

## Swing Your Partner and Try to Remember All Those Steps

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BY day, Richard Sands, an administrative judge at the Motor Vehicles office in the Bronx, decides whether you really deserve that speeding ticket. By night he unwinds, not in front of the television set with a glass of wine but with a swing of his partner and a do-si-do.

"I don't know where my college degree is," said Mr. Sands, 57. "I don't know where my law degree is. But my square-dance diploma is hanging on the wall in my office."

Mr. Sands and his wife, Esther, 55, a supervisor at the Reading Reform Foundation in Manhattan, know that many of their friends think square dancing is hokey. But the Sandses, who live in Queens, insist that it isn't just the stereotypical country hoe-down, with men in cowboy boots and women in crinoline skirts. They see square-dancing, with hundreds of steps requiring precision and coordination among dancers, as highly cerebral. "It's a very challenging mental exercise," said Mr. Sands.

Like quilting bees and bridge clubs, square-dancing is part of a fading Americana. Tony Oxendine, the founder and editor of Square Dancing Today magazine, which is based in Charlotte, N.C., said that interest in square-dancing peaked in the 70's, "right about the time 'Urban Cowboy' came out and country music got real popular."

Mr. Oxendine and others say square-dancing largely attracts older people and gays. While some groups have relaxed their dress codes to appeal to younger dancers, Mr. Oxendine said, older dancers are still in the majority. "Only people who are retired, or can get off of work whenever they want to, have the time," he said.

Gay groups, he said, are probably the fastest growing in the country. Robert Davia, president of Times Squares, a gay group in New York, says that gays see square-dancing as a way to meet people: most gay groups attract singles rather than couples.

The Sandses took up square-dancing a couple of years ago after their youngest child left for college. Judea Lerner, a co-worker of Mrs. Sands's who has been dancing for nearly 20 years, suggested that the couple try it.

Mrs. Sands was doubtful. "Richard never danced in his life," she said. "I think he stood up and swayed at our wedding."

After months of pleading from his wife, Mr. Sands agreed to give it a try, "just to shut Esther up," he said. But then he surprised himself. "Within seconds," he said, "we were having a good time." The couple joined Times Squares and Ginny's Swingers, a Long Island group in which the average age is about 65. The Sandses dance once a week with each group, and they say they prefer the Manhattan group, because the dancers are more enthusiastic and their music is faster and more challenging. "It's almost like your it comes out," Mr. Sands said. "You can really start yelling and screaming and having a wonderful time."

Mrs. Sands agreed, though she acknowledged that at first she found it confusing to be in a square with all men. "When they said, 'Girls move,' I didn't know who the other girls were," she said. Like other gay groups, Times Squares shuns the traditional square-dance costumes. "Those poofy, fluffy crinolines are not my thing," Mrs. Sands said. Square-dancing has its roots in the English Morris dance and the French minuet. Fifty years ago, it consisted of only a few steps; today, there are hundreds, danced to any kind of music, from show tunes to country. The caller sings or calls out moves like "recycle," "ferris wheel" or "load the boat."

Dancers are grouped according to the number of calls, or movement phrases, they have mastered. The Sandeses have completed the first two of seven levels, meaning they have learned about 100 calls. At more advanced levels, simple calls become sophisticated "concepts," in which mixing and matching can translate into countless movement possibilities.

Away from the dance floor, the Sandeses spend time studying. Mr. Sands sits at the computer learning moves from square-dance software with graphs and charts, while Ms. Sands prefers practicing with a video.

"It's complicated," said Mrs. Sands. "There are multiple moves within a step and there are so many intricate ways to go. The dancing is fun, but I see that my real passion is learning it."

Ms. Lerner said she "could have a Ph.D. at this point," what with all of the time and energy she has spent learning steps.

Square-dancing seems to hold a special appeal for the math-savvy. Stephen Gildea, a member of Tech Squares, a group at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, likens square-dancing to a mathematical concept that goes by the name group theory. "That's when a collection of objects in a set transforms into another set due to some outside operation," he said. "As a team, you're solving this puzzle in real time."

Needless to say, group theory is beyond the reach of most dancers, most of whom never get beyond the lowest levels. And if they did, says Jerry Reed, the executive director of Callerlab, an international association of square-dance callers, there wouldn't be many callers available to them. Of the 4,000 in the United States, only about 100 can call at the very top level.

Lee Kopman of Long Island is one of them. He not only calls the advanced moves; he actually invented about 400 of them, helping to transform square-dancing into the sophisticated pursuit that it has become.

On a recent night at a recreation center in Rockville Center, Mr. Kopman led his weekly beginners group through its paces. Looking more preppy than country in his navy polo shirt, white cotton shorts and navy topsiders, he called out steps to 16 dancers, often correcting them when their squares fell apart. He runs a small recording business that produces tapes, which enable dancers throughout the world to dance to his calls. While he considers square-dancing as a way both to stay healthy and to meet people, his wife, Lilith, finds another virtue: "couples therapy."

"Square-dancers don't get divorced," she said. "The wives schlep the husbands the first time, and the husbands end up loving it even better. That happens with almost every couple."

Ms. Sands couldn't agree more. "We've had maybe two arguments in the past year and a half — that's tremendously nothing," she said. "We have a new subject, and we're spending more time together. What could be better?"