

HOW LONG IS TOO LONG by Buddy Weaver

There is a saying that has stuck with me since it was shared by a veteran square dance caller many years ago. "Always leave them wanting more". Smart thinking and sounds easy but why do we often find ourselves doing the exact opposite? The patter tips that last for fifteen minutes to thirty minutes. Remember the workshop tip that kept dancers on the floor for forty-five minutes?

The common fault of square dance callers – both traditional and modern western – is the tip running too long. When the music starts there is an enthusiasm and anticipation which electrifies the room. That energy carries into the tip, where a good caller will manage it and quickly ease out to a smooth close. The tip that is too long exhausts that energy leaving dancers feeling tired. Do you see the dancers checking their watch while you're calling? Is the end of your tip marked with little enthusiasm or applause? You've gone too long.

One of the reasons why tips run too long is the limitless playtime of the music. Whether with a live band or vinyl record or laptop, the music will keep going until the caller stops it. Another reason for seemingly endless tips is the lack of focus of the caller or the caller being too focused. In the former, the caller starts calling without a plan of what material will be used in a particular tip, where he/she wants the dancers to move, and how it will segway into the singing call. The calls used are extemporaneous but feel like a random smattering that go nowhere. In the latter case, the caller is razor focused on getting the dancers through a particular call or call sequence, not noticing the passing of time while pushing towards his/her goal. In the end, the caller got through the material but at the dancer's expense.

Every single caller has been in these situations, but the good caller, realizes it afterward and has a fix going forward. Here are some ideas on how to avoid being "that long-winded caller".

1. If using a laptop for your music source, change the software setting so the hoedown music will loop only once. An average hoedown produced by a square dance music company will play 3:42 minutes and with only one loop, your music will end after roughly 7:30 minutes of play. If you are using vinyl records, then reset the needle only once.

An added bonus to knowing that your music will end after one loop is recognizing the musical changes as the hoedown finishes so you have the dancers home taking the final bow as the last musical note hits. Dancers really like that.

2. Set a timer either on your computer, cell phone, or even an egg timer. Once you start the hoedown – six minutes. When the timer sounds, you should either already be ending the tip or quickly bring it to a close. Consider, an average dance with a patters and singing calls. Each tip has the patter end around the six minute mark plus the singing call and transition time between the two giving you a complete tip of around fifteen minutes. This seems like a desirable time for the average dancer to be standing on the dance floor.

If you are calling only patter, like most Advanced and Challenge dances, then keep the

patter tips to the six minute neighborhood, let the computer change squares, and start into another six minute patter. When two six minute patters are offered in a single tip, anyone sitting out is back dancing in about six or seven minutes. This is also useful in classes, EVEN BEGINNER CLASSES where the dancers get to change squares after six or seven minutes. If they are in a problem square, they are only there for six or seven minutes.

3. While on the subject of classes, if you are teaching a call then keep the dancers on the floor no longer than six or seven minutes INCLUDING the teach. An example which works well in beginner classes is start your timer when squares are set and you are ready to start teaching. Have a clear, concise teach along with walk through. Ready to start the music? Check your timer, if you've used four minutes teaching, then CALL ONLY TWO MINUTES WITH MUSIC and end the tip. Have the Head Couples quickly switch squares or if you have only one square, then have Ladies Chain and Rotate. Now call for six minutes using what you just taught. Let the dancers enjoy the music and watch how everything seems different, in a good way.

If you are taking six minutes or more to teach a call then you must learn to be a better teacher because no-one can hold an enthusiastic student audience for a long teach. There are many on-line resources on teaching and how people learn. It is a fact that learning square dancing is difficult made more challenging by the fact that most callers are not trained in teaching. At least, we have to avoid obvious mistakes like tips that are too long. It is the easiest problem to fix.

Finally, a surprising side-effect to shortening your patter tips is you'll have more tips during the entire dance. More opportunities to explore dancing fun and use new music. DANCERS WILL RESPOND POSITVELY TO SHORTER TIPS.

Your comments are always welcome, please send them to buddy@buddyweaver.com