



## STRUGGLING UP THE CLIFF - THE CHALLENGE OF BECOMING A CALLER

- Opinion by Tom Gray, Leduc

*Claudia invited me to submit an article on the process of learning to call. The result is based on personal experience, discussion with other new callers in caller schools, and posts on the Facebook groups Callers in Training and Newbie callers.*

Why become a caller? In my case, it looked like fun, a challenge, something new, something I thought I might be good at because I enjoy teaching. I had noted the camaraderie among callers and wanted to be part of that. Some have admired a particular caller. Others have had to take over when a club suddenly needed a caller and no one else was available (or willing). Occasionally, someone is persuaded to give it a try at a "goof night" and find that they enjoy it. However you get started up the cliff, climbing requires a considerable investment in money, time, and effort.

**THEY WEAR A LOT OF HATS.** *(Besides being callers, they are teachers, listeners, counselors, chaperones, emcees, referees, mechanics, politicians, promoters, artists, etc.) -Corben Geiss*

### Cost of Equipment and Music

Learning to call can be costly. I've spent some \$3000 or more on equipment and music -- and I'm just getting started. Even used equipment can be expensive. And after your main purchase of a sound system (amp and speakers), there are the extras -- microphones \$100+ each, Hilton mic cable \$110 US, ADC sound cards, misc. patch cords etc. gear case \$80+, wireless mic \$500+ etc. With all this gear, clearly a caller also doubles as a sound technician. Care and maintenance of equipment also factors in.

Music is a second major outlay in money and time. New records and MP3 files run about \$7 USD plus S/H, plus time spent in selecting, reviewing, and ordering. Callers typically have hundreds of songs; do the math. Old records are \$1 or free, but going thru them and listening is time-consuming. Listen to the called side adds more time. Learning what's good for your singing voice, style, and personality takes time; listening to new music and deciding if it suits you takes even more time. Converting vinyl to digital takes 5 to 15 minutes per song (transfer plus cleanup). It all adds up. Memberships and dues also add up -- CALLERLAB membership \$105 USD/yr; SoCan membership \$67.20 CAD/yr; other professional organizations - about \$60+/yr - depends on what you join. Caller Schools run \$500 or more each, a little less for workshops; add travel and accommodation. Add in mileage, wear and tear on vehicle and time away from spouse and family.

*"Many years ago when I first started calling, an experienced caller told me to NEVER listen to the called side. I forget his reasons but I ignored the advice. I want to hear how the song starts. I want to hear how the song is handled. I want to hear the timing. There are so many songs with which I am unfamiliar, I need to hear the song sung through."*

*-- Nick & MaryAnne Turner, BC*

### Learning to Speak/Sing -- Vocal skills

Good diction is a plus - you need clear enunciation. You also need to learn precise delivery in time to the music, and how to set the sound system to best enhance your voice. Speech lessons come in handy (for example, I did two years of Toastmasters to learn public speaking skills). While "a half-decent singing voice" is generally considered to be of value, of greater benefit is having a sense of rhythm and a sense of timing. Singing lessons can help (many callers sing or have sung in community and church choirs; many take private lessons). However, it's my observation that the best callers are excellent performers (if not excellent singers).

*Overheard after I did a guest tip: Dancer 1 - "He's a good singer." Dancer 2 - "Yes, but a good singer is not necessarily a good caller, and a good caller is not necessarily a good singer."*

### Time Commitment -- Practice, Practice, Practice

Dancers probably do not realize how much time and work goes into learning to call. Working out or checking choreography, rehearsing, and practicing with dolls and calling software takes hours each week. Initially, it took me 6 hours to prep for a two-hour gig (such as a wedding dance or church group), because I want to give them both their money's worth and my very best effort. *Fortunately, it takes less time now, and I've had some great times calling those*

*"one night stands". Besides, they're the only way I make money calling! I have spent hundreds of hours practicing in my garage, my basement, my office, my car -- practicing singing calls, timing on patten etc. And this time is largely wasted because it's done without live dancers. You get a live square, you call something you've practiced for hours, the dancers do something you don't expect (but maybe could have, with more experience), and ... now what? You can't practice for that unless you've got dancers to practice with.*

*"As a new caller, I am finding that there is a lot (and I mean a lot!) of prep time that goes into calling a class night. By prep time I mean hours spent during the week working on easy singing call figures, selecting what calls and how to teach them, etc." - Denise Carbonell, USA*

## **Technique, Delivery & Performance**

Some newbies can step up to a mic and deliver a dynamite dance (Brad Slepicka for example, who wowed with his debut at age 14) but most of us learn more slowly. Proper use of calls, what's correct and when to use them, plus timing, flow, dancer movement for good choreography, all come bit by bit. We learn technical aspects of formation, arrangement, sequence, relationship, quadrants, symmetry; when to "stack" calls and when not to; how to resolve a square (get everybody back home or to an Allemande Left). Entire caller schools are devoted to the theory and practice of calling.

When you step onstage, it helps to be an extrovert, a bit of a show off. If you're not, it's a steeper uphill climb. The top callers are also excellent entertainers, who deliver with style and personality. "Have fun – enjoy life and smile when you call. You can hear the smile on the microphone." - advice from Mel Wilkerson, Australia. Easy for you to say, Mel!

*Public speaking is a breeze compared to calling. I'm always nervous for my single tip. My first few times up at the mic, my shirt was soaked with perspiration! It has become a little easier over the years, but still happens occasionally. With one tip at a time, I have no chance to get over my nervousness and start enjoying being up there. I get only one shot at it. There's no second chance.*

## **Mastery of Memory**

Starting to call at 20 must in many ways be easier than starting at 60. My mind was sharper at twenty! Certainly my memory was better back then. I'm finding it difficult to memorize material, in part because of the difference being onstage makes. Somehow holding a mic wipes the memory clean! Apparently, this is a well-known phenomenon. I CAN memorize songs or choreo that I've called on stage over and over. With only one tip here and there, progress has been slow.

*"My mind still goes blank when I get up in front of everybody." - Mark Hart, Apple Valley, California*

## **Learning to Teach**

To teach anything, you need an understanding of the material, knowledge of how learning takes place, and a great deal of patience and persistence. The newbie caller also has to overcome dancer attitude. "These new callers don't know how to teach. You can't let them loose on new dancers, they'll ruin them." (These are actual comments made by dancers who somehow forget that every one of their favorite callers was a beginner "back when"). Another common situation is being ambushed -- the Club caller says, "I want you to teach XXX tonight." No chance to prepare or review. Caller thinks he's being a good mentor and coach for throwing the newbie into the deep end. Forgets he's been doing it for decades and can probably do it in his sleep... but the new caller might need some prep time.

*The best way to learn a subject is to teach a class in it. You don't have to be an expert -- you just have to know more than your students, and keep two jumps ahead. "For thousands of years, people have known that the best way to understand a concept is to explain it to someone else." While we teach, we learn,' said the Roman philosopher Seneca."*  
- Annie Murphy Paul, [The Protégé Effect](#).

## **Support from Local Clubs**

Many beginners feel that clubs could better support new callers. "We give the new caller one tip a week" is a common format. Consider this: how long would it take you to learn to square dance if you were allowed to *dance* only one tip a week? Oh, and how do you think a new caller feels when there are four squares in the hall and only one square (or fewer) get up for the newbie's tip? The best way to encourage a new caller is to *get up and dance*.

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*"When I started about 8 years ago, I went to a callers school but because I was only getting about one tip a week I was frustrated because I wanted to get better but couldn't." - Patrick Gene Matthews, Cedar City, Utah*

Clubs are also reluctant to hire beginners. My own club has twice passed me over when looking for a replacement. Each time, they said I lacked experience, which is true, but they were unwilling to give me the opportunity to gain the experience I need. Nobody seemed to see the irony of that.

*James Herpin, from Fort Charles, Louisiana, reports, "I also have been trying to get started in calling. I have been calling about 6 or 7 years but have received few offers from local clubs, including the club I used to belong to. They hired a caller from 80 miles away who charges \$50 more than I did."*

In areas with lots of excellent, experienced callers, clubs seem never to hire a new caller to do a guest spot or demo, either. Inevitably, they will pass over a newbie for a more experienced caller. You can't blame the clubs for that: they want the best they can get. In such areas, it can be almost impossible for new callers to get a toehold, and the cliff begins to look insurmountable.

*"The point being that if you don't help those starting out, they may not be there when you need them." - John Anthony, Havertown, Pennsylvania*

### **View From the Clifftop**

Not sure what it looks like; I'm not there yet. A glimpse came in Yuma when someone came by after my tip and said, "I really enjoyed your calling, and I want you to come and call at USA West in Helena this summer." Repeat business, word of mouth referrals, and great one-night-stands also provide a glimpse of success. A new caller clings to these peeks at the vast horizon of calling.

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