

LONG DISTANCE CALLING

By Tom Kaiser

Operator? Information?

No, not AT&T or Verizon. I'm talking about calling square dance via Zoom.

Are you one of those callers that, when you first heard about other callers calling 2-couple square dancing via Zoom, thought "That looks too complicated", or "I don't think I have all the hardware and software required for that", or "That's too much work to focus on only 2-couple calling", or "I can't imagine calling without live dancers right there in the same room with me", or *[fill in the blank with other excuses you considered]*.

I was one of those callers that thought I would never be interested in calling via Zoom. But that changed.

I live in Sacramento, CA and called weekly for 3 clubs prior to Covid shutting down square dancing. My husband and I decided to spend the summer of 2021 in a small community in Northern Michigan. Presque Isle Township has a population of 1,575. Friends from Grand Lake in Presque Isle suggested I contact the local athletic clubhouse

there to see if it might be interested in offering square dance lessons.

I contacted the club's activities director and she was very interested. We arrived in Presque Isle on June 1, 2021 and started teaching the Tuesday night weekly square dance class on June 15th at the Presque Isle Harbor Association Clubhouse. We started with 3 squares and drew as many as 5 squares as the summer progressed. The summer population increases with people from lower state Michigan and Ohio coming to their summer cottages in Presque Isle.

We had 4 angels while the rest were all beginner square dancers. And, brand new dancers would start each of the first 5 weeks. So, there was lots of repetition for the first half of the summer.

On the 3rd Tuesday, 2 dancers arrived wearing club name badges. I thought "Wonderful, 2 more angels". They were from Alpena, a city 20 miles south of Presque Isle with a population of 10,035.

This husband and wife from Alpena had danced in other states and were now starting a square dance group in Alpena. They had 1 square, and had danced 2 Wednesdays so far, but

their caller was driving 3 hours each way from his home in lower state Michigan to call in Alpena.

The following day, I received an email from the husband asking if I might be interested in calling a couple Wednesdays a month for the Alpena group, in order to save their caller some driving time. I phoned him the next day to say “Yes, I’m interested, which Wednesdays would you like me to call?”. He said “How about all of them?”. So, I ended up calling every Tuesday and Wednesday nights in Michigan for the rest of the summer.

At the end of the summer, the Alpena group said “We want you to keep calling for us. Don’t go home to Sacramento”. I smiled and politely said “Unfortunately, that is not an option.” They said “How about calling for us via Zoom?”.

My initial thought was “I don’t think so.” But, I didn’t say that. Instead, I said to them “Hmmm, let me think about that”.

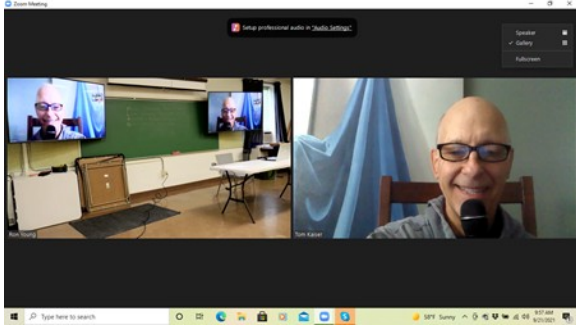
Late that night, I sent an email to Thom Dang. I remembered that Thom did a training session for GCA (Gay Callers Association) members via Zoom, demonstrating the hardware requirements and setup as

well as the special settings to use in the Zoom application when calling via Zoom. I was unable to participate in that training session when Thom initially offered it. In my email, I asked Thom if he made a recording of that training session and if it was easily accessible anywhere. He quickly responded that it was indeed available in the “Members Only” section of the GCA website.

I want to send a **big shout out** and **huge THANK YOU** to Thom Dang for that excellent resource on the GCA website. The video of his training session was very clear, easy to follow, and thorough.

When I met with the Alpena group the following Wednesday, I told them that I would definitely consider continuing to call for them via Zoom after I returned home to Sacramento, IF the technology worked well enough to the satisfaction of them and me.

It appeared to me that their technology could work very well. They dance at a community college in a room that has 2 huge TV screens on the wall with good speakers, and a large sophisticated camera unit.



I have 2 laptop computers and the required patch cord (RCA to 1/8 inch), and I was pretty sure I had a USB sound card at home in Sacramento.

During the summer, another Sacramento area club contacted me wanting to hire me as their club caller when I returned home. So, I was now committed to calling in the Sacramento area on evenings of Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, and afternoons of Monday and Thursday. I offered the Alpena group a time slot of Wednesdays 2:30-4:30pm for me (5:30-7:30pm for their time zone). They said that would work.

After returning home to Sacramento, I set up everything following Thom Dang's directions and I called a local caller friend to do a test run via Zoom. It worked!



I then contacted the Alpena organizer to schedule a test run with their technology on September 21st. Everything worked fine, so we began our first Wednesday Zoom square dance lesson on September 22nd.

The Alpena group has been attracting 2 squares of dancers, and the organizers tell me that all the dancers love the setup.

The local newspaper, Alpena News, sent a reporter on October 6th to observe the dancers in person and the Zoom setup. The newspaper ran a picture and a couple paragraphs in its "Calendar of Events" on October 12th. Then, on October 16th, the newspaper ran a full-page article with 6 pictures. It was wonderful free publicity for the Alpena square dance group.

<https://www.thealpenanews.com/news/local-news/2021/10/swing-your-partner-round-and-round/>

Zoom calling for 2-couple dancing was a wonderful resource for dancers observing shelter-at-home guidelines during the worst of Covid.

Zoom calling for full squares is also a wonderful resource for groups that cannot find a local caller in their vicinity. If a group can provide appropriate technology on its end, teaching classes for new dancers and/or calling weekly regular dancing are certainly possible with calling via Zoom. From my perspective, a large TV screen for the dancers to see the caller is not so important. Most important would be a sound system in the dancers' room that sufficiently amplifies the caller's voice so the dancers can hear the instruction and calls; and a camera in the dancers' room that can adequately provide the caller with a good view of the square(s) on the dance floor. I find it most useful, if possible, for one designated dancer/coordinator to have a wireless lapel microphone in order to provide feedback to the caller and ask any questions during the Zoom session.

So, if you are one of those callers that thought you would never consider calling via Zoom, look at the possibilities. I did, and I am very happy that I am doing it. It is quite enjoyable seeing all the smiling faces

in Alpena, MI on my Zoom screen every Wednesday afternoon!

I am aware of two resources you can access to get information and details regarding hardware requirements and setup as well as the special settings to use in the Zoom application when calling via Zoom:

- Join the GCA (Gay Callers Association) and get access to the special resources in its "Members Only Content" section of its website <https://www.gaycallers.org/>
- Go to the Callerlab Knowledge Base (*Sharing ideas and experiences for the betterment of Square Dancing*) and find the article "Hookup Chart for Zoom Calling" authored by Lorne Smith. You will find there a diagram for hookup of equipment, and a PDF explaining the Zoom settings to use. <https://knowledge.callerlab.org/hookup-chart-for-zoom-calling/>