

LEE HELSEL

Lee is one of the newest of the many top notch square dance callers to become a recording star. His first release on Sets in Order label has met with better than average acceptance. This is Lee's first year on the Sets in Order square dance institute camp faculty.

A member of the first Winter Asilomar session held last February, Lee has been called into the August session to conduct special callers' courses and to lend of much of his ability and personality in the firesides and after-party fun.

As an accomplished caller and instructor for many callers' classes in the past, Lee has developed an outstanding plan of instruction and encouragement for new callers.

The pages that follow explain some of his very workable beliefs. (Gs)

THE CALLER

INTRODUCTION

They say it takes all kinds of people and things to make up a world. It is equally true that it takes all kinds of people and things to make up the Square Dance World. In this section of the note book I have some thoughts about both (people and things) though mainly slanted toward the caller they may be of interest to the dancer. They are designed for one purpose — to help make "Square Dancing More Fun."

I. TECHNIQUES OF CALLING

There are many elements that must be combined to spell out success in calling. It would be difficult, if not almost impossible, to enumerate all of these. The content of this section deals with six factors which I feel to be of prime importance, though it must be kept in mind that this listing is not an exhaustive one.

1. Rhythm: Rhythm is perhaps the most important element in this group. Since square dancing is essentially a drill to music, it is imperative the caller augment or supplement the rhythm of the music in directing the dancers. Rhythm refers to equal spacing of periods of time and is measured by beating time to the music, tapping one's foot, etc. Most people essentially have an inborn feeling of rhythm, and it is necessary the caller possess this quality. If not, there is little hope.

The caller should not just call in, but actually through, his own devices, create rhythmic structure in relationship to the music. Variety in the rhythmic structure by use of the after-beat, "push notes," etc., adds greatly to calling, though can be overdone.

Two basic rhythms are used: (a) double time, and (b) triple time. Double time is characterized by two or a multiple of two beats to the measure, while triple time used three or a multiple. Double time is the most commonly used rhythm.

Metronome beats per minute (MBM) is a convenient method of computing speed of dancing. In double time (4/4) there are two metronome beats per measure. Thus, 130 MBM indicates 65 measures of music are being played per minute. Further support to the convenience of this computing method is added due to the fact a dancer usually (but let's face it some of them don't) takes a step on each metronome beat. Thus, at 130 MBM the dancers are taking 130 steps per minute. Though sections of the country vary in speed from 120 to 150, about 130 MBM is a comfortable speed to dance.

2. Pitch: Correct pitch or harmony provides a pleasant relationship between the caller's voice and the music. It is not absolutely essential for the execution of the dance that one call in harmony with the music, but proper pitch gives tremendous added enjoyment to the dancers (and the caller). Generally speaking, the caller's voice must be pitched to one of the notes within the harmony of the chord structure being played by the music. The root note of the chord is the reference point upon which the caller may build a variance of pitch patters.

For example, the chord of F Major is composed of the notes F-A & C. If the caller pitches on either F-A or C he will be in harmony with the chord. However, if he pitches on E he is creating a dischord, which is unpleasant to the ear.

Variation of pitch within the chord structure is essential to relieve what might be a monotonous chant if only one note is used. For patter calls and even some singing calls, it is suggested that the melody not be followed to accomplish the variation needed. The caller soon develops a "pitch pattern" which will be adaptable to various hoedowns and relieve him of having to establish new patterns with each different piece of music used.

The discriminating use of "blue" notes adds to the variety. However, care must be taken not to wander or vary too much.

3. Command: Command is the direction given by the caller to the dancers. Generally it represents the expression of the fundamental figure which the dancers are to execute. The command has two basic components — (a) the naming of the individuals or couples who are to carry out the command and, (b) the maneuver or figure to be done. At times the latter component is implied by virtue of the antecedent which applies till a new individual or couple is named, however, (a) above can never be omitted.

In modern square dance calling command is generally mixed with patter. Patter plays an essential role in continuing rhythm but is not necessary for the actual execution of the dance. Care must be exercised so that command can be distinguished from patter.

Methods for highlighting command are:

(a) Increase in volume: This is the most common means of calling attention to commands. Usually a caller thinks he is increasing volume but is actually not creating enough contrast between command and patter.

(b) Change of pitch: Usually going to higher notes in pitching one's voice attracts attention to the command — this is not done in all cases, however.

(c) Repetition: Repeating the command once or twice gives added emphasis to command. The hazard in this comes when repeating becomes a habit and loses its uniqueness as an attention getter.

(d) Talking: Sometimes breaking the pitch and use of ordinary speech qualities calls attention to the command. This method is not recommended except for real "trouble" spots in dances.

4. Timing: Timing refers to the number of beats allowed by the caller for the execution of a particular figure. It does not refer to the speed of the music, but rather to the speed of dancing. The usual tendency is for callers to rush the timing and not allow for the proper number of beats for the execution of the call. Dancers also contribute to the breakdown of timing by setting up large squares, taking too large steps or falling behind the beat of the music. Timing should be carefully planned to allow for the fact that dancers can travel only so fast. Singing calls are usually fairly well timed so comments here apply mostly to patter calls.

Timing requirements vary with the level of dancers. Beginners must be given more "reaction" time than experienced dancers who have a tendency to fall into habit patterns with frequently used figures. No rule covers all situations. This is the place the caller must use judgment in determining allowable time. In most cases the caller finds himself with dancers of some variety of abilities and experience. He, therefore, must suit the call to the greatest number of dancers. One aid to proper timing is for the caller to call to a representative square which reflects the approximate average or slightly above average of the ability of the dancers. One should not call "to" the slowest or the most experienced set on the floor, but one that represents most of the dancers. The hazard is in the fact that the caller likes to see his calls executed properly and promptly and he has a tendency to call to the best dancers. This must constantly be guarded against.

Since Square Dancing should be fun, remember to call at a comfortable level timing speed and avoid extremes.

5. Clarity: The need for clarity is almost self explanatory. In today's complex "hash" dances, it is necessary that the dancers catch each command in order to properly execute each figure. If the dancers hear only part of the command or miss important cue words, confusion results. Clarity depends upon enunciation, acoustics, voice and music balance both in volume and tone. Such factors as acoustics and sound equipment will be discussed in a later section.

Proper enunciation is most important. Generally enunciation can be improved by opening one's mouth wider and making sure correct breathing assures sufficient air to produce the proper sound. Proper choice of words is also a factor which simplifies the understanding of the caller. Best placement of the microphone in relation to the mouth is also significant. The mike or the caller's fingers or thumb should never touch the lips or chin (some callers use their thumb to obtain proper distance from mike to mouth).

Clarity also depends on proper balance of voice and music. Generally with records this is fairly simple to control by adjustment of volume controls on the mike and phonograph. The difficult part is to listen and evaluate these components. One of my pet gripes is the caller who puts on the music then says, "How's the music?" He then proceeds to ask "How's the voice?" Neither question can be properly answered because he isn't actually calling. This is where a caller's wife (or husband — some callers have these things) can be of great assistance. She can move about the floor while the caller is calling and by simple hand signals inform him of the balance.

Another method comes through experience of the caller hearing his voice in relation to the music on a voice and music monitor, or thru the speakers and making the proper adjustments. Tone controls are important too. The caller's voice should carry thru the heavy bass qualities of the music to be readily understood. Remember, "If you can't hear you can't dance."

6. Programing: Programing here refers to two things: - (a) Proper selection of dances, e.g. singing versus patter calls, difficult versus easy, etc., for the evening's dancing and (b) the proper combination of breaks, figures and fillers within the patter call itself.

(a) As a general rule the easy or "fun" dances should be programmed for the beginning and the end of the evening with the more difficult or complex dances in the middle of the program. In following a one and two program (one round dance then two squares), the more difficult dance should be done the first of the two squares. Followed by an easier dance, the dancers soon forget that they had trouble with the first (if they goofed) and they rest with the satisfaction of having completed the easier dance and had fun.

I highly recommend the planning of each evening's program (on paper) to be followed with proper allowances to be made for variations. The same applies to rounds. Lack of a written program, plus the pressure of trying to remember to provide a variety of dances, e.g., line, star, circle, etc., leads to a monotonous evening.

(b) Programing within the square itself should receive consideration. A square is usually composed of five parts: (1) Introduction (2) Breaks (3) Figures (4) Fillers, and (5) Endings. Naturally you use only one introduction and one ending but skillful blending of Breaks, Figures, and Fillers can do much to make the dance a success.

A general rule to follow is to use a figure twice (heads or sides working), then a break, or perhaps add a short filler, two more figures, then a break or filler. This can be repeated if desired, though remember the dancers are putting out the physical effort. Remember, marathon callers aren't popular.

II. MUSIC AND SOUND

1. Music: Music is the foundation upon which the dance is built. Music can either make or break a caller. In most cases callers work with records which provides an opportunity to exercise strict control over the music via record selection, though if you are fortunate enough to use live music you should exercise similar control over the music.

(a) Record Selection: This section deals in general with patter records though some comments are applicable to singing calls. Generally speaking a record that gives a strong rhythmic beat is best. This is usually accomplished by a strong bass beat, the use of rhythm guitar, the piano, and in some cases drums. In general, strong melody leads should be avoided in that the caller has a tendency to follow the melody. Most record companies pay strict attention to the needs of callers in regard to keys, bass beat, subdued melody, etc., though this is not always the case. Minor keys should be avoided for it lacks the full pleasing balance that is found in the major registers.

After the above requirements are met, I look for something else in a record. Difficult to describe, it might be termed lift, excitement!, etc. One that really "sends" one. The "makes you want to dance" music.

I also strongly recommend a variety of patter records be used during an evening of dancing to augment the variety of figures, breaks, etc. Using the same patter record all night has much of the same flavor as calling "Four Gents Star" all evening. Guard against getting in this rut (or grave - pun intended).

(b) Live Music: Live music adds considerably to the square dance picture, however, there is general agreement between those callers who have had experience

with both live music and records that there is a strong preference for good records over poor live music. In calling to live music it is important that the caller be familiar with the musicians. "Just any" musicians will not meet the requirements; it is essential that they be familiar with properties of square dance music. It is necessary that they have an appreciation of their place in relationship to the caller. The typical Western band not used to playing with square dance callers sets up a competitive situation that must be avoided. Beginning with February 1955 issue of "Sets in Order" there is an excellent series of articles by Pancho Baird entitled "The Caller and Musicians Can Be Perfect Square Dance Partners." I highly recommend this series of articles.

2. Sound Equipment: The sound system plays a very important part in today's square dance picture. Unlike the old time square dance caller, who stood in the middle of the floor and bellowed commands at the top of his voice, the use of good sound equipment enables the present day caller to do many things his predecessor could not do. The use of sound equipment has embellished and enlivened the square dance through the medium of pa tter, as well as enabled the use of more interesting and difficult figures that would have been impossible in Grandpa's day.

(a) Equipment Selection: Selection of the proper sound equipment is important to the caller. It should be remembered that equipment should be underworked rather than overtaxed. Pushing amplifiers to their maximum tends to distort both music and voice and loss of quality results. For general use a 25-watt public address system is adequate for dances up to 25 or 30 squares. However, special adaptations of 25-watt equipment have been used to successfully cover halls dancing 60-65 squares. Reliability is the keynote of equipment selection. Two 12-inch speakers are about the minimum a caller can get by with. The use of a monitor is preferred by many, and both music only, and voice plus music monitors are successfully used by many callers. The variable speed turntable is a must. The microphone should be matched to the PA system in order that proper balance be maintained. The microphone that produces "bass" qualities should be avoided, inasmuch as they produce an effect in which the voice blends too closely with the music. The exception is the high pitched or thin voice. The microphone must provide the quality necessary for the voice to "cut through" the strong bass rhythms of the music and be substantially different from the quality of the music to provide for maximum understanding.

(b) Placement: It should be recognized that hall acoustics play an important part in the placement of PA equipment. It is almost impossible to advance any rule of thumb that will cover all situations. Acoustically the hall should absorb sound and produce very little sound reflection. Sound properties are similar to those of light and will reflect from any hard, flat surface. Treatment of walls and ceiling with acoustical plaster or acoustical tile permit absorption. It should also be noted that the dancers absorb sound as well as the walls and ceiling of the room.

My preference in speaker placement is to use two 12-inch speakers placed in the same end of the room as the caller operates from, and placed so that they will "cross". This is to say one would point each speaker at the far opposite end of the hall.

I will not attempt to go into multiple speaker placement for peculiar hall characteristics, though I will be able to assist with individual questions on the subject.

III. LEADERSHIP IN SQUARE DANCING

1. Responsibility: Much has been said and many things written concerning techniques of square dance calling but this is only half the story of the success or failure of square dancing. Square dancing is essentially a social recreational activity and without question the most important factor in this area is leadership. By leadership I mean not only the caller's actions behind the mike, nor only the caller. I include his wife (or husband) as well as all the things a caller does in his total relationship with people on behalf of Square Dancing. The acceptance of this responsibility, and adhering to the principles of good leadership, offer the key to success.

2. Leadership Elements: Some elements of leadership as they apply to square dancing are:

1. Thinking and acting in the best interest of the dancers rather than the caller.
2. Avoiding extremes - follow the principle of "The most good for the most number."
3. Develop sensitivity to the needs of people.
4. Evaluate your actions and results of your leadership continuously.
5. Develop and adhere to a "Code of Ethics" toward other callers.
6. Develop and exhibit personal leadership qualities:

a. Dependability	i. Foresight
b. Honesty	j. Imagination
c. Loyalty	k. Open mindedness
d. Sincerity	l. Self-reliance
e. Cheerfulness	m. Cooperativeness
f. Firmness	n. Tactfulness
g. Optimism	o. Unselfishness
h. Fairness	p. Friendliness

3. Judgment: Perhaps no other factor is as important in leadership as judgment. Judgment is sensitivity to and consideration of all factors in a situation, and the decision to establishment of a course of action in conformance with basic principles.

4. Practical Elements: The following list may prove helpful in the area of leadership:

- a. Be enthusiastic - it's contagious
- b. Develop a sense of humor
- c. Overlook mistakes of dancers
- d. Anticipate blunders
- e. Be lenient
- f. Develop confidence through preparedness

- g. Program just enough - don't overdo a good thing
- h. Expect the best
- i. Get to know your people
- j. Change plans to suit the situation
- k. Admit mistakes - we make 'em you know

5. Callers' Wives (or husbands): One word about the caller's wife. Many a good caller has been severely handicapped because his wife did not understand or adhere to the basic principles of square dancing. The caller's wife can be a tremendous asset, not only in the area of assisting in demonstrations of figures and rounds but in providing a warm friendliness that makes people feel at home. She can assist in getting hesitant people in squares, check sound balance, and volume, etc. One forte that is her's alone is the encouragement of beginners in proper costume as well as passing on details of dressmaking, etc., which is of prime interest to all women. She can be a real member of the team. (If you'll let her.)

By Lee Helsel