

# Square dance legend on LI still has the moves

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By JIM MERRITT. Special to Newsday



Kopman, 81, of Wantagh calls the regular Monday night dance in Rockville Centre on Feb. 16, 2015. Kopman is known internationally for the square dance choreography he has developed over the years. Photo Credit: Jeremy Bales

For dozens of square dancers who have braved subfreezing weather to attend Lee Kopman's class in Rockville Centre, on a recent Monday evening, it's not enough to do-si-do, swing your partner and promenade. They've been there, done that, years ago in beginners' class. What they want tonight is the challenge of the modern, intricate choreography that Kopman, 81, of Wantagh, is known for at square dance clubs from Toronto to Tokyo.

For the past five minutes, the mostly older crowd that paid \$7.50 a person to dance has been getting their money's worth, moving to the beat of a countrified version of The Beatles' "Hey Jude." Standing at the front of the room with microphone in hand, Kopman is leading about a half-dozen squares, each formed with four couples, through a sequence of steps that not only challenge their feet -- but also their minds. Kopman is known worldwide for his skills at "sight-calling," or improvising choreography a few of steps ahead of dancers, who often have to scramble to keep up.

"Slide through," Kopman says, sounding like the Tony Bennett of the square dance scene. "Pass through . . . now Wheel and Deal." Then with a collective "whoop!" -- the square dance version of dancing in the end zone after a touchdown -- partners are reunited, and they promenade back to their original spots.

After a quick pause, Kopman launches them into the next sequence of complicated moves.

Square dancing has been around at least since Colonial days, but those early settlers -- as well as anyone who took a grade school gym class with a square dance component -- would be astonished at how much the traditional form has changed in recent decades. Aided by technology and newer and more difficult dance moves -- many originated by Kopman -- it's not your great-grandma's square dancing anymore. Much of that recent evolution is credited to Kopman, a retired Bethpage School District physical education teacher, who is celebrating his 60th year as one of the nation's most innovative and best-known callers.



Kopman's fans span the country. They have either danced with him during his frequent travels, learned from him through educational materials, or moved to other callers he's schooled in his designed choreography.

"He has made the most significant contribution to all levels of square dancing of anybody in the world," says Becky Knapp of Simpsonville, South Carolina, who learned her first steps from one of Kopman's cassette tapes about 20 years ago. She and her square dance partner and husband, Dave, a printer, were so impressed with Kopman's style that, three years ago, they published a 217-page book of his recollections titled, "The Square Dance Man," available through [dosado.com/ga](http://dosado.com/ga) for \$20. Knapp says she believes that "square dancing is what it is today because of Lee Kopman."

Many of Kopman's Long Island square dancers agree, and have been coming to learn new steps week after week, for decades. "He's always inventing stuff," says Flo Brickmeyer, 85, of Rockville Centre, who has been walking the five blocks from home to take Kopman's classes at John A. Anderson Recreation Center for 35 years. "It could be the same old moves," she says, "but he twists it around and makes it interesting."

Dave Gould, 51, of Lynbrook, who was at Monday's session, figures he's learned 80 moves from Kopman since the late 1980s. Gould explains Kopman's appeal this way: "A tougher move might have five or six parts to it. What he does a lot better than other callers is giving directions to the dancers as we are executing the move."

Kopman learned square dancing while studying for a teaching degree at Adelphi University in Garden City, and called his first dances for Bethpage elementary school students. His goal has always been to get people of all ages thinking on their feet.

### Retirement



"No matter what level of square dancing you do, it's a challenge for your mind," he says. "Most people are so sedentary, they don't know what it is to think instantly and react physically." In modern square dancing, "You have to think and move and listen at the same time. That's pretty hard to get people to do," he admits, "but once they lock in the moves, they love it."

Kopman has dances and classes at the recreation center three days a week. On Thursdays, he has a 10-week beginners' class, from 7-8:30 p.m. For dancers who have mastered the basic moves and want to advance to the next level, there's a class from 8:30-10 p.m., called "mainstream," where students learn more than three dozen new figures. On Mondays and Tuesdays, there are classes and dances for more advanced dancers. If students choose to reach the highest level in Kopman's circle, they become Level 2 "Challenge" dancers and must be able to execute 230 different moves at Kopman's direction.

"More than half of the moves that he has written are still being used by square dance callers around the world," says Barry Clasper of Toronto, chairman of the board of governors of Callerlab, an international association of callers that maintains a masterlist of hundreds of square dance moves. Kopman's authored footwork is danced in Canada, Western Europe, Japan and Australia, as well as in Russia and the Czech Republic -- nations where square dancing is currently catching on, Clasper says. (According to tradition, the moves are called in English regardless of the native language.) "It's pretty hard to call a dance without using his moves," Clasper says.

Lou Flego, 81, of Northport, Kopman's Adelphi classmate who also became a professional square dance caller, says that Kopman's choreography came along as square dancing was growing in popularity. "Square dancing really hit its stride in the mid-1960s and was firmly entrenched by the '70s, and this is when Lee was writing calls continuously," Flego says. "He was very innovative because he was always ahead of the pack. People had to learn what he was doing if they wanted to keep up."

Throughout those years, square dancing has been a family affair for the Kopmans. As a young married couple in the 1950s, Kopman and his wife, Lilith, went to their first dance. Lilith, now 80 and a retired Levittown School District substitute teacher, is his partner and helpmate, setting out pretzels, Tootsie Rolls and coffee for the dancers; offering them extra help with new moves and filling in whenever a square is short a dancer.

Both of their children had square dance weddings. Their daughter, Phyllis Smith, 54, of Dallas, Texas, a TV producer, went to her dad's dances as a girl. Their son, Steve, 58, of Knoxville, Tennessee, travels the world as a successful square dance caller in his own right. He's helped his father to adjust to emerging technology.

"When the iPod came along, I kind of resisted the technological aspect, but after a while, my son said, 'You gotta do this,' " Kopman recalls. "I got used to it right away because it's easier to carry two iPods than schlep around 45 records. (Those old 45s, with songs like "Peg o' My Heart," still come along as a backup.)

At the height of his career in the 1980s, Kopman called local dances four nights a week and traveled 46 weekends a year. He once earned \$8,000 for a weekend festival in Las Vegas. But recently, he's been slowing down, cutting out travel and working close to home, also teaching a course in social dance at Nassau Community College in Garden City in addition to calling at the recreation hall.

Scaling back has disappointed his most fervent fans, his wife says. Kopman was a founding caller of the annual American Advanced and Challenge Convention for square dance held in cities across the country. "When he stopped calling at the Challenge convention in 2012 in Milwaukee," Lilith says, "people wept because he really is the father of square dancing as it is today."

Kopman keeps his passion for square dancing alive by writing new moves with computer programs developed at Caltech and Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "Square dancing is



always fresh to me because I have a passion for it." he says. "I write new choreography every day."

### **Bow to your partner**

For more information about Lee Kopman's evening classes for beginner, intermediate and advanced dancers in Rockville Centre, call 516-221-5028.

On April 9, caller Jim Emory, of Westbury, will be starting a beginners' square dance class at the United Methodist Church of Baldwin, where he also holds advance dances. His advanced classes are at the Hicksville VFW hall on Wednesdays. For more information, call 516-876-8704.



Lilith Kopman, 80, in the long grey skirt and jacket, takes to the dance floor at the John A. Anderson Recreation Center in Rockville Center Feb 16, 2015, where her husband, Lee Kopman, 81, calls the moves for the dancers. She helps him at his dances and fills in when a partner is needed. (Credit: Jeremy Bates)



Lee Kopman, 81, of Wantagh calls the regular Monday night dance on Feb 16, 2015 using complicated moves he developed. "You have to think and move and listen at the same time," he says. (Credit: Jeremy Bates)



Lee Kopman, 81, of Wantagh calls the regular Monday night dance at the John A. Anderson Recreation Center in Rockville Center on Feb 16, 2015. He is known for his skills at "sight-calling". (Credit: Jeremy Bates)