

# *Smooth Dancing, Body Flow, and Timing*

by Tim Marriner

To be smooth, dancers must be able to move from one action to the next without interrupting their motion by changing their pace. This aspect of the sensation of smoothness results from properly timing the delivery of the call. In addition, to feel smooth, the calls must place the body and hands, if used, in a position at the end of one action readily available to start the next action without sharply changing the direction of motion. This aspect of the sensation of smoothness is the result of proper body flow and hand availability. The dance will be experienced smoother if the dancers are allowed to start moving to the called actions on the first beat of a musical phrase. Timing is the relationship between the calls and the dancers action measured in beats of music. If the calls action is not allowed enough beats of music for the dancers to execute, often called “**Clipped Timing**,” the dancers will have to rush to keep up. If the calls action is allowed too many beats of music the dancers must wait for the next call, often called “**Stop and Go Timing**.” The answer to the question of how much lead-time is necessary varies. Factors such as familiarity of the calls, formations and arrangements utilized, the degree of space in the hall, the condition of the floor, and the room acoustics, all affect smooth dancing. If dancers are walking without any connection to the musical rhythm, proper timing and smooth dancing is impossible. Good timing is the mechanism that keeps an entire floor of dancers stepping on the same musical beat. Effectively, the caller can provide a command to all of the dancers at the same point in their execution of the dance patterns. When this occurs, the dancers move synchronized demonstrating the true beauty this folk art deserves.

There is a lot more involved with smooth dancing than just not using the same hand twice in a row. Below are a few terms that affect the sensation of smooth dancing.

## **Elements of Smooth Dancing**

**Kinesiology** is the study of body movement and includes consideration of the anatomy of people and how their physical characteristics affect the way they move.

**Overflow** is continuing in the same direction too much. Any time that a turn between two people goes more than  $\frac{3}{4}$  there is a risk of overflow. Dancers could become disorientated.

**Counter Dancing** is sometimes used to refer to the interaction between dancers whether they are in contact with each other or just nearby. The most important aspect of counter dancing is the need for dancers moving around each other to counter balance each other. Inactive dancers must be aware of the path of active dancers and adjust their position to help the actives.

**Command Time** is the number of beats of music it takes to speak the call.

**Lead Time** is the number of beats elapsing between the Command Time and the dancer reaction time.

**Execution Time** is the number of beats it takes to actually do the action of the command.

**Timing** is the interrelation of Command Time, Lead Time, and Execution Time with music, which affects the experience of square dancing.

Other factors that affect the dancer experience of smooth dancing are tempo, call familiarity, choreographic surprises, gimmicks, and even environmental influences.

### **Metering Of Command Words**

Callers try to deliver calls in vocal patters that fit the music. Fitting the call to the music involve two aspects of the music. One is the musical phrase and the other is the meter. Most all of our music used for square dancing today has an 8-beat musical phrase. Meter is the way the notes between the Anchor Beats (the heavy “Boom” 1<sup>st</sup> beat of every 2-beat series) are distributed. Although the commands “Allemande Left with your Corner Girl” and “Corners All, Left Allemande” can both be given in 4 beats of music. Each command has different meter. Furthermore, they complete the Key Words of the command at different places in the 4 beats. The first has completed the Key Words after the first two beats while the second wording does not complete the Key Words until after the 4<sup>th</sup> beat.

### **Pre-Calling**

This is a type of command delivery where the dance action may start on an anchor beat. An example often used by callers during singing calls using the command “Sides Face Grand Square.” The caller pre-calls the action so the dancers can start on the first anchor beat of the musical phrase. The best results of dancing will occur when this is done as often as possible. Today’s choreography sometimes limits our ability to do this all the time, but the more we are aware of the dancers best experience of smooth dancing the more we should strive for this result.

### **First Beat Calling**

This is where the call words start on an anchor beat. Today’s callers tend to take count 1 for themselves. They feel more comfortable with phrasing and metering when they take the first beat. The dancers simply adjust and take off on the next available anchor beat.

## **Things to Avoid**

- >Late Command Delivery - “Stop and Go” dancing will result if the command is delivered too late.
- >Early Command Delivery - Dancers will have the tendency to rush through the call
- >Clipped Timing – Consistently dropping a beat or more from the number of beats (steps) required for comfortable execution of the action is Clipped Timing. When this happens dancers must shortcut the actions and the feeling of dancing disappears. Clipped timing usually results in scrambling, dancer failure, and frustration.
- >Over Stacking Commands - Dancers will not have the time or the memory space to remember all the calls at once and may hesitate because they simply forgot what to do next.
- >Over use filler words - Side two you Pass the Ocean, and then my friends everybody Extend, again resulting in stop and go jerky body flow.

## **Philosophy of Timing verses Choreography**

Understanding the mechanics of square dance timing is essential for callers. This, however, is one of several areas in which technical, mechanical knowledge is not enough. Beyond the factual aspects of timing, there are issues involving judgment. Moving smoothly with the music is not the only appeal of modern square dancing. The other side is choreography. Many people enjoy working through complex sequences of square dance movements even without music. It is fair to say that the dance is the playing field where timing and choreography are in competition for the dancer’s interest. A balancing act must occur. How much are you willing to compromise one for the other? Being aware of smooth dancing techniques and choreographic pit falls will provide you with the best knowledge to give the dancers a well balanced blend of both worlds. Perhaps the bottom line should be that when timing adjustments are sacrificed to achieve a programmed choreographic thrill they must be balanced by an equally abundant experience of good smooth dancing.