

CALLERS SERVICE BULLETIN

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SUBJECT: STYLING SUGGESTIONS FOR
SQUARE DANCING
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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