Tips on Becoming a Better Dancer

by Janet Neumann

I have been asked by a few people to give them some tips on becoming a better dancer. So this is my attempt to put in writing some of the ideas that I have.

I believe that I can summarize my tips using these headings:

•Dancing

•Teamwork

•Definitions

•Identification

•Precision & Breathing

•Study & Practice

•Have Fun

Dancing

This activity is called "Square Dancing", which I believe means to move with the beat of the music. If you move your feet in time with the music, you should not have to run to catch up nor be standing around waiting for the next call. I know this is ideal, but that is what we should strive for. A dance where the caller gives us the calls at the appropriate pace for us to keep moving and where we, as dancers, execute the calls as they are supposed to be done, is truly a beautiful sight. Of course, the reality is that callers don't always give the calls at the right time and dancers do make mistakes and have to be corrected. But if we all give our very best, we will get closer and closer to that beautiful picture.

Some other points about dancing--At a dance you need to make every effort to keep going even if a mistake is made. Try to correct yourself and keep the square moving. If you didn't see something, ask someone at the break, but don't stop in the middle of the square and ponder it. I insist on this same effort in a workshop. When the tape is going, everyone does their best to keep moving. Then when you are promenading home, you can raise your hand and ask for a repeat or a walk through or whatever, but you cannot yell "stop the tape, I don't see it". The benefit of this is that you make your workshops like a real dance where you either have to keep going or stand and wait for the next sequence. I believe strongly that you gain more from dancing, even if you are not in the correct postions, than standing at home or in the square with the tape stopped. If someone in the square, or the caller, says "lines facing", make any old line facing and keep moving. At least you will get more practice and you can ask questions at the break.

TEAMWORK

Square dancing can really only work when there is teamwork. Each square is a team of 8 people, and all 8 need to participate and contribute. Every square will have a weakest dancer, even if you have 8 top notch dancers, someone will be the weakest. So don't focus on who's in your square. If you start a tip saying "oh we have some bad dancers in this square so we won't get anything," you will be defeated before you start. Think positively knowing that you need to do the calls correctly and be in the correct position at the correct time. Everyone has the ability to help in the square. This does not mean you should push or pull people around. It means taking hands with people when you should, it means saying a definition or repeating the call to help someone who may be doing the wrong call or doing a call wrong, it means keeping your square tight and symmetric, it means communicating nonverbally with nods or pointing or a motion of the hand, it means waiting an extra second for someone who is behind and not just going on with your part and leaving them in the dust. No one likes to be helped when they don't need it, so subtlety and judgement are important. The goal is for the square to get through the sequence, not just one or two people.

DEFINITIONS

Definitions are the most important fundamental you can have. We all learn how to do calls by some definition, but often we quickly forget that definition and do the call by "feel". This is a major problem for higher level dancers. Most calls can be done from many positions even though most callers may only routinely use them from a few. I believe that knowing and saying the definition quietly to yourself while doing each and every call is absolutely crucial for success. The basic and mainstream definitions are the most important because they are the building blocks for all future calls learned. You may think it is foolish to say to yourself "half right and half left" when you hear swing thru, but if you always did that, you would have no trouble doing it from a left hand wave, a tidal wave, or a phantom setup. Sit down with a list of calls from Basic up to the level you are dancing and then say the call and follow by saying the definition. If you cannot quickly state a definition, you need to study. Only when you have the definitions readily available in your brain, will you be able to execute them in the square at a dancing pace. And back to teamwork, if the person beside you seems to be hesitating, saying the definition a little louder so they can hear it may mean the difference between continuing to dance or squaring up at home waiting for the next sequence.

If you do not know or don't think you have a good definition of a call, ask someone. Many definitions originally given to you may be long and cumbersome. You may be able to find a much quicker/shorter definition by asking around. For example, the call Shake Down can be defined as Belles do a three-quarters zoom and the Beaus do a run and roll. That definition works, but the call is so quick that it will be over before you decide if you are a belle or a beau. A quicker definition is everyone quarter right, counter rotate and roll.

IDENTIFICATION

Square dancing is loaded with identification. We have couples 1, 2, 3, and 4, heads, sides, belles, beaus, boys, girls, ends, centers, leaders, trailers, partner, and a whole slew of formations. You need to know which of these you are at all times, and you need to communicate that to your "teammates". When the callers says "boys trade" it may seem stupid to raise your hand, but if the other boy doesn't know who is who, you could break down. I would strongly suggest that you get in the habit of gently raising your hand or saying "leader, belle, etc" anytime you are an identified person. This will help you and the whole square. The way I learned to identify quickly was to practice at a lower level. When you go to a dance 1 or more levels below your top dancing level try this exercise. Each tip pick one identity (leaders, trailers, belles, beaus, ends, centers,) and then after each call quickly think to yourself which one you are (leader or trailer, belle or beau, end or center). You will almost always be one or the other. Also, take a tip and mentally point to your partner after each call. This may seem so fundamental....and it is. Good fundamentals make good dancers!

Identifying formations is also critical. You must know what right- hand waves, left-hand waves, R and L two-faced lines, tidal wave, R and L columns, zero tags, quarter tags, half tags, three-quarter tags and full tag positions are. Callers give us many cues about our formation. If they say in your "right-hand columns" or "check a right-hand column", look around and make sure your square has a right-hand column. The caller is probably saying that because someone is NOT in a right-hand column. Teamwork again--help each other, look around and be aware of the whole square. Don't just say, "I am in a right-hand column" and forget the rest of your square. If you don't try to help your square get into a right-hand column, you are as guilty of taking the square down as the person who is incorrect. If you get the whole square into a right-hand column you have a chance of continuing with the sequence. If you don't you will probably soon break down and stand at home.

If you are not in the correct position and you know who you are out with, try to correct it along the way when you are next to each other and can simply trade. But don't ever break down the square trying to fix yourself if the square is dancing. I believe it is important to know that you have an opposite in every square and you can use that as a tool if you are confused, but do not use it as your mode of dancing nor blame the opposite if they are wrong and you followed them. While on this topic, I must say that I also feel strongly that you should look and work in your own square only. You know you have a counterpart in every square around you, but if you have your head turned to copy the square next to you, I can assure you that you are NOT being a team player and you are basically saying you have given up on your own team. Use a counterpart only when the square has broken down and you are trying to make a formation so that you can get going again instead of squaring up.

PRECISION & BREATHING

Being precise in your dancing is vital. We do a tremendous amount of turning and casting in square dancing, and being a quarter off can, and will, often break the square down. I believe cast off three- quarters is one of the hardest calls in square dancing. It requires discipline to be certain that you have turned three walls, not five- eighths and not seven-eighths, but three-quarters. I count 1, 2, 3 to myself every time I do a cast three-quarters. Precision also means being lined up with the other dancers in the square and keeping the square tight. If you have two parallel waves, the dancers should be close enough side to side to touch hands easily without stretching out their arms. The dancers should also be close enough front to back to reach forward and touch the person in front of them. Some people may think this feels too tight, but it is not if you use square breathing appropriately. The square should be in constant motion. Every call has the potential for all dancers to need to breath even if they are not active in the call. For example, from a squared set, when "heads swing thru" is called, the sides should take a small step backward to allow room down the middle for the resulting wave. Then if the call was "lock it", the heads in the middle would do the call "lock it", but the sides should also move a step forward to bring the square back to an appropriate size.

STUDY & PRACTICE

Ongoing studying of definitions at all levels and constant practicing are essential to good dancing. Do not take it for granted that you will forever remember a call's definition just because you learned it once. Quiz with another person while traveling, review a few calls each day at lunch or while sitting at a long red light, and don't be afraid to ask questions. Do I sound like a broken record?? Good!!

Dancing, teamwork, definitions, identification, precision, breathing, study and practice, these are my keys to good dancing. If you do all of these, you will become a better dancer and that will lead to the last point.

HAVE FUN

Square dancing is a fun activity. Smile and enjoy yourself, it could be contagious!!