

You're Starting a What?

By Glenn Rogerson

Both our square dancing friends and our non-dancing friends thought we were crazy when we announced we were starting a club. The argument from the square dancers was; "We don't need another club; square dancing is dwindling away". **We did it anyway.**

First a little background. The most important thing you need to know about us, is that we both love a challenge. So, when we took up square dancing four years ago, we wanted a "fast-track", we didn't know we wanted it, or that we would have to build it. But we went "to check it out" in the spring (too late for lessons) and the caller, said "never mind, we'll teach you on the fly". So, this is how we learned:

- Six months of "on the fly" Mainstream,
- one round of "Angeling" Mainstream lessons,
- two sets of Plus lessons at the same time,
- six months of custom instruction in DBD/APD,
- 18 months of running Austin Plus Dancers,
- six months of custom A1/A2 instruction.

Here we are; four years later and we are really happy with our dancing, as I write this, we just came back from a very technical weekend of A2 and did very well, only four months after graduating A2.

Why start a Plus club? We didn't plan to start a club. What we wanted was to learn better, more deeply. We were at the Plus level attending every weekend and dancing every "bonus tip" of Plus we could at MS dances. But it never felt like we were getting the focus we needed. And our friends seemed to feel the same way. So, we decided to get a square together and hire a caller to work with a single square in our dining room.

Planning was key! Before we ever put that first square together, I knew we needed a clear road map, so both we and the caller knew where we wanted to go. So, I resolved to come up with a list defining both the current state and the desired outcomes. The list was later extended when we converted to a club.

Basic Assumptions & Observations List:

1. Many dancers were never taught call definitions.
2. Most dancers don't have necessary knowledge or skills to judge their abilities.
3. Most dancers don't know how much callers "hold back" to "call to the floor".
4. Most dancers don't know what it's like to dance at a high level or to better choreography.

5. Most dancers don't know what APD / DBD is and fear it.
6. There is no organized and accessible program to advance dancers after they graduate lessons. Dancers have been left to their own devices when it comes to gaining experience. They are told to go out and get "floor time".
7. Some dancers don't care to dance better, "good enough" is O.K.
8. Dancers cannot progress, dancing in squares that don't challenge them.
9. "Floor time" without instruction is a difficult and painful way to get experience.
10. Workshops have limited effectiveness they are infrequent, and lack focus.
11. "Angeling" at lessons has limited effectiveness as the level is always "beginner".
12. Square dance quality degrades because of the aforementioned causes.
13. Most dancers want to dance well.
14. Callers want to provide the best entertainment possible to dancers.
15. Dancers need to be taught about all aspects of square dancing to advance.
16. Callers can only get better if they have better dancers to work with.
17. Plus does not "stand alone", it includes Basic, Mainstream and APD / DBD.
18. A caller who likes to teach is worth their weight in gold.

The Chopped Livers. We all knew what we wanted was a "workshop program" that wasn't random but one that built on itself each week. So, we formed a square and found a like-minded caller in Dan Clairmont. One week he abandoned us for a prior engagement, and the running joke was that we were treated like "chopped liver", and so became our de-facto name.

We started with the basics, literally. We spent three weeks killing bad habits, and reinforcing MS definitions with APD, and we continued working MS definitions, even as we went through the whole Plus list using APD/DBD as a means to strengthen our knowledge of the definitions. This attention to detail and focused workshopping served us well when the Chopped Livers formed once again in our dining room to learn Advanced (A1/A2).

When word of our success got out, it was apparent that the need was more universal, and the pressure to turn it into a full-fledged club, became over-whelming. We knew we didn't want a traditional club structure, the old truism is: "If you want to kill something, send it to committee", so we organized as a couple run club called Austin Plus Dancers (APD).

Later, when we moved our attentions to Advanced, we turned it over to Dan and Gail to run as a caller run club. We also knew we wanted a club where "workshopping" was the norm, so we de-emphasized the social aspects and focused on the dancing. It isn't for everyone, there are dancers who still don't understand why we do APD, or why we don't do parties or themed dances. Many of these that do not understand what we were looking for in the club also do not understand why

we do computer assigned squares. Simply put, for us it facilitates better learning to split couples up.

The club still flourishes today under the following tenants and schedule:

Program Tenets:

- The “Program” must progress, the aim is not to hit any certain level and graduate, but to keep all dancers advancing.
- Instruction must address the root causes of problems.
- It will educate the dancers about all aspects of dancing, call definitions, etiquette, styling, organizations, elements of complexity, calling.
- APD/DBD is taught, not only as a means to itself, but more importantly to strengthen the dancer’s knowledge of the definitions.
- The “Program” will emphasize the “when in Rome” creed. Special care must be taken to not create Square Dance Snobs.
- Personal responsibility is emphasized.
- Workshop tips, study groups and dance tips are used to combine learning with practice/fun.
- The curriculum should advance as fast as the dancers can absorb it.

Schedule of Event’s. Originally, we didn’t offer lessons, we were meant to be the “next step” after lessons. But we have since relented to demand and offer lessons once a year.

The main events are the nine week workshops offered twice a year. They start, as we originally did, with fixing and strengthening MS definitions and then move into re-teaching the Plus curriculum with a focus on the deeper knowledge that comes with APD/DBD usage.

Were we crazy? For years, the pressure on dance quality has been in the downward direction. Call to the floor, graduate everyone regardless of ability, now call to a lower floor. No competition in town? The local caller relaxes and doesn’t improve nor do the dancers.

We believe that putting pressure on the community to improve the quality of the dance is the first step to bringing back the glory days of square dancing. Expect more from your dancers, give them the resources they need, and they will give you more.

Were we crazy? Maybe. Starting a club isn’t for the faint hearted, but we found a need we had and solved it for others as well. Most dancers in Austin, will tell you that the level of dancing and the strength of the community have both gotten better over the last two or three years ... even if they can’t tell you why.