

## KEEP THOSE NEW DANCERS

Source: Caller & Leader, Mike Seastrom, California

**When new dancers walk into the door of your hall to join you for the first time, what do you think is running through their minds?** Think back, if possible, to the first time you walked into a hall to learn to square dance. If a friend, relative, co-worker, or neighbor brought you and introduced you to others in attendance, you were lucky. If you were courageous enough to walk in by yourself, how you were treated and received probably made a big difference in your decision to stay or leave and never come back.

**They say that we only get one chance to make a first impression, so let's take a good look at not only what it takes to make that first impression a positive one, but what it takes to keep our new dancers coming back week after week and becoming new friends and members of our club.**



**There are a few things that already need to be in place when you open the doors for the first time to your new dancer program.** When there are more than a few members of your club helping and attending your new dancer dances, it's extremely important to make assignments ahead of time. If no one is asked specifically to do a job, it probably won't get done so make sure to have a written list of those members helping out.

Surely a person or couple will be taking names, money, and personal information of those attending as they come in the door, but what about the other important things going on? At least a couple of people, (ideally as many as four to six members) need to be assigned to act as host and hostess positioned around the entrance and inside after your new dancers sign in. **These folks are not only verbally welcoming everyone coming in the door, they are introducing themselves, exchanging and learning names, and introducing people to one another.**

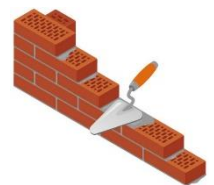
**Get to know your new dancers a little as individuals. Knowing some personal information about new acquaintances helps you remember their names, because you can associate a visual or mental image about them.** It also gives you the opportunity to share some of that personal information with others as you introduce them, and it will in turn help those folks who have like experiences or hobbies, to more easily converse with each other. This "social tuning" can really get a good verbal buzz going before people even start to dance and it can make the evening even more fun. Successful clubs have done this at their regular dances for years, as a way of welcoming and getting to know their guests while getting their dance nights started.



**That brings me to another point. Try to make each 'new dancer dance' or 'new dancer evening' a party.** It may sound like more work, but everyone likes going to a party and it will give your new dancers another reason to come back week after week. Celebrate Square Dance Month in September, celebrate the first day of fall, celebrate Columbus Day, Halloween and on and on. Put up some simple decorations and you'll find it really makes it seem like a party is going on. These are simple things that can be delegated to members of your club. Be sure to involve your new dancers later on down the line.

**Always have food available and when possible have the food you serve go along with the theme of the party for the evening. Food and square dancing go together and it always seems like more of a party when there is food.** You can also use the food you serve for your theme. Have a Fruit Night, Pie Night, Men's Cake Bake and so on. Use your imagination, have fun with the food and themes you choose, but keep it simple so that no one feels burdened or inconvenienced.

Bob Osgood, the long time editor of Sets In Order, Square Dance Magazine, and the caller leader that started CALLERLAB, said long ago that the **'dance is the bricks that our club and our dance nights are built with, but the social fun is the mortar that holds all the bricks together'**. Pay some real attention to the detail that makes up the social part of your club and dance events and the extra effort will really pay off in the long run.



**Many leaders in our activity have been very careful in the last ten to twenty years to eliminate certain words from our vocabulary that might be offensive or sound like too much work for your members and new dancers.** I used to think we were just being too picky, but I have seen this change really have an impact on my own new dancers and I now believe that it really makes a difference.

The first one is calling a new dancer a 'class member', 'student', 'greeny' or something like that. They are new dancers, because they're dancing the first time the music starts and should be recognized for that. Although this may sound like a small thing, it subconsciously recognizes their accomplishment and unlike some of the other terms above, is much more positive.

I also found that by welcoming new dancers the first night to the "(Your Club's Name) New Dancer Dance", that I had a much more positive impact than when I previously welcomed them to the "(Your Club's Name) New Dancer Class". It's much more motivating to your new dancers to come back week after week to a dance than (yawn) another class. **Think about it, would you rather go to a party every week to dance or go to class?**

**Make each night a dance and not a close order drill or rigid event, and it will add so much to the fun.** It's really easy to do singing calls right away, get the new dancers singing with you, shouting back at you with various calls, and just plain enjoying themselves. It's all about the FUN every night and every tip!



**Lose phrases like, "When you learn to really dance", or "When you get good enough to dance with our club".** They're dancing from the first night and it's much more positive to be encouraging. Say things like, "You are doing so well", and "Isn't this dance of ours good fun?"

**Try to be encouraging** with comments like, "Don't worry, we were all new dancers before and we can really understand what you're going through". I know these things sound so picky, but just making the attempt to be positive and encouraging can go a long way in making your new dancers feel more comfortable. It's important for them to know that their feelings are normal and understood by the experienced dancers and club members.

**Offer some additional learning opportunities to those that need it.** Sometimes just another walk through of a call between tips is enough. Occasionally it really helps to schedule a separate time, in a fun and social setting (with food) at someone's house, to dance and practice what has been taught. These efforts can make the difference in keeping new dancers coming back instead of becoming frustrated and dropping out.

**Have someone assigned to personally call those new dancers who miss a new dancer dance.** It lets them know they were missed and that someone was thinking about them. New dancers will be absent less if they know, in the back of their minds, that people miss them and know when they are not in attendance.



**If you have someone good enough with email and you have email addresses for your new dancers and members, an email can be sent out a day or two after your new dancer dance to thank everyone for coming and list what was taught.** You can also remind them about the next event, mention the theme, and any changes in time or venue. I've seen some groups make up fun questions about what was taught in these emails. This short email can go a long way in connecting with your new dancers and club angels and is another opportunity for your new dancers to learn and remember what they were dancing.

**Include your new dancers in as many club events as possible.** Make them honorary members of your club right away and send them the club newsletter. Put your new dancers' names in the newsletter under the section for birthdays, anniversaries and accomplishments as often as possible. These little steps can go a long way in keeping your new dancers with your program and eventually becoming regular members in your club. Treating them like royalty is a great way to make them feel good about themselves and their achievements as new dancers and a terrific way to keep them coming back. That's really what it's all about. Have some great new dancer dances and have a great new dancer program!

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**About the Writer:** Mike Seastrom has been dancing since 1960, and calling since 1963. He started dancing after losing a bet to his mother and calling when he tried to show his 6th grade teacher what “square dancing was really like”. He taught his first class in 1963 after borrowing money from his folks to buy a small sound system and was able to pay them back before the class was over.

After receiving his doctorate in 1976, Mike joined CALLERLAB in 1977, and has been Chairman of several committees, as well as an annual presenter for interest sessions and seminars at CALLERLAB conventions. Mike served on the Board of Governors from 1984 to 2003 and completed a two-year term as the CALLERLAB Chairman of the Board in 1994. He was also awarded the Milestone Award in 2001 by two of his mentors, Bob Van Antwerp and Bob Osgood. He submits the monthly CALLERLAB Viewpoint articles to “American Square Dance” magazine and his articles have appeared in various publications around the world.

Mike teaches, calls Basic through C-1, prompts contras, and also enjoys doing dance party events when his schedule allows. He is a strong advocate for the Multi-Cycle Method of teaching new dancers and enjoyed a very successful program with the Valley Trailers Square Dance club in California. Mike currently teaches for the Buckles & Bows.

Mike records for Rhythm Records, regularly does Caller Clinics, and helped produce an Introduction to Contra Dancing package for R & R Video, with the California Contra Callers Association.

Calling has given Mike the opportunity to travel extensively in the United States, Canada, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Germany, Costa Rica, New Zealand, Australia, and Japan. Mike enjoys dancing as well as calling and still feels that “dancing as a team of eight” is the best recreation in the world. As a practicing dentist, calling is an avocation for “Dr. Mike.” He feels so fortunate to receive such tremendous support from his wonderful and understanding family and staff.

