

HELPER WORDS FOR CALLERS

Controlling the degree of difficulty is a major responsibility of today's callers. When we taught classes to new dancers, we all used helper words to assist the dancers in understanding what hand holds or arm turns had to be done and how far to go. When dealing with dances after class, we still have to remember that not all dancers are as dedicated to the activity as we are and therefore may need some help to complete the calls successfully. Our skillful use of helper words can make the degree of difficulty much less than if we didn't use any helper words

Having said that, however, please understand that not all dancers need or want helper words. Some dancers will take your words to mean that you want them to do the additional steps while others will just "tune you out" if they don't need the helper words. Just recently, an article appeared where the dancers were lamenting that few callers just called a Teacup Chain and let them dance without a lot of verbiage from the caller. This is clearly a case where the dancers didn't need or want the helper words.

If we consider the degree of difficulty factors, we can see the need for helper words if the formation is unusual or the arrangement is unusual. As an example, I would suggest that if we are calling at the Plus Program, most of the variety will probably come from calls on the Mainstream Program. There are some Plus calls, however, that can be danced smoothly from various arrangements and formations if we use helper words judiciously. If calling Spin Chain and Exchange the Gears from normal waves (BGGB), there are few problems. If calling Spin Chain and Exchange the Gears from waves where Boys are together and Girls are together, it makes sense to remind the dancers who the leader of the exchange will be. You might say First Boy or Second Girl etc. to help the dancers with the unusual arrangement. Similarly, if using Point-to-Point Diamonds and you want the dancers to Flip the Diamond, you might want to remind them that they should end in Tidal Waves.

It is important to realize that we don't need to use helper words all the time or with every group. The dancers come to dance and too many words interfere with their pleasure if we overdo the use of them.

There are other considerations in the use of helper words where they can not only be annoying but worse, they interfere with correct timing. If a caller uses the helper words Step to a Wave and then calls Swing Thru, it is almost a certainty that the timing will be off. Clearly, the words "Step to a Wave" are unnecessary in most circumstances. It might very well be appropriate to use those words, however, if you were going to follow the words with a Fan the Top to remove the chance of the dancers using the incorrect hand. At other times, the words Step to a Wave are needed if the following call requires the dancers to be in a wave, such as Recycle or Centers Trade etc. Judgment is the key. Equally important to judgment, however, is the knowledge of the call and what is required of the dancer to execute the call.

There is another aspect of Helper Words that needs to be understood. Specifically, when you use a series of words to condition the dancers to expect something, don't mislead them or try to trick them. For instance, Forward up and Back you reel, Pass Thru and _____. The dancers expect you to call Wheel and Deal. Many years ago, we called in this fashion to help the dancers. If we wanted the dancers to execute a Dixie Style to an Ocean Wave, we used the words "Ladies Lead". Some callers today are misusing these words as in the following: "Ladies Lead for a Flutterwheel". This is incorrect and encourages the dancers to prepare for the move and move in the incorrect direction. Part of our job as callers is to let the dancers win. Our choice of words can help in this regard.

When we study the art of teaching or how to teach, we know that we can go from the known to the unknown and from the simple to the complex. Similarly, with our calls, we should use helper words that are familiar to the dancers and will actually help them learn and execute the call correctly. If using Relay the Deucey, some calls will use words such as Grand Swing Thru to help the dancers. Perhaps it would be better to say, "Six Trade, Center Four Trade with the Left, Six Trade and then Girls Turn 3/4" if the call started from a normal ocean wave (BGGB).

CALLERLAB has made a handout called Analyzing a Call. Make copies of it, fill it out for each call, formation and arrangement that you plan to use and be sure that you know and understand what is required from the point of a formation, an arrangement, people involved and hands that are necessary. If you do this, then it is easier to use helper words which are meaningful to the dancers. If the dancers don't need the extra help, then keep quiet and let them enjoy the music. CALLERLAB has also completed a very useful document for teaching that deals with commonly used formations and arrangements for the Basic, Mainstream, and Plus calls. They are reasonably priced and should be a part of every caller's library.

Of course all of this is contingent upon many factors which are the subject as separate topics such as TIMING, SMOOTH DANCING and PROPER BODY FLOW, SHOWMANSHIP and SINGING CALLS. Look at the Curriculum Guidelines for Caller Training and the Supplement to it. They are excellent books and are essential if you ever try to teach other callers.

Remember, if the dancers need help, use helper words. If the dancers don't need help — keep quiet.

Good Luck