-Sa-Do to an arm turn call involves two reversals of body direction, and thus is not the smoothest of combinations.
5. When calling Spin Chain Thru, always have the ends do something. It is fine to have the ends do nothing when you are teaching the call or giving practice and drill to newer dancers. But at a normal dance it is a let-down for the ends to stand around and do nothing for such a long time.
6. Sweep 1/4 requires good timing from the caller. It is better to be a little early with it than late. If late, the dancers must stop and then start again.
7. Examine your calling to see if you are calling too many Right & Left Thrus or too many Bend the Lines.
8. After a Star Thru, any call involving hand holds is poor, because it represents the same hand twice for someone. Thus, forget these combinations: "Star Thru - Swing Thru". "Star Thru - Square Thru"; "Star Thru - Touch 1/4"; "Star Thru - Fan the Top".
9. The combination of "Scoot Back - Recycle" is difficult for average Mainstream dancers, because they must instantly redirect their thinking about who they are working with. An average floor is likely to break down on this combination.
10. From parallel waves, do not call: "Ends Run - Couples Circulate." This is awkward for the new centers who are looking out after the Ends Run. Instead call: "Ends Run - Centers Trade - Couples Circulate." The leverage provided by the Centers Trade smooths out the entire sequence.
11. The combination of "Dive Thru - centers California Twirl" is not the best, because it requires an abrupt sideways change of direction for the centers.
12. Never call "Zoom" from a trade-by formation. Dancers are likely to slam into each other and someone could get hurt.
13. Do not say "Step to a Wave - Swing Thru". This is choppy calling and feels choppy to the dancers. Just say "Swing Thru". Any time you are going to give an arm turn (or hand turn) call, do not say "step to a wave" first - keep the dance flowing by simply saying the call.

Singing Calls

1. Use the music volume during singing calls. There is some great music out today - let the dancers feel it as they dance. If you do not have a good singing voice, let the dancers hear more of the music by cutting out unnecessary words and phrases.
2. If you lose your timing on the singing call, do not keep calling off time, ie. words not matching the music. Make a pause of a couple seconds to hear where the music is, and then go from there. The dancers do not mind you doing this, because it is very uncomfortable for them to dance off time - they want you to make this pause to get back on time right away.

Sight Calling

1. If you are on a stage, do not select all your pilot squares at the front of the hall. It may be convenient to do so, but you will tend to look only at these squares; this gives the appearance you are calling a private dance for these people and are ignoring the rest of the hall - not a good image to convey. Choose one or two squares about half-way back. Looking at the center of the hall makes it appear you are looking at the entire hall.
2. If you forget who the corner is while sight calling:
 - A. If you know all the couples in a set, ask one of the men who his corner is. The man you asked is now your primary couple, the girl he points to is the secondary girl. Since you know who the secondary girl's partner is, you can now resolve the set.
 - B. If all have their original partner, and you have simply forgotten sequence, call: "Pass Thru - Wheel & Deal - centers make a Right Hand Star to the corner - Left Allemande."
 - C. If 2 couples have original partner and 2 do not, or if you are not sure whether the second pair have their original partner, call: "Pass thru - Wheel & Deal". Now get the matched couples (the ones you know have original partners) on the outside of the set - if they are not there after the Wheel & Deal, you will have to call a Zoom to do this. Now call: "Centers slide thru - make a Right Hand Star to the corner - Left Allemande."
3. In sight calling a singing call, start your get-out no later than beat #33 of the figure portion. There are 64 beats in most singing calls, and the music changes at the half-way point - which is the end of beat #32. This is a recognizable place in the music, so you do not have to actually count beats.

It is better to end early and have to occasionally add an extra Swing Your Partner than to be late and have to rush to get finished. Many callers want to sight call singing calls, but are afraid to try because they think they will not complete the figure in time. Starting your get-out by beat #33 will give you confidence in sight calling singing calls.