

# How To

# RETAIN DANCERS

Published By

**BAASDC & SDCCGB**

**JOINT COUNCILS' RPM COMMITTEE**

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RPM



■ recruit ■ promote ■ maintain ■

SQUARE DANCING

***KEEP IT ALIVE...RPM***

In order to keep Square Dancing alive we need a way to bring in a steady flow of younger people.

# **RETAINING SQUARE DANCERS FACTORS THAT CAUSE DANCERS TO DROP OUT AND THEIR SOLUTIONS**

## **Introduction**

These notes summarise the several seminars held around the country as well as the letters, telephone calls and chats I have had. Where possible I have attempted to group problems and solutions together, problems introduced with bullets •, solutions introduced with a , indented and in *italics*. Inevitably there is some duplication which I have tried to minimise. Some solutions contradict others but all points of view are equally valid and should be considered; none should be dismissed. They have all been offered as reasons why dancers have left clubs. A balance between the needs and aspirations of all dancers needs to be found if they are to be kept dancing.

All clubs should be run for the benefit of everyone within it, and a caring, democratic club will see that all members enjoy their experience. Members should be able to take their complaints to the caller or to the committee knowing that what they say will be taken note of and if necessary, acted upon. How the club is run and how dancers are taught should be subjects for discussion between dancers, caller and committee. A caring, democratic club should be a happy club, should be a thriving club.

I wish to thank everyone who took part in these seminars and who freely shared their thoughts and suggestions with me.

Irene S Dimmer, October 2001  
Revised February 2006 & 2008

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## 1 Beginner classes

### 1.1 Factors that influence learning

- Outside pressures - changes or problems in work or family, busy day, tired
- Age & associated problems - health, hearing, mobility, poor memory and inability to learn
  - *Provide hearing loops in the hall or receiver into deck and suit the choreography to the dancers.*
  - *Dance in the daytime or at weekends.*
  - *Allow a longer learning period.*
  - *Target advertising.*
- Not up to task, but won't admit it
- Too much to learn initially
  - *KISS - Keep It Sweetly Simple.*
  - *Call to suit the floor, vary the teaching methods and use lots of patience. UDo not use 'buzz' words. Adjust to suit the majority.*
  - *Keep early dancing simple, but technically correct, building in lots of repetition but ensuring dancers enjoy themselves.*
  - *Are there some people who will never master square dancing? Do they drive better dancers away? Should they be pointed elsewhere? Not an easy task! Some felt they must be told. It is a harsh world and perhaps it's time that we admitted that square dancing is not for everyone and acted accordingly.*
- Preferred learning style not being met; poor or different learning ability and speed
- Natural anxieties about making mistakes and the barrier to learning this creates.
- Made to feel inferior
  - *It is necessary for the club and callers to develop an awareness of student needs and individual requirements, provide support and build confidence and where necessary hold additional teaching sessions. Knowledge about learning styles and techniques is useful.*
  - *Anxiety creates chemical changes in the brain which can hinder learning.*
  - *People must not be picked on, shunned nor patronised. Allow time. Create a friendly welcoming atmosphere and encourage dancers to laugh at their mistakes.*
- Rushed through programme too quickly
- Pushed into the next programme before ready, often because of pressure from friends.
  - *Consolidating learning is more important than moving through one*

*programme or on to the next programme and allowing time for this to take place is necessary. Educate everyone to appreciate this.*

- *We are advised to dance at mainstream after graduation for at least a year. All dancers would be advised to dance at any subsequent programme after learning it - Plus, A1, A2 etc - for at least a year before moving on.*
- *Are dancers being sacrificed to their own or their caller's egos or the club's needs?*
- Unintelligible language
  - *Learning the language of square dancing has been likened to learning a foreign language. Use simple everyday language at first, gradually introducing square dance terms. Recognising and allowing time for this factor is crucial.*

### 1.2 Their expectations

- Unrealistic expectations of self or of dancing experience
- Unmet expectations
- Failure to appreciate the need for commitment to the course and to the necessary learning to make progress or maintain standard
- Infrequent attendances
- Something better on TV
  - *Be patient, during the initial period build in lots of repetition and hope all will eventually catch the square dance bug.*
  - *Communication is essential and at some time dancers need to be made aware of the commitment necessary but stressed too soon this could be off-putting. We are competing with a very sophisticated world and it is up to us to give them a better experience.*
  - *Friendly phone calls to find out why people have missed show interest and may bring them back.*
  - *The class could pay in advance for each term or for a year.*

### 1.3 Other points

- Beginner caller given the responsibility of teaching the class
  - *This can be a problem. Beginner dancers are entitled to the best. Unfortunately, there are too few callers to always make this possible. Beginner callers should be supervised and given lots of support and encouraged to consult the Secretary of Callers Club about training courses.*

- *Teaching brand new dancers is unlike teaching established dancers something new. It requires considerable experience, skill and patience to teach beginners. What is taught and learnt in class provides the building blocks of all future dancing. Students are learning to listen, to respond to the caller, to work as part of a group, to concentrate and to move in time with the music. At the same time they are learning the language and acquiring a knowledge of choreography and much else. In short they are learning to square dance. Training courses and caller/teacher notes will expand on this.*
- Too few people to generate a good atmosphere
  - *Use a small hall. Adjust the furniture to reduce available space. Angels may be helpful here.*
  - *Examine recruitment techniques and look again at the recruitment booklet issued by the RPM committee.*
- Single dancers - often too many ladies
- Sashes for lady dancers
  - *This is a fact of life. Encourage some ladies to dance as man permanently and ask the lady dancing man to wear a sash though this should be optional.*
  - *Target your advertising.*
- Gear - is there too much emphasis on this early on?
  - *Leave for some time. Do we need it? If so, why?*
- Angels - too many, too bossy, don't mix, will try to teach or talk whilst caller is explaining.
  - *Good angels have a lot to offer. Brief before the course starts with a written handout. Praising a good angel or gently reminding a 'talker' that only one voice should be heard may work. Remind them of their own need to concentrate whilst learning and to listen to only one person. They must be patient.*
- Incorporation of beginners into the main club
  - *Do not rush new graduates into the main club. Give them time to practise their new skills before exposing them to what they may see as a hostile world waiting for them to make a mistake. Their anxiety will ensure they do make mistakes.*
  - *If the class meets on the same night and in the same venue as the club, then let them join the club for one tip*

*each evening and as they progress, gradually extend this. An occasional full evening together e.g. at Christmas is a good idea.*

- *If they meet on a different night, then invite them along to the club occasionally especially to special evenings. Invite them to any social events - club barbecue, outing etc.*
- *A sensitive approach is needed when the class is eventually integrated. Some members of the club may have welcomed classes ten or so times and need consideration if the club is not to lose them. Offer club members 2/3 tips at their standard during the evening to enable them to maintain their standard and feel valued. Their goodwill is essential. Explain to the class the reasons for this - they will be in the same situation in a few years' time.*

## **2 Club dancers themselves**

### **2.1 Aspects that affect ability to learn**

As almost all the points in section 1.1 also appeared here, I shall not repeat them but would direct you to re-read that section when considering aspects of learning in your club(s).

### **2.2 Other aspects**

- Dancers form cliques and are intolerant of others, particularly less good dancers and always dance in the same square. They seem to have short memories and forget the mistakes they made/make and are impatient.
- Felt lost or ignored at the club
  - *Better education right from the beginning might help. Find ways of mixing the dancers - the grand march, circle mixers, computer cards, though good manners should make these unnecessary. Some people just want to dance with their friends and surely this should be permissible.*
  - *Hold social events other than dancing to break down barriers.*
- Other clubs they attend give them a false impression of their ability. Wanting them to stay they give them false praise.
- Dancers, often the best dancers, are poached by members of other clubs,
  - *Poaching is totally unacceptable. It is extremely discourteous, and can be very hurtful particularly if your club has expended time, energy and money on teaching these people to dance.*

- *Dancers going to other clubs is acceptable. Their dancing may improve. If it prevents dancers dropping out completely then it is acceptable.*
- *Maintain your friendships with them as at some time in the future they may wish to return. Encourage dual club membership. Provide a copy of the Let's Square Dance magazine on graduation.*
- *Make available a copy of the "Square Dancing Indoctrination Book", obtainable from square dance shops such as Phil & Zoe 01903 243392.*
- *Should you look more closely at what you are offering the dancers? If you are not offering them a satisfactory experience, then they may well look elsewhere.*
- *Burn out - dance too often*
- *Attend Saturday dances too soon*
  - *Dancers improve their dancing by attending Saturday dances. Yes, but if they are spoiling the evening for others point out the club is the best place to learn.*
- *Lack of knowledge about the wider scene*
  - *Some dancers are content to dance one night a week and we should not expect more of them. However, we should ensure they know that there are lots of enjoyable events where they can gain further pleasure. Direct them to the club notice board and announce forthcoming events.*
  - *Provide a club newsletter listing events.*

### **3 Behaviour and attitudes of other dancers within the club**

#### **3.1 General points**

- *Unfriendly and unaware of the social etiquette of square dancing*
- *Form cliques and always dance in same square*
- *Unwelcoming to new members*
- *Do not greet visitors*
- *Too much noise whilst dancing or from those sitting out*
- *Petty feuds*
- *Lack of personal hygiene*
  - *This can be very unpleasant and may result in the dancer being ostracised. A handout at the time of graduation could spell out some of the points like this that it is difficult to address in any other way. Eventually the caller or chairman or a close friend may have to mention it. Include deodorants, and 'smellies' in the club raffle.*

\*\*\* Look up the BAASDC constitution, appendix B for guidelines on this.

#### **3.2 Attitude to new or not so good dancers**

- *Hostile to new graduates*
- *Walk out of poor, failing square*
- *Pass a forming square to avoid weak dancers*
- *Make unkind comments*
- *Short/selective memory that makes them forget their own mistakes and their occasional? frequent? need for help and they blame others for their own mistakes*
  - *All of the above are examples of bad manners and should be dealt with immediately*
  - *Introduce social events to break down barriers. See the suggestions under 2.2*
  - *Remind them they needed help once.*
- *Poor styling, rough dancers, push dancers around*
  - *These aspects should have been picked up during class but in the club they may be evidence of frustration. Is the club in danger of losing them? Introduce one or two challenging tips during the evening to show you value the better dancers and that there is a place for them in your club. This may encourage them to be more patient particularly if the caller or chairman talks to these people and enlists their help with the weaker dancers. We are dealing with human nature and few of us are saints*
- *Weak dancers drive away better dancers*
  - *This is a real danger and will result in a lower standard of dancing within the club. Look again at the points in the previous paragraph and back at 1.1.under "too much to learn initially".*

#### **4 The dance material; what is expected of the dancers**

- *The complexity - too difficult, too fast, too slow, too easy and becomes boring*
  - *The complexity must fit the group. In a very mixed ability group, have two or three challenging tips for the high flyers*
- *All Position Dancing or Dancing By Definition (APD/DBD) can be very challenging*
- *Not introduced to APD/DBD at all in their club or class and when they meet it they feel confused and inadequate*
- *Too much APD/DBD at one go, in one tip*

- *There are two schools of thought about the introduction of APD dancing. One says introduce 'standard position' dancing first and after graduation introduce APD. The other, with sound educational arguments, says throughout the country, introduce APD quite soon in a dancer's experience but handle with care and never too much at one go. This way it becomes an integral part of a dancer's make-up. For instance if Pass the Ocean is always danced from 'standard position', dancers will generate their own definition - men, 'I pass thru and turn right', and ladies, 'I pass thru and turn left'. Eradicating a wrong definition once entrenched is very difficult and better never developed.*
- Too much/not enough repetition, particularly of a new move or of a move from a new 'non-standard' position
- Too much to learn and remember
- Too much/too little workshopping
  - *Adequate repetition is essential. One respected caller says it may need 77 repetitions to fix something. Caller judgement is essential. But it is not always easy to assess how things are going and consultation between the caller, club leaders and the dancers even will help. A varied flexible approach will mean that all dancers get satisfaction at some time.*
- Split level nights which can give too little practice at any one programme
  - *There is no easy solution to this. Some people feel they don't work. To maintain a standard at any level and gradually extend dancers' ability requires a whole evening. Are the dancers being short changed? With fewer dancers in our clubs and classes and insufficient callers this may be inevitable. Some clubs offer different levels on alternate weeks though this may not be suitable for beginners. Offering a monthly evening at the higher level may be one solution.*
- Too serious or too flippant an approach
- No longer fun
  - *Why? Should we be aiming for pleasure and enjoyment rather than fun? Build in occasional evenings and tips that are relaxing and enjoyable and ensure a flexible, varied approach so that everyone's preferences are met at some time.*

## **5 The club, the venue and its ambience**

### **5.1 The hall and its location**

- Accessibility poor
- Inadequate/insecure parking
- Size and atmosphere - hall too small for comfort or too large for sociability
- Inappropriate environment - infants' chairs, toilets
- Poor lighting both inside and outside
- Temperature not right - too hot/cold; insufficient ventilation
- Unwelcoming/unclean
  - *Consultation with the hall secretary or management committee may bring an improvement. Talking to someone calmly may overcome many of these problems. If necessary, write to the Chairman of the management committee. You are a paying customer. Often the people who run a hall don't use it and therefore don't realise the accommodation is substandard. Point out to them that you are losing dancers and may have to move or close the club.*
  - *In a too large hall, use furniture - tables, chairs to reduce the space.*
  - *In an infants' school are there staff chairs and toilets that you can use?*
  - *If all else fails, change the hall but you may lose some dancers so consult them first.*
- Caretaker forbidding
  - *Forbidding, shy or concentrating? A good caretaker is worth his weight in salt. A Christmas box, an invitation to share potluck at a party might work. Be inventive! Failing all else, try lots of flattery.*
- Acoustics/sound poor
  - *Is this the hall or the equipment being used? If the hall, then consult the managers and seek technical advice. Curtains or acoustic tiles might solve the problem. If the equipment, then discuss with the caller. Callers invest a lot of money in equipment for often little returns. Could the club invest in new equipment?*

### **5.2 Additional points**

- Cost of hall and its influence on admission charges
  - *Admission charges have to reflect hall costs. Historically, square dancing is very cheap. Compare with charges for community courses, sometimes as much as £3 - £4 per hour. Re-educate dancers for the need to pay a realistic amount.*
- Additional rooms. Is there more than one hall to accommodate a class of

beginners/ other levels of dancing? Would this be too expensive? See previous point.

- *This would depend on caller availability and affordability. Running a beginners' class on the same night as the club means that students are committed to that evening but can present other problems. Using two rooms could avoid the need for split level evenings.*
- Moving to a new hall
  - *As with all things concerning your club, examine carefully why it is necessary, consult all your dancers and then make your decision.*
- Dress code. Is our insistence upon dancers wearing 'gear' driving people away?
  - *Mixed views here - yes, no, maybe. Some love it, some tolerate it, some hate it.*
  - *There is a move towards less emphasis on 'gear'. Perhaps we should be more flexible and not demand it be worn on club nights.*
- Unsociable club, no non-dancing activities
  - *Social activities e.g barbecues and club outings can be great fun and help to break down some of the barriers.*
  - *Appoint a social activities secretary. Talk to other clubs about their activities and read about them in Let's Square Dance.*
- Nowhere for singles, particularly single ladies to dance
  - *Some single ladies pair up with one dancing as a man and wearing a sash or 'I dance man badge' or if good dancers, they could alternate.*
  - *Display a 'solo' notice at Saturday dances.*

### **5.3 Club officers**

- Do not welcome visitors or dance with them
- Always sit and talk to the same people
- Do not listen to the dancers' views
- Unprepared for club membership or officer responsibilities
- Do not follow up absences
  - *Club officers have a crucial role to play in the atmosphere of the club, to ensure that everyone feels welcomed and valued. But all club members have a role to play here not just the officers and committee. Go and sit in a different seat. Talk to people including visitors. You'll be surprised at the warm response. They are the friend you're about to make. Educate all*

*dancers that they should serve on your club committee or seek officer status at some time. If not wishing or able to take on this responsibility there are many ways in which members can help and support the club. Callers' partners often fill this ambassadorial role spontaneously particularly in a caller-run club. But all club members can be welcoming. Overcome your natural shyness; it may help your club survive.*

## **6 Saturday dances**

### **6.1 General points**

- Unsuitable hall
- Hall too small with too many dancers admitted for comfortable, safe dancing
  - *Better planning and selection of hall. The dancers are, in effect, your guests and need consideration. Restrict numbers and do not allow profit to override the need for comfort and safety. Spell this out on your publicity and tickets. Callerlab recommends a 12ft sq for one square of eight people.*
  - *Many of the points raised under 5.1 'The hall & its location' also apply here so please refer back to these.*
- Too many dances and not enough dancers
- Clashing dates
  - *To avoid clashes please follow the BAASDC's guidelines:*
  - *Ring the Coming Events Consultant, details appear inside the front cover of Let's Square Dance, to find out which dates are free and which of those are not regularly used by a club in your area.*
  - *Book the event and then notify the Coming Events consultant by phone and in writing.*
  - *In addition what is required is better coordination and communication between clubs in adjacent areas. Without this natural courtesy clashing dances may well make a loss. Those areas which have a central co-ordinator have mostly overcome this problem. Those areas which have not, could come together to come to a long-term arrangement whereby each club has specific regular Saturdays allocated to it. These must then be adhered to.*
- Not enough Saturday dances at their preferred programme
  - *Encourage your club to run more dances and help in the planning and running of them.*

### **6.2 Split level (programme) dances**

- Do split programme dances give value for money?
  - *Not to those who only dance the lower programme.*
- Split level dances mean that, for mainstream dancers, for example, there's not enough dancing at their preferred level or other types of dance are interspersed which give an apparently similar effect
  - *If all clubs were brave enough to run single programme dances for say a year would dancers then be educated to expect this and support single programme dances thus overcoming the main argument against them that they lose money.*
  - *Offer one, two tips at the most at the higher programme in each half. Think very carefully about value for money for those dancing at the lower programme.*
  - *Split level dances are thought to cause the 'rush to plus' and if now 'plus with prearranged 'A' tips dances are run may these not cause a gallop to A?*
  - *Ultimately, club leaders have to decide but they should at least look carefully at what they are doing.*
- Some dancers actually prefer split level dances. It gives them a chance to rest or the chance of dancing fairly simple Plus
  - *Dancers do not have to dance every dance. If feeling pressured then leave the room at the beginning of a tip until it is well under way. Drastic, but it works.*
  - *Should the higher level offered be fairly simple? May this not frustrate the dancers who like their plus or A to be challenging?*

### **6.3 Newer or 'less good' dancers**

- New graduates tend to stay with their peer group, are reluctant to mix and often hide at the back of the hall as they fear they will break the squares down.
  - *This is the responsibility of others in the club who should dance with them and encourage them to mix. See also next two points.*
- Not up to the required level of the dance because persuaded to attend before ready by friends or caller or club committee member.
- Bad Saturday night experience where they were made to feel inadequate
  - *They should be discouraged from attending until ready for fear that they may be disillusioned if their squares*

*frequently break down or they may drive others away.*

- Cliques formed with some people dancing in the same square all night thus excluding newer dancers
- Dancers will pass a forming square to avoid weak dancers
  - *Look back under section 2.2 for comments on these points.*

### **6.4 Other points**

- Dancers are forced to get up to complete a square even though needing a rest
  - Look back under section 6.2
- Too long, not long enough between tips
- The calling is too fast
  - *Better communication between the dance organisers and caller is essential as callers are employees.*
  - *Callers should exercise caller judgement and call to the level of the floor.*
  - *They need also to remember the increasing ages of the dancers.*

## **7 Callers**

Callers have a major part to play in the success of square dancing and dancers recognise what a tremendous debt we owe them for their hard work and dedication. At all the seminars, people were very appreciative of them. However, some areas for improvement did emerge during the first seminar and have been further discussed at subsequent ones.

In order to avoid the cumbersome 'him/her' I have used 'him', 'his' throughout and hope our lady callers will understand and excuse me.

### **7.1 At the club**

- Unaware of factors that prevent learning and blame the dancers for their shortcomings rather than looking at their own approach
- Make tips too long and go past people's receptive span
- Include too much in one tip - either of new moves or positions or any one move taught from too many positions leading to dancer overload
- Do not give dancers adequate exposure to APD/DBD or give too much at one time.
- Too long/not long enough between tips
- Call too fast
- Poor communicator and unsympathetic to needs of dancers
- Plans course and lessons poorly and rushes dancers through too quickly

- Education, and consultation with club leaders and dancers is essential, remembering that constructive comment is not criticism but an attempt to help callers give of their best and thus prevent dancer loss. Attend Callers Club or Regional Callers Association meetings especially if a workshop on learning is being offered. Read books on learning and learning styles.
- Tape and listen to self when calling.
- Pays no attention to styling or considerate dancing
  - Styling is very important as it makes for smooth, considerate dancing. Styling should be taught in class and reminders given in the club. Co-operation between caller and club leaders helps.
- Records/music unsuitable - too old, too modern
  - Records and equipment can be expensive. Can the club help to purchase/replace old records/equipment? Where possible a wide variety of music should be used.
  - Record swap shops may be a source of replacement records.
  - Paul Bristow regularly advertises Sting and Snow records in the let's Square Dance magazine. Contact Paul on 020 8845 5073.
  - New Beat supply recordings via the web <http://www.new-beat.net/>.
  - Trevor and Chris Day run the NARCA Record Shop. Contact them on 0161 437 3620.
  - Hanhurst's tape service is also of value - details from Callers' Club secretary.
  - Some callers, especially ladies find it more difficult to find records that suit their voice range. Humming along helps to find the best records but ultimately using it in the usual venue is the only real test.
- Poor control of equipment/tone knob with music too loud or voice/music too strident
  - The caller's partner or a club leader can help here. When on the stage it is not always possible to hear the sound one is making.
- Irritating habits
  - The caller's partner or a club leader should mention these as they can be very off-putting. The caller should then try to overcome them. If a cough or laugh which cannot be eradicated

then at least move the microphone away from the mouth.

## 7.2 At Saturday dances

- Not enough enjoyment and too much workshopping
- Callers not fully briefed about the standard of dancing to expect
- Ignore/unaware of the ability of the floor and do not call to it
  - It is essential that callers are briefed about the expected level of the floor, but good callers will watch very carefully during the first tip or two and will then balance his programme accordingly. However, satisfying several levels of ability is very challenging and requires considerable skill if all are to feel satisfied. Look back at 'Newer or less good Dancers' for further comments on this problem.
  - Trainee teachers do teaching practice where they are observed by the class teacher, the school head and by their own College Education lecturer. When the teaching practice is reviewed, good and bad teaching points are fully discussed. Should we introduce something drastic like this? A checklist of points for a caller to rate himself out of ten might help focus a caller's attention on how well he did and persuade him to do better next time.
  - Anyone who encourages a dancer to attend a dance before they are ready is culpable.
- Focus on a square of dancers from their own club, ignoring the rest of the floor
- Make 'in' jokes to other callers present on floor or on stage or to friends on the floor
  - These show very bad taste. By excluding the rest of the floor, both set up a barrier between them and the 'in-group'. They may be a 'comfort blanket' but should be avoided at all costs.
- Caller verbally abusing dancers
  - This is unforgivable and should never happen. It is difficult to believe that such a caller would ever be re-employed by that club or by any other who saw it.
- Poor diction
  - Voice lessons may help as will work on microphone technique and better use of the controls on the equipment being used. A sympathetic but honest 'mentor' is needed.
- Appearance
  - Most callers are very smart and scruffy callers should observe and copy.

- Leave too long, not long enough between tips
  - *Most callers play quietly through the last record used considering this the right length of time to leave before commencing the next tip. Other factors to note are the room temperature, the speed at which squares form - or don't. The speed of*

*a caller's delivery should also be considered. If dancers are running all the time, they will require longer between tips so will an older dance population. Caller judgement is important.*

Irene S Dimmer 2006 (Re-issued 2008)

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#### **Publications you may find useful :-**

How to **RAISE FUNDS** for recruiting By Zoe Bremer 2006 (Re-issued 2008)

How to **MARKET** Square & Round Dancing to **RECRUIT** New Dancers by Linda Gill 2008

How to **RECRUIT** By Eric Curtis 2008

How to **ARRANGE YOUR FIRST NIGHT** of class By Joan Black Lune Valley Ocean Wavers  
2005 Re-issued 2008)

How to **RETAIN** Square Dancers By Irene Dimmer 2006 (Re-issued 2008)

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