

Good Things about Square Dancing – How can we encourage new dancers to join?

We are involved in a great activity – Square Dancing! We must be involved, or you would not be here listening to this speech and I would not be making the speech. Our question is how can we involve others?

Each of us needs to be an ambassador for our activity. Now some of you are becoming uncomfortable, thinking, “I am not good at talking to strangers,” or “I am not good at selling things or convincing people to try things.” I am not talking about knocking on doors like a religious group, I am talking about just being aware of opportunities to talk about our activities. We all have square dance tee or polo shirts, but where do we wear them? Do we wear our square dance tee shirts to a dance event or do we wear them to a baseball game? If we wear our square dance tee shirt to a ball game or a movie, we are publicizing our activity, just by having a visible mention of square dancing. It also can help members of the public to understand that people who square dance are “regular” people, not a category.

One of the barriers to convincing people to try square dancing is their preconceptions about the activity. They **know** that we always dance to country music, we have to wear those funny outfits, and we are all from rural areas in the West or Midwest. You and I know that square dancers are regular people who have held a variety of jobs, have different levels of education and enjoy other “normal” pastimes in addition to square dancing. Recently, clubs have relaxed the dress codes and different callers use a variety of music. The public has not yet modified their preconceptions. For example, a few years ago, I was hired to call a beginner square dance party for a group of college students from overseas. Since I was working with younger people, I picked a variety of music, using some rock, some modern pop, some country etc. At the end of the dance, the group leader told me that for future bookings, I needed to use more country music to give the students a “real” square dance experience. He disregarded my explanations that real squares dancers dance to a variety of music.

Some years ago, a member of an NNJSDA club wrote a human interest story about square dancing. He quoted square dancers about how they much they enjoyed square dancing. Each quote included the dancers name, age and occupation. There was a good cross-section of dancers quoted. That fall several clubs in the Northern NJ area had more people come to classes to try the square dancing activity than in past years. I believe that the article changed the perceptions of square dancers from a bunch of like-minded blue collar people pretending to be hillbillies to a varied group of individuals enjoying a stimulating hobby. These new dancers found someone that seemed like them who square danced, so they felt that they might enjoy square dancing.

We may not be able to change the public's perceptions about square dancing immediately, but we can try. When we talk about our activity we can emphasize how well square dancing meets many human needs.

The other night on the news there was a story about how many people today feel lonely and isolated even though they stay connected on Social Networks. Square dancing fills the need for face to face social connection. We need to meet together to enjoy the dancing.

This news story prompted me to check online for what people needed to have good health. One website listed the following basic human needs: Need to give and receive attention; Need to heed the mind/body connection; Need for purpose and goals; Need for community and making a contribution; Need for challenge and creativity; Need for a sense of intimacy; Need for a sense of control; and a Need for status. Let's consider how square dancing meets many of those needs.

Since dancers function on groups of 8, people can give and receive attention and feel like they have a sense of community. Since many clubs often donate to charity, the need to make a contribution is satisfied. Learning the calls involved in the programs can satisfy the need for purpose and goals. Unfortunately, many dancers have attached status to what Program/Level they have achieved instead of how well they execute the calls.

Square dancing also provides mild aerobic exercise – music plays at 124 to 126 beats per minute which means the dancers who walk with the beats can be walking 2.5 miles per hour. Have you checked your fit-bit before and after a dance? Those of us who dance on a regular basis are fitter than when we started due to the regular walking. New class members are often tired before the angels, because the new class members are not yet used to all of the walking that takes place during a dance.

Square dancing, and the learning of calls provides mental stimulation and uses the puzzle solving functions of the brain. One of the things that people find when they are square dancing is that they must concentrate and focus on the caller's commands. This means that for the length of the tip, the dancers can forget the other problems and concerns that are in their life. I do not mean to say that all tension is relieved, because many new dancers can stress about remembering the calls and how to do them. However, the regular tensions of their lives are forgotten for a while.

If you post on social media, do you mention how much fun you had at the square dance you attended last night? If you have non-square dancing Facebook friends, they will hear about your activity. Mention that the caller used music by Bruno Mars (if you know about such music) or the pirate –themed decorations and/or clothing worn by the dancers. Such a post may help change the stereotypic expectations of non- square dancing friends. At the very least,

you are communicating to others about how you love this activity (and you didn't have to knock on a strangers' door).

Now, if you talk about all the information about square dancing that I have mentioned in this speech, you will either bore potential dancers to death or make them run screaming from the conversation. The strategy is that if you happen to mention that you square dance and a person responds with mild interest, make one point about how square dancing fills a need in your life. Later this afternoon, Roy and Mike will have a whole session about how to talk up square dancing. My point is that we need to let the general public know what square dancing is today and how much we enjoy the people and the activity. If nobody talks about square dancing, nobody will change their minds about trying square dancing.

Betsy Gotta

04/18