

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. (Os)

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.