

Square dancing club offers family-friendly fun, fitness for all ages

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Ella Welch and Dale Benjamin step out on the dance floor at a Maple City Swingers event.

It's a dance form that has been around since the 17th century, but more and more people of all ages are getting involved in modern square dancing. It's reminiscent to most as a cowboy-style handoff of partners, but upon close examination it's a series of steps most similar to ballroom dancing, with friendship and fun as an added bonus.

Glenn Jacob, 87, of Adrian began square dancing in 1983 with his wife, Hazel, and continued dancing with his granddaughter after his wife died in 2008.

"At the time I got interested, I happened to walk by a room where people were square dancing and it appealed to me very much," Jacob said. "I started taking lessons and I've been dancing ever since. It's a fun way to meet people and nice, clean entertainment."

So what makes a square dance so square? Four couples (eight dancers) arrange themselves in a square, with one couple on each side, facing inside the square. The couples dance in unison as the caller provides the choreography, known as cues. (Another form of dancing often seen at square dances is round dancing, where couples dance to cues by themselves.)

"You don't have to be a dancer," Jacob said. "If you can walk you can square dance. Even if you think you have two left feet, you learn the call and they tell you where to go."

"Twenty or thirty years ago, square dancing was a considerably bigger activity than it is now," said Jude Hocking, president of Adrian's local square dancing club, The Maple City Swingers, which has been in existence for about 30 years. "It's still a lot of fun and an extremely good activity, because it involves mental and physical combinations that you have to coordinate with other people."

Like many couples, Hocking, of Adrian, dances with her husband, Tim Hocking.

"It's as much of a social activity as it is dancing," she said. "And for people looking for physical activity that don't want to go to the gym or track — you can always dance."

The Maple City Swingers will be hosting regular dances and lessons beginning Sept. 9 at Hidden River North, 975 W. Beecher St., Adrian. The classes, which will be from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. each

Tuesday, will be held in the clubhouse. Dances will be held the third Friday of each month starting in September as well.

Marvin Reuter of Jackson said he got involved in square dancing when a girlfriend enticed him to go.

“I had been a musician and was looking for something to be able to perform without having to be in a bar scene,” Reuter said. “It was a positive experience and I enjoyed it. I’ve been doing it ever since.”

Rueter eventually became a caller and a dance instructor, and will be leading the Tuesday night classes in Adrian.

“You learn to square dance about the same way you learn to use a computer,” Rueter said. “First, you learn how to turn it on, then how to click your mouse then where to click. Square dancing really is just using one hand after the other—right left, right left, right left and your feet are just walking — so basically, you have to know when to go right, left and where to turn one quarter and where to go three quarters.”

“That’s what lessons are for,” Jacob said. “They go over the steps in detail and once you do it so many times, you remember them.”

“Many people look at square dancing as something they learned in high school or at church many years ago, like it is basically moving around and not doing much,” Hocking said. “What they may not know is that there are many calls that represent the dance moves — sometimes 60 to a dance — and when you follow them, the dance just flows. It’s very similar to ballroom dancing with similar rhythms and movements, like the cha cha, waltz, foxtrot, jive and rumba.” A basic square dance program can have more than 60 calls and up to 30 more advanced calls depending on what level the dance is.

“It can be a lot to remember, but you begin with the mainstream calls and pick up the more complicated calls as you go along,” Hocking said.

“We treat each lesson as a dance,” Rueter said. “We try not to make it too instructional and we use what we learn.”

You don’t have to be part of a couple to join in on the fun — many people come and are paired up with another single person. There are also “angels,” people who are experienced and know the calls, who can dance with singles.

Rueter said it is not necessary to have a partner of the opposite sex, as many people dance with friends and family members.

“When people come in, we expect they will know nothing about square dancing, but it’s OK if they do,” Rueter said. “We get them dancing right away. If they bring a partner, then they will stay with that partner. If they come alone, we will pair them up with someone.”

While most associate square dancing with old-time country music, modern square dances play all types of music. People also dress in whatever makes them comfortable.

“One of the nicest things about square dancing is that it is a really great activity for the whole family,” Hocking said. “We have dancers from 8 years old to over 80.”

Studies have shown that square dancing also has potential health benefits, from warding off depression to connecting the mind and body in ways that decrease dementia risks.

“It’s not physically strenuous, but it’s good cardiovascular exercise and it’s not boring,” Rueter said. “You have to learn to use your mind with your muscles at the same time, much like playing a musical instrument.”

“I’m 87 years old and I still dance,” Jacob said. “You have to be mobile and you have to be mentally alert enough to follow directions, but just about anyone can have a good time doing it.” “If you like people it’s a very good activity,” Rueter said. “We have a lot of fun and have made a lot of friends.”

Basic movements

There are scores of calls, or movements, which can be performed in a square dance. The following are a few basic moves:

Dos-a-do: It is a circular movement where two people, who are initially facing each other, walk around each other without or almost without turning.

Do Paso: Each dancer faces a partner and does a left arm turn half (180 degrees) to face in the opposite direction. Releasing armholds and moving forward, each dancer goes to the corner for a right arm turn half (180 degrees). Each returns to the starting partner to courtesy turn to face the center of the set or to follow the next call.

Bend the Line: Couples work as a unit, and the line simply folds in the middle so that all four people in the line will be facing the center of the set and facing the couple who were in the same line. This will require the center people to back up. A Bend the Line will result in the square forming two facing lines of four.

See Saw: Each dancer walks forward and around the partner keeping left shoulders adjacent, then steps forward to face the corner.

All Around the Left Hand Lady: Gentlemen face the lady on the left and the two walk in a full circle around each other; no hands are used in this move.