

Dancing the test of time

Finding fitness, fun and friendship squared

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In a world of smartphones, Twitter and Facebook - of fast-paced technology and change - there are still a few things that can't be done in 140 characters or via the Web.

Try at least 100 moves or more, and think face-to-face rather than Facebook.

Square dancing was providing a social network long before the Internet.

Even as disco died, Hammer-time wound down and the moonwalk waned, somehow square dancing proved remarkably, perhaps even surprisingly, resilient.

It even outlasted the Tri-anon Ballroom, the iconic downtown venue that in October 1965 was packed with hundreds of square dancers drawn to Regina for the Jubilee Jamboree, one of the premiere events in the province's 60th anniversary.

Two years later, thousands of dancers graced the floors of the Exhibition Auditorium, the Curlodrome (once mainstays of Exhibition Park, now known as Evraz Place) and the Armoury - three locales used in 1967 for a two-day square dance festival to mark the country's centennial. Back then, Saskatchewan was something akin to a square dance mecca. In the mid-'60s, the Leader-Post reported on a new survey that showed Saskatchewan claimed the highest percentage of square dancers per capita of any province.

Every city in Saskatchewan had square dance clubs, and few towns or villages were without them.

Yorkton's Earle Park, then one of the kings among square dance callers, proclaimed in one report that the dance had moved "from the barn to the ballroom," with at least 12,000 square dancers in the province.

"Those who deride it are those who've never taken the trouble to come and see what it's all about," Park was compelled to add.

In 1962, the Regina square dance crowd was eagerly awaiting the coming not of the Beatles, but of the "King of Hash" - a caller from California who had taught Hollywood stars Jennifer Jones and Gregory Peck to square dance for the movie *Duel in the Sun*. Square dancers cued up to perform during royal visits. (Rumour has it Queen Elizabeth so enjoyed a square dance display in Regina, she tried the moves with the family back at Buckingham Palace.)

Princess Alexandra, cousin to Elizabeth, proclaimed during her 1967 visit to the Queen City: "I had hoped to see some Scottish dancing, but this was almost as good."

That was the heyday of square dancing in Regina, when the halls were so packed the dances were in shifts, and almost every church basement was used for square dancing.

These days, there's more gaps between the eight-person squares. There are approximately 600 square dancers and 26 clubs across Saskatchewan.

The Regina clubs have also dwindled - but that makes those that have endured all the more unique.

"I personally think it's one of the best kept secrets how fun it is," says Ron Wiebe, a Regina-area square dance caller.

Part of the baby boom generation, he and his wife Margareta often elicit a few raised eyebrows when they mention their pastime.

"Sometimes, as soon as you say square dancing, people envision old people maybe with walkers and canes," he says. "If you get a group of younger people dancing, a little bit younger, you can

really pick up the music speed and you can do really fast choreography. And you can get people moving very fast."

It's a Thursday night in the basement of Regina's St. James Anglican Church, home of the Happy Hearts dance club - and there are definitely no canes to be seen. The only walkers are the groups of eight getting into position as they eagerly anticipate the next dance.

In fact, if you can walk, you can square dance.

"Part of the appeal of square dancing is you don't really have to know how to (dance). The caller tells you what to do all the time. Also, you don't have to do a lot of fancy footwork," says Wiebe, who teaches beginner classes.

For this wind-up of the season, Happy Hearts is joined by members of the city's two other square dance clubs - the Whitmore Pioneers and Wesley Whirlers. All three have been around 50 years or more.

The tiled dance floor is awash in colourful skirts, flouncy crinolines (optional), button-up shirts, scarf or string ties - and broad smiles (mandatory).

Tonight is kind of like open-mike night, with a few of the newbies taking turns at calling.

"I'm terribly nervous," admits Barry Gruell as he steps behind the microphone. "Have fun," he adds, a command that really goes without saying for an audience that punctuates some of the calls with clapping and hoots of "whoo-hoo!"

"If I screw up, try to get back together again and make me look good," he chuckles.

There's no need to worry; his instructions are clear and loud over the recorded music - and seemingly no left foot or otherwise gets in the way - as the squares of dancers follow his calls like mice to the Pied Piper.

The first-time caller reads from a "cheat sheet" and follows a pattern of moves to keep it simple. But Barry, with a grin, later admits, "That's the best part, when you screw up and have a train wreck."

Bow to your partner, promenade, allemande left, find your corner, meet your girl, wheel and deal, and so the do-si-do goes - most of these dancers know about 100 calls.

And after two hours of dancing, give or take a few breaks between sets, many will have covered the equivalent of five miles in low-impact aerobic activity - thus the buttons someone had printed up: "Try Square & Round Dancing just for the health of it."

(The round dancing to which it refers is also cued by a caller but closer to choreographed, ballroom dancing.) It also accounts for the pitchers of ice water drained between sets and the wafts of air from the portable fans.

Donna Gruell, Barry's wife, likes to wear a pedometer to the dances. She usually registers some 20,000 steps.

If her feet are tired by the end of the night, "it's nothing that stops me," says Donna.

The Gruells began square dancing in the late 1970s. Then lives got busy with work and children, and they took a hiatus. Four years ago, they returned.

"I said, 'We're not going to sit and retire on the chairs,'" recalled Donna.

Now they belong to two clubs and usually hit the dance floor three nights a week.

"It's infectious," says Barry. "Forget about Facebook and Twitter. This is awesome," he adds.

And the 55-year-old Barry repeats the often-uttered phrase among this group: "It's not an old-person thing."

(Generally, the age range is somewhere between late-40s to "whatever," in the words of one fellow.)

Barry, a self-described shy guy, admits he wouldn't normally be one of the first to an open mike, but the square dance community has become family. Like many of those here, he relishes the social interaction as much as the exercise.

Most everyone wears name tags, helping people to get to know one another.

One of the few women in pants, Anita - also known as "Andy" - Rieger sports an additional tag that reads, "I'm dancing the role of a man."

After her husband Edward passed away three years ago, she was asked to stay on with the club. Much like a high school dance, there are sometimes a shortage of willing men to step onto the floor.

Rieger and her husband took up square dancing almost two decades ago, when there were lineups to get in the door.

"It took three nights of fighting to get him here," she says. "Then he loved coming."

Shirley Treleaven shares a similar story. In the mid 1970s, the Milestone woman heard about a new square dance club starting in the community. Treleaven signed up - then she broke the news to her husband Bill.

"He said, 'I'm not dancing,'" recalls Shirley. "I said, 'I'll find a new partner then.'" Needless to say, Bill joined his wife.

In his youth, he square danced with his local 4-H club in a little country school. But the "dance" was reduced to drills, and a young Bill found them pretty boring. "I said no more to square dancing."

He relented given Shirley's ultimatum.

"I fell in love with it again," he says. He became a square dance caller in 1978 and never stopped.

"You can step into a square anywhere in the world," says Bill, explaining how the calls are standardized and always given in English.

Some of the music is still on vinyl records, but much of it has been moved to MP3s. Bill relies on a computer, his memory, and his excellent knowledge of choreography to cue the dancers. A good caller is like the conductor for an orchestra. "There's an interaction between the floor and the caller," says Bill, adding a good caller will build on the dancers' enthusiasm.

There are few more ardent fans than Joyce McGowan, who has a closet of square dance skirts that she's amassed over some six decades.

"I'm even dancing in my sleep," says McGowan. When a reporter's questions delay her return to the dance floor, McGowan sits with her feet tapping the floor, and her hands keeping beat in her lap.

She met her husband Ken through square dancing or possibly badminton - it was one of the two, she says. "I got railroaded," McGowan deadpans. Ken was a railway man. She hasn't wanted for a dancing partner through 57 years of marriage. In fact, they squeeze the square dancing in around badminton, golf and curling.

"Because of our activity, it keeps us going," says Joyce. She and her husband are in their 80s but show more energy than some teens. The conversation is soon over. The next dance is starting - and Joyce and Ken are quick to the floor.

"Most people dance until they can't anymore," says Don Penny. He started square dancing about 13 years ago as a favour to a friend.

Asked how many toes he stepped on in those early days, and Penny replies, "I've been lucky. I haven't stepped on any.

"I've been wounded a few times though," he adds, smiling.

Penny was president four times of the Wesley Whirlers. Word has been swirling around the dance floor all night that the club is folding. "Nobody wants to run it," explains Penny.

Now two Regina clubs remain, and one of those is also "iffy."

The talk worries Wiebe. He says people want to dance; they just don't want the responsibility of operating a club.

But no one is prepared to call the last dance just yet.

"The solution is just to have more dancers," says Wiebe. He's already looking forward to teaching a new beginners' class this fall.

"Some say square dancing is a dying art," says Alice Gaveronski, between sets on the dance floor. "I don't think it is."

For more information, check out www.sksquaredance.ca or call 543-0421.

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