

Square dancing is far from being square
By Sylvie Belmont
Camarillo Acorn
September 4, 2014

This is not your grandparents' square dancing.

The 40-year-old Buckles and Bows Square Dance Club is moving with the times as it undergoes a resurgence in popularity.

Founded in 1975, Buckles and Bows counts more than 100 members. The nonprofit organization was formed in the spirit of fellowship and fun on the dance floor.

While most social dances, both traditional and modern, focus on the movements of the individual or couple, square dancing involves eight people in four groups of two who move in unison to the call of an announcer.

Many of the steps are found in folk dancing throughout the world, and the music can be traditional or modern.

According to John Duhig, a member of the Thousand Oaks based club, square dancing is all about having a good time with the seven other dancers in your square.

The club invites community members—young and old—to learn the traditional American dance form.

A beginners class takes place every Tuesday through May 2015 from 7 to 9 p.m. at the Hillcrest Center for the Arts, 403 W. Hillcrest Drive in Thousand Oaks.

Duhig and his wife, Sybil, are class coordinators for the club.

Over the years, classes have drawn people from throughout the region, including Camarillo, Moorpark, Simi Valley, Thousand Oaks and Calabasas.

“Square dancing does not require athletic skill or physical coordination to any great lengths. It’s a great form of entertainment and exercise,” John Duhig said.

With over 100 different calls to follow, the dancers enjoy a physical and mental workout in a convivial setting, he said.

Dances are always executed with the guidance of an experienced caller. “Wild” Bill Horst is the instructor, caller and entertainer for the group.

“He makes it fun in the process while you are interacting with a roomful of nice people,” Duhig said.

A centuries-old social dance with European roots, square dancing is alive and growing in many parts of the world, and it has been an integral part of American social life. Square dancing is also popular in Germany, Sweden and Japan.

“They dance to American English calls. If I were to go to Japan, even though I don’t speak the language, I could go to a square dance,” Sybil Duhig said.

According to the Country Dance and Song Society, the dance form has changed over the decades to fit the needs of the people doing it. The focus now is on newer music.

“We’re trying to get more contemporary music to get the younger folks,” John Duhig said.

Square dancing is not done exclusively to the beat of country music. Today’s callers are adding songs from other genres and choreographing them as square dances.

“We play all kinds of music. You’d be amazed at what music you can dance to,” Sybil Duhig said.

Traditional clothing is not required at the dances, although some men still wear cowboy hats and bow ties and the women are in petticoats and fluffy dresses. The dress code for the dances and classes is always casual.

“An alert mental attitude and a desire to have fun are all you need,” John Duhig said. “Square dancing keeps your mind active, and it keeps you feeling young and energized, and it’s just plain enjoyable.

“It’s not intimate, it’s social, and we spend most of our time laughing.”

The retired pilot and his wife, who is a former membership director at Sunset Hills Country Club, began square dancing 11 years ago.

In addition to the classes, the club hosts group dances on the fourth Saturday of every month at the Goebel Adult Community Center in Thousand Oaks.

Club members also enjoy dinner outings, camping, festivals and social activities. They are always eager to add new friends to the group. But prospective members must first complete the classes.

“Now we’re trying to get people to come and play with us. The secret is getting folks past the old stigma and give us a try.

“Many then fall in love with square dancing and us,” John Duhig said.

Singles and couples are encouraged to join. Organizers provide a partner for each student who needs one.

The club members, called Angels, are available during class to fill in as a partner if someone doesn’t have one.

The Angels also help dancers learn in a friendly and supportive environment, Sybil Duhig said.

The first three weeks of the beginners class are free, and anyone can join during that time period. Students are asked to make a \$5 weekly donation thereafter. Refreshments are provided.