



SQUARE DANCING - "A Love & Passion"

JERRY JUNCK'S COMMENTS

Reprinted from the USDA NEWS

October – December 1998

— Whether we decide to embrace the Target 2000 proposal; accept the Basic Program for an entry level, or continue to subscribe to our current programs, we must reassume a leadership role and the responsibility for two other things.

First, teach NEW DANCERS. Every caller, not just a few. Let's be realistic. An influx of NEW DANCERS would go a long way toward solving most of our problems.

Secondly, every caller must provide a dance environment that is choreographically easy enough for new dancers to succeed. I think it is imperative that unless we, as callers, change our attitude toward dancer success, no decision we make will have any effect on recruiting or, far more important, retention. I firmly believe that, collectively, most callers call material far too difficult for new dancers.

I just as strongly believe that propensity has to change before we see new dancers decide to stay and enjoy the activity. This is one aspect of our calling skills that will be very difficult for many to change.

In my first CALLERLAB speech, I talked about attitudes and described two types of dancers, recreational dancers and hobby dancers. Most hobby dancers are what we have left in the activity. They dance the Plus, Advanced, Challenge, and Round Dance programs. They are the survivors. They enjoy choreographic challenge. These hobby dancers are what we have catered to for the last twenty-five years. It will take a huge adjustment in caller attitudes to change to an easier style of choreography for new dancers. Please note, I'm not talking about the current dance population. I'm addressing the NEW DANCER. We cannot expect them to be able to perform the complex choreography of today, with a minimal amount of training. We have to provide them a place to perfect their skills and enjoy what they know before we subject them to difficulty and complexity. We MUST change our attitudes regarding teaching, complexity of choreography, and dancer success. If our activity is to survive and grow, I think that change is absolutely imperative. To be sure there are recreational dancers in square dancing. However, they are now in the minority. If you go to the Midwest, or the Northwest, you will find them.

— Many of these recreational dancers simply quit dancing when PUSHED upward. Most aren't like my parents, who simply say, "I don't want to learn any more." I am reminded of a statement by Jack Lasry during a keynote speech at one of the CALLERLAB Conventions. He said, "I am not concerned by the numbers of dancers who drop out of our activity. But, I am concerned by the numbers that we drive out." I agree with Jack, and firmly believe we need to change our attitudes, if we expect to retain new dancers.

— Shane Greer said, "I think, through evolution, callers have totally focused on what we can do choreographically, and in general, forgot the things that are so much more important. The dance is more important, the music is more important, the fun is more important, and the social aspect is more important. Dancers love to anticipate what is coming, at least part of the time. Isn't that what dancing is? Yet, if we call this way, some of our peers think this shows a lack of ability. New callers see and feel this pressure, so they focus most of their attention on intricacy."

"We now have a whole square dance population that only enjoys this type of dancing. However, it is quite obvious that this does not appeal, and is not attractive to the masses.

I think there may be a time coming when we have to decide, do we want the masses, or do we only want those who love it so much that square dancing is all they do. Square Dancing is a great deal like golf. Golf courses would never stay open, if they only permitted people that could shoot 85 or lower. Let's be realistic, the folks that shoot over 100 keep the courses open and full." Have you ever thought of it in that way. What an interesting analogy.

— If we sincerely WANT to bring the recreational dancers back into our activity, then we MUST cater to THEM.

— We must develop a sincere desire to provide programs directed toward the new dancer. My concern is that I see very few callers who want to offer this type of program. Most certainly, not if they have to do it alone. Most of today's callers grew up admiring those who are able to demonstrate an expertise with complex choreography. This has been our focus for 25 years. It will not be easy to change that attitude.

— Now, why should we do this? BECAUSE WE HAVE TO, if we have any real desire to revitalize our activity. And, because we have a huge potential customer base available to us, the baby boomers.

— These people are a much different group of people than the dancers we now know. Society has changed dramatically and these people are an impatient, show me quickly generation. They will not commit to a year of lessons, nor will they necessarily stay with anything for any length of time. We need to be able to accommodate them.

We have to excite these people about the activity first. Once they become enthusiastic, they will become that new base we have been talking about. But again, we MUST have callers willing and capable of calling to them first.

— We are the callers and the leadership of this great activity, and everything starts with us.

What will it take? Quality, dedicated leadership. From that leadership we MUST have four things:

1. A love and a passion for square dancing.
2. A sincere desire to recruit and train new dancers.
3. Patience to give these new dancers time to mature into the activity.
4. The leadership skills necessary to convince the current dance population of the importance of protecting these new dancers.

From our leadership, we must have a love and passion for square dancing. In addition, we need to restore a mutual respect for each other, as well. There is no place for jealousy and mistrust among callers. The club caller, the class teacher, the full time caller, all have a place and a purpose in the activity. Most importantly, we need to recognize the importance of the club caller to this great recreation. On their shoulders rests the very survival of square dancing. It is the club caller that is the fabric and the backbone. It is the club caller who instills the flame of passion and provides the continuity of leadership. I salute you.

In addition, all of us have to dedicate ourselves to improving our skills. Callers have to become better and more efficient teachers. We must have a zest and passion for teaching. We must possess the technical expertise to enable us to teach effectively, and to provide a comfortable and entertaining environment after class. This is part of our responsibility as leaders in this activity.

We need to be able to motivate dancers as to the importance of recruiting, and the necessity of being patient and understanding with the new dancers we do teach. That motivation, to inspire people to recruit, is vital to any success we may experience in restoring our recreational dancer population. But, in order to recruit effectively, we must convince our current dancing public of the importance of recruiting. We have to motivate them into becoming ambassadors for the activity. If we can do that, we will have a vibrant and cohesive recruiting network, and it really should not be that difficult to find customers for the greatest recreation there is.

Finally, and this is my opinion, whether we adopt the Target 2000 proposal, the Basic list as our entry program, or continue with our current programs, I don't think we can effect any positive change in the activity until we address our attitude toward teaching and retaining the dancers we do teach. We will get new dancers from new dancers. If we run our new dancers off, we will get no new dancers.

Excerpts reprinted from the retirement speech of Jerry Junck, Chairman of the Board, given at the Monday evening banquet of the 1998 CALLERLAB Convention.

This is just the type of conversation that we hope will take place in Baltimore, Maryland in January 1999 at the Round Table discussion hosted by USDA. — Jim & Edythe