

CALLERS SERVICE BULLETIN

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SUBJECT: STYLING SUGGESTIONS FOR
SQUARE DANCING
WRITTEN BY: DOC ALUMBAUGH

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DEFINITION OF "STYLING":

As applied to square dancing, the term "style" is construed to mean the execution of various steps and movements in such manner as to provide the effect of smoothness, grace and rhythm. There are at least five major elements contained in square dance styling, as follows:

1. Poise
2. Bearing
3. Rhythm
4. Timing
5. Local Mannerisms

The first four of these elements are applicable to all dancers in all sections of the country, while the fifth element will change according to local custom and habits.

STYLING VARIES IN MANY AREAS:

Different sections of the nation have different styles of square dancing. It is not the purpose of this article to claim that the local mannerisms described herein are the "best" ones. The points set forth here are, in most part, in common use throughout the southern California area, and are specifically those taught by the writer in his square dance classes. Other sections have equally good, or even better styling methods than those presented here. Hence, the intent of this article is to offer the writer's version of square dance styling, and to invite the reader to use whatever elements thereof that may be of interest and application to his own particular area.

P O I S E

In square dancing, poise means three things. (1) The knack of always being in correct position at the start of, during the execution of, and at the end of a figure or movement. (2) the maintenance and the dancer's balance and equilibrium, and (3) coolness and confidence.

Have you ever seen the guy (or gal) who always seems to be out of his proper place during a promenade - either wandering completely away from the circle, or trampling the heels of the couple in front, or lagging back to get in the way of the couple in back? Ever see a couple start a ladies chain opposite their proper position, then scramble like mad to recover position after the figure? Ever see a dancer go too far around (or not far enough) on a hand swing, and throw the whole set out of gear in trying to recover? We've all seen and experienced these shortcomings in poise, and the best correction known is constant alertness on the part of the dancer to keep himself in correct position at all times.

Good poise abolishes awkwardness almost automatically. Proper balance and equilibrium is achieved by an understanding of good footwork and weight bearing. Many dancers seem to have a natural reaction to good balance and graceful movement, but most of us have to learn the hard way - by experience. For example, the transition from the counterclockwise turn at the end of a right and left through, to the clockwise rotation of a swing immediately following, requires good poise through careful balance and footwork to accomplish the change gracefully.

Confusion and bewilderment nearly always result in a loss of mental poise. Calmness and confidence restores and maintains poise. An excited and tense dancer rarely has poise, while a relaxed and cheerful dancer always has it.

B E A R I N G

Good bearing goes farther than just correct posture. Much has been written and said about how to be erect, "stand tall, pull in the dining room, tuck in the sitting room" and the like. Boiled down to simple terms, good bearing is a combination of posture, carriage, grace and the way you "handle" yourself. It's the way you pick up your feet and set 'em down. It's the way you carry your head and shoulders.

By all means, good bearing can only be good when it is easy, relaxed and natural. Affected and stilted poses can never be graceful, and the "show off" can always be spotted when he tries to assume unnatural and pretentious position.

Good bearing, then, means the little ways of handling one's self on the floor that result in smooth, natural, easy and graceful dancing.

R H Y T H M

Rhythm is nothing more than recognizing the metronome beat of the music, then using that beat to execute the movements of the dance, not only with the feet but with the hands and body as well. A great deal has been said and done about rhythm, even to making it a subject of study for children in elementary grades. It's application to square dancing, at least for the dancer, is really quite simple. Most people have a natural response and reaction to rhythm, while others less fortunate must make an effort to develop a sense of rhythm.

Several kinds of rhythm are used in square dance music and calling, such as 2/4, 4/4, 6/8; together with such variances as down-beat, after-beat and pre-beat rhythms. It is not necessary for the dancer to become familiar with all these types of rhythms, although the caller should acquire enough knowledge of them to recognize, evaluate and utilize them at the proper time and under the right circumstances.

So far as the dancer is concerned, he is mainly interested and concerned with the simple metronome beat of the music as delivered by the rhythm section of the orchestra. Producers of square dance records take particular care to emphasize the beat of their music, usually from such instruments as the bass fiddle, drums, tuba, guitar or banjo. Experiences and competent "live music" pays like attention to the beat. Hence the dancer is given a strong and steady beat to follow and should quickly develop a feeling for rhythm that will contribute substantially to his dancing style and pleasure.

In square dance movements that are sustained over a considerable period of time, such as the grand right and left and the promenade, most dancers have no

trouble in putting a foot down on the floor on each beat of the music. On other movements of shorter length and greater complexity, it is often difficult or impossible to fit steps to beats. Nevertheless, dancers should be encouraged to match their "hoof" beats to the metronome beats as much as possible.

T I M I N G

No, "timing" in square dancing does not mean dancing in time to the music; that comes under the heading of RHYTHM. Timing means the execution of figures in the proper allotted time as expressed by metronome beats. For example, the proper timing for completing an allemand left, grand right and left and promenade home is (in most sections) 32 metronome beats. The usual timing for a ladies chain is 16 beats, broken down to four beats for the ladies to cross over, four beats to turn around, four beats to cross back and four beats to turn with partner. Other figures have a more-or-less standard number of beats allowed for execution, but are too numerous to list.

The caller must be acutely aware of good timing, and it makes for much better footwork, better teamwork by the whole set and certainly better dancing for all if the dancer has a practical working knowledge of timing. For these reasons the caller-teacher should always include some training in correct timing when teaching square dancing. Singing calls are usually timed out carefully and offer good study material for the interested dancer or caller. Contra dances are timed out with precision, but the timing for like figures in contras and squares will frequently not agree because of the difference in style and formation of the two types of dances.

L O C A L M A N N E R I S M S

Every section of the nation has it's own ways of square dancing that is characteristic of that locality, and that is the way it should be. In the writer's humble opinion, it would be a serious mistake to even suggest that dance figures and movements should be standardized all over the country - just as it would be wrong to suggest the abolishment of regional speech accents and clothing styles. There must be at least six different ways of executing the docey-doe (as well as spelling it) throughout the United States, and it's fun to learn them all.

When I refer to "local mannerisms" of square dancing, however, I allude to the many little fashions and positions of holding and placing the hands, body and feet during basic movements; rather than to the actual method of accomplishing the pattern itself. The national trend in square dancing appears to be toward the smooth and graceful type and away from the jerking, hopping and bouncing that used to predominate. In California, especially Southern California, square dancing has progressed rapidly with this trend toward smooth dancing and the following points, or local mannerisms, may be useful for the student of "styling" to analyze.

"HONOR YOUR PARTNER"

Ladies face partner, place right foot back with that knee bent slightly, left toe pointed out and left leg straight, spread skirts with both hands and bow. This position is the same for the lady in bowing to corner, opposite gent, etc. In honoring partner, right hand lady and opposite lady, the gent faces the lady concerned, places right foot forward, right hand is placed ju

above belt buckle in a semi-open relaxed position with palm up, left hand at small of back with palm out - and bows. In honoring his corner the gent places left foot forward, left hand in front, right hand in back. Usually there isn't a lot of time allowed for honoring (and it's a pity), so that the action is quite fast and excludes an elaborate deep bow.

"SWING YOUR PARTNER"

Either the "walk-around" or the "buzz" swing is acceptable in Southern California. The writer's experience has led to the belief that the "walk-around" swing is the easiest to learn and, for most dancers, the smoothest to do. When the "buzz" swing is done properly it is a beautiful thing to see, but so often it is accompanied by hopping, bouncing and lack of rhythm that it detracts from the grace and ease of swinging. The "walk-around" swing is easily taught by merely instructing partners to walk around each other, taking short steps on the right foot and long steps on the left foot. A simple ballroom-banjo position is used for the swing, with right hips adjacent, gent's right arm around the lady's waist, lady's left arm around gent's right shoulder, gent's left and lady's right arms extended to side with elbows slightly bent and hands at about shoulder height. By leaning back slightly to obtain good leverage, and relaxing, a smooth and graceful swing is soon mastered. When a swing is followed by a promenade, the gent stops his swing when his left shoulder is toward the center of the set, drops his right arm from his partner's waist, leads the lady into a $\frac{1}{2}$ right face twirl under his own left and her right arm, then changes hands to the promenade position described in the paragraph below.

"ALLEMAND LEFT, GRAND RIGHT AND LEFT, PROMENADE HOME"

On the allemand left, corners take left hands in regular clasp and walk around each other, with just a suggestion of a hesitation (or a nod of the head) at the halfway mark. This has been called a "float" type of allemand and the hesitation is often so slight as to be difficult to perceive. During the grand right and left, ladies and gents clasp hands briefly but firmly as they pass, at a level between chest and waist. When partners meet for a promenade following a grand right and left, the gent takes his partner's right hand in his right hand, then pushes his right hand forward and over causing the lady to make a $\frac{1}{2}$ right face twirl. The twirl should be done smoothly but rapidly so that the gent barely breaks his stride. The gent withdraws all but his right forefinger and middle finger for the lady's hand to rotate around during the twirl. Immediately following the twirl, and all during the promenade, the gent offers both his hands to the lady with palms up and fingers almost straight, while the lady places her hands into the gent's, palms down. The right hands are crossed ON TOP, approximately shoulder height, of left hands during the promenade. We like this palm position better than the "hand-shake" hold as it keeps the elbows close in to the body and partners close together.

As partners complete the promenade at home position they drop left hands, the gent pushes his right hand forward and over the lady's head causing the lady to make a $\frac{1}{2}$ right face twirl. Partners keep right hands joined after the twirl, and step away from each other at extended arm's length, bow briefly to each other, drop right hands, step toward each other and swing just once around to end in normal position facing center of set and ready for the next call.

"CIRCLE LEFT"

Hands are joined with gents' palms up and ladies palms down, with all hands at average shoulder height. Dancers face slightly toward line of direction and simply WALK (not hop, skip, jump or shuffle). Turning or swaying the body from

side to side is not often seen anymore among experienced dancers.

The step that is used all through the dance is a simple and relaxed walking step with the knees slightly bent and feet close to the floor but without scuffing on the floor. It is more of a glide than a shuffle. The weight is forward on the balls of the feet.

"LADIES CHAIN"

Gent receives the lady to be turned with his left palm straight up and thumb pointed out to the left side with fingers in an open but relaxed position, into which the lady places her left hand palm down. The lady's right hand is placed behind her back with the palm out to receive the gent's right hand. Gent walks backward during the turn while the lady walks forward, to pivot in place.

The same hand positions are used for the lady and gent to turn following a RIGHT AND LEFT THROUGH, DO-PASO AND DOCEY-DOE.

"CIRCLE FOUR TO A LINE OF FOUR"

The visiting couple goes to the host couple, all join hands and circle $\frac{3}{4}$ around. Visiting gent drops his left hand and the circle of four straightens to a line of four on the host couple's side of the square and with the visiting gent nearest his home position. As the broken circle straightens to a line, the lady on the end of the line (the lady of the host couple) walks under her own left and her partner's right hand in a full left face turn as the line falls into place. This eliminates the necessity of the end lady skittering backward rapidly and awkwardly as the line snaps into place.

The action described above may also be done in circle formation when picking up another couple. As the active gent drops hands with his corner to pick up the next couple, the corner girl walks under her left arm, timing this action so that she finishes just in time to join hands with the next couple. Another dance illustrating this point in styling is Right Hand Over or any other Forward 6 combination where a line of three is made, the end girl executing the same twirl as above.

"INACTIVE COUPLES PIVOT"

Whenever one or two couples promenade the outside ring (like in Pretty Girl), Lady Goes $\frac{1}{2}$ Way Round, The Route) the inactive couples pivot in place. This is done when the active gent (with partner) comes shoulder to shoulder with the inactive couple. The standing couple (in a promenade position) begins to pivot as couple approaches and as the gents put their left shoulders together, they pivot once around in their home position.

There are, however, exceptions to this point of styling. The pivot is never used on dances where the active couples cut through the inactive couples, such as in the Texas Merry-Go-Round, Hello, etc.

"MARKING TIME UNTIL THE CALL COMES"

There are times during any square dance where one or more couples are inactive. This is particularly true at the start of a dance when all four

couples are waiting for the call when it trails the music by several measures. The best method of marking time for inactive couples that I have observed is the "balance-in-and-together" trick. If all four couples are marking time, then all should synchronize their movements to do the same thing at the same time. The footwork for partners is opposite during this "balance-in-and-together" technique, so we'll describe the footwork for the gent, the lady doing the counterpart. Partners join inside hands, gent's right with lady's left, balance forward toward center of set on left foot while swinging joined hands forward (Ct. 1) and touch right toe to side of left foot (Ct. 2). Balance back on right foot while swinging joined hands backwards and pivoting $\frac{1}{4}$ turn to face partner (Ct. 1), and touch left toe beside right foot (Ct. 2). Repeat until the call comes. This balancing may not be as spectacular as other mark-time methods used because of it's brevity, but it is entirely effective, easy for all four couples to coordinate, and keeps the dancers close to "home base" so that the call will not catch them out of position. It can be used at any time during the dance by an inactive couple(s).

"MISCELLANEOUS"

Far be it from a mere man to suggest fancy "skirtwork" to the ladies, because that is something that is strictly within the feminine province. There is nothing that adds so much to the color, grace and flow of motion in square dancing as good skirtwork. However, like anything else it can be over-done. Handling the skirts should be done, as a rule, only when there is ample time to do a graceful job of it. It isn't exactly pretty when a gal has to snatch desperately at a skirt, flounce it any old way and drop it quickly because she needs that hand for another purpose. On the whole, skirtwork is prettier when done with a free hand and with the hand toward the outside of the set. As the ladies star or chain (except for a star promenade), the skirtwork should be done with the free hand because it shows up better and avoids possible embarrassment resulting from a possible short skirt held in a high-handed star.

If the men must do something with their free hands, the approved position for them in this locality is to place them palms out and thumbs pointed in on the hip pockets. This should be done only when there is considerable time that one or both hands are free. It looks too affected to do this on a grand right and left where hands are changed quickly.

S U M M A R Y

Strange as it may seem, most local mannerisms have been originated and adopted by the dancers themselves and are a result of their wishing to dance with something more in the way of "style" than just getting around the floor. It is part of the caller's job to analyze these points as he sees them in his groups, pick out the good points from the bad, and then encourage or discourage them in the light of his best judgment and for the good of the majority of dancers.

Good square dance styling is nothing more or less than good square dance habits. I have found it easier and more effective to teach the various elements of styling right from the very first night of a beginners group. Hence, the learner has no bad habits to break later on as he becomes aware of good styling.

Styling can, of course, be carried to the point where it becomes a burden instead of a joy. However, good square dance style is fun because it makes for the