

North Shore Squares, Starting A New Square Dance Club

By Bruce Holmes

A personal narrative, because those make the best stories

I took a square dance class in seventh grade. Loved it.

Twenty years later I was teaching a successful Folk Dance group on Friday nights in my home town north of Chicago. I met a woman. We got engaged. She suggested we attend the Kentucky Dance Institute that summer. KDI is a week-long dance camp where we could pick up some new dances we could share with our dancers.

One of the hours each day at KDI was spent on Square Dancing. I didn't want to bother. I had forgotten I had ever tried Square Dancing. My positive memories had been replaced by the general opinion out there in the ether. I'd watched Hee Haw on television. I liked some of the music. But the humor was stupid. They dressed like rubes. And I wanted nothing to do with such things. Square Dancing was for hicks. Somehow I ended up in the class anyway, and discovered, once again, that I loved Square Dancing.

When my fiancé and I returned home I asked her if she'd like to take Square Dance lessons. Her response was, "OK, but I won't wear the crinolines." I did not know what crinolines were, so without giving it a second thought I said, *fine*. We took lessons, and it became a major part of our lives. We got up to C1 with a lovely bunch of people meeting each week in someone's home. Toward the end we had kids that we were carrying in our arms as we danced. But the kids kept getting bigger and our Square Dancing days petered out.

A decade on my wife and I divorced. A year later I met a woman at English Country Dance. She was also recently divorced and was exploring social dance. In addition to the English Country Dancing we started going to Barn Dancing. One day she asked about Square Dancing. I went into shock, "Oh, gosh, I used to Square Dance. It's great stuff. We'd have to take lessons. But I'd love to go back to it."

She nodded. "All right. But I won't wear the crinolines." (I swear to you, I'm not taking license for comic effect. Both of the women in my life said the exact same words.)

By now I knew what crinolines were. I had never really liked wading through them. So I said, "Fine by me."

A year later we were Plus Dancers at the Detroit National Convention. Early Thursday morning I bought myself two new cowboy shirts. Then immediately went to a seminar on how to bring more people into square dancing. They quickly opened it up to the floor and passed a microphone around. One of the first woman to speak said something to the effect of, "I can't get any of my women friends to try square dancing because of the way we dress. They say they wouldn't be caught dead dressed that way." Over the course of the hour perhaps another ten women echoed that concern. I left the seminar wishing I hadn't bought the two new cowboy shirts. If the way we were dressing was killing off Square Dancing, maybe we should stop. Ken Ritucci mentioned in his key note address that we were dying out at the rate of 8% a year.

My new love and I were members of the club (Glenview Squares) that had sponsored our square dance lessons. This was in the Chicago area. Our lessons had run from September through May and taken us all the way through Plus. That's how it was done in our region. With one exception, all the clubs in the Chicago region were Plus clubs. And those clubs taught Plus in something like 36 weeks. The pattern at Glenview was that from each class a couple of people would get it and fall in love with Square Dancing. But most students weren't able to master it in the time allotted. In addition, we weren't graduating good dancers. So most of our students fell by the wayside and soon weren't showing up for dances. Slowly the number of dancers in the region was declining. Clubs were folding. People made sporadic efforts, but no one seemed to be able to turn the tide.

At Glenview an "Ad Hoc" committee was formed to work on the lessons. My partner and I were asked to be part of it. The committee tried to do more with advertising. We replaced the teacher and brought in someone we hoped would bring new life to our lessons. We read the materials that Callerlab provided and talked to clubs from all over the continent who were trying to grow our activity. We decided to follow their lead and hold Intro Parties with lots of deserts being offered. It was a lot of fun. We enjoyed working together and put a lot of time and effort into the project. And it worked. We probably doubled our class size that year.

Except ultimately we failed. The final results weren't all that different. The problem, as we came to understand it is, you can't teach Plus in 36 weeks. In that time frame only a small percentage of students with very high aptitude will get it. The rest of the people who've stuck it out with you and done their best, will fade away over the summer. But just about every club in the Chicago area was a Plus club. They were desperate for new members. They had from September through May. And at the end of that span they needed people to be ready to join the club. There seemed no way out. The Ad Hoc committee wrestled endlessly with the problem.

At some point the Ad Hoc committee began looking at the Club50 concept. These days Callerlab is calling it Sustainable Square Dance (SSD), and I will as well. It would allow us to start a class twice a year. We thought we'd have a better chance of retaining and succeeding with the students. Except we'd need to provide the graduating students with a place to dance. We considered starting up a second club that would be solely SSD. But we didn't think we had the stamina to run two clubs. Could we fold the SSD dancing into our current dances? We just didn't see how. There wasn't enough time available. Half our time was spent Plus dancing and half our time was spent Round Dancing. If we gave our newly created SSD dancers a third of the dance time they'd come to a dance and get to dance for maybe thirty minutes. It made no sense. No longer offering Round Dancing felt unthinkable because there were a handful of club members who were passionate about the Round Dancing. Except that was the obvious solution. At every dance, half of our time was spent with 90% of our membership sitting on the sidelines while a handful of couples Round Danced. Meanwhile, those of us on the committee felt like we were fighting for the survival of Square Dancing.

In the midst of all this my life took a strange turn. I was head angel for the class. And one day the caller didn't show up. He worked in crises management, and it was winter, and we were having storms. He was working that night. I filled in best I could. I didn't know how to resolve.

But I could get people into the proper position and teach the call. He didn't show up the next week either. Or the next. In between I tried to figure things out. By the spring he had moved and was gone. And I was a not-very-good-but-getting-better caller.

A great battle ensued for the soul of the club. People who had run a successful club for years felt the change might destroy the club. We felt change was imperative if we were to save Square Dancing. On a night when people were passionate about the outcome, change won. Unfortunately, a few people couldn't support the new direction and left the club.

A year later we were offering SSD lessons twice a year. Our dances alternated between SSD and Plus tips. And our membership had gone from somewhere in the 50s to 90.

In the meantime, there were ideas of my own that I wanted to try. I live along the lake and except for Glenview (a half hour's drive inland) just about every club is an hour's drive away. Additionally, they almost all do Round Dancing. So if I wanted to go Square Dancing, I would drive for an hour, Square Dance for an hour, watch people Round Dance for an hour, and drive home for an hour. I think I'd rather watch a movie. Why was there no Square Dancing nearer to me, north of Chicago? Years ago, there was. I had to believe I could bring it back. So a few years ago I went around to several of the park districts along Lake Michigan where I live and asked if they'd be interested in hosting square dance lessons. Every one of them was enthused. I've since learned they were all quite certain I would fail. But they thought it sounded like the kind of thing they should support.

I scheduled three classes to start in September, each with an Intro Party. I figured at least one of the classes was bound to get cancelled. But at least one of them would happen. I created a flyer and put up fifty of them. For the flyer I needed a picture. I wanted a picture of relatively young people square dancing. Except I didn't want the square dance outfits. I looked for hours on the web and finally found a picture by Brian Elmer of some dancers up in Canada. The background had some petticoats, but the foreground was better. And I'll admit to doing a little photoshop on the background.



I felt the flyer needed to break down some stereotypes to even get them in the door. So the text read:

Today's Square Dance

It's not what you think it is

"It's teamwork. You're working a real-time puzzle with seven other people. And when you nail the outcome, it's really quite exhilarating."

Today's Square Dancing is not heehaw music, frilly clothes or cowboy shirts. It's not even dancing. (There's no artsy self-expression involved.) It's just walking to music. It's a little like football, except without the concussions. You've got formations. You've got a team around you. You've got plays sent in by the caller. The challenge is, can you run your route successfully? Now granted, the team is coed. But that's a feature. If you enjoyed geometry in high school, you'll get a kick out of this stuff. The music you walk to ranges from the Beatles to modern hits. Today's Square Dancing is great exercise for the body and brain. You'll walk several miles a night, and your mind will be challenged.

Obviously, with both the picture and the text I was trying to appeal to the guys. And I was asking for what I wanted. People who enjoyed challenges and had certain mental aptitudes.

Later Roger Peterson was able to take a picture with my own dancers that I liked:



But the background in the second picture is less than ideal. Getting great pictures of people square dancing is just plain difficult.

The intro parties had about 12 or 16 people each. When they showed up they found my partner and I dressed in normal clothing. The first music they heard was EDM (Electronic Dance Music, it's got a good beat and some of it's quite nice. I don't dislike country music, but I don't use any of it at the intro parties. I'm trying to dispel a stereotype. I also don't teach DoSaDo at the intro parties. I don't want them to think they know square dancing.) I've figured out something since then. Not having angels may have helped. Often the angels at our clubs are in their seventies or eighties. But when people in their forties or fifties show up, the potential students may feel the activity is only meant for older people. Thus they don't take the idea of joining the class seriously. I'm 70. But there's only one of me, and I'm on the athletic side. And as the teacher, somehow my age hasn't doomed the classes.

One park district cancelled its class a week before the scheduled start date because only one person had signed up. My experience since then is that most people don't sign up until that last minute, so perhaps they jumped the gun. The other classes both happened with seven or eight people. I had a head mic that I had left over from my days as a singer songwriter. That allowed me to call from the square. So seven students was not a problem. If you have two classes a semester and two semesters a year, you can have maybe 30 graduates by the end of a year. By the summer of that first year I sent out an email asking if people wanted to start a club. By September we had 28 people signed up. By the following summer (2018) we were above 50 members and one of the students was now a caller.

The two classes in the fall of 2018 have put our numbers to about 70 members. From now on I foresee being able to add at least 30 members a year. If we're offering four classes a year, getting ten new members out of each class is a rather modest expectation. Plus, I think we're getting better at this. This Winter we'll also be offering a Boot Camp which will consist of 4 straight Saturdays starting in February. And following the suggestion of Rocky Mountain, we're eager to try a class meeting twice a week.

Our current schedule (constantly changing and evolving)

Dances

September – May: Our big monthly dance is the second Saturday of each month.

We start and end with SSD tips with Plus tips in between

June – August: Summer Dance Series

A weekly dance/workshop with one of our club callers to keep people dancing over the summer.

Lessons

September – December: SSD Beginners (class 1)

We take 18 weeks to teach SSD. We realize it was designed to be taught in 12 weeks.

But that seems optimistic to us. You can teach the calls in 12 weeks, but then we feel the students need time to absorb the material and get up to speed so they won't flounder at a real dance.

September – December: SSD Beginners (class 2)

January – May: SSD Beginners (class 3)

January – May: SSD Beginners (class 4)

September – May: Plus Class

You could actually finish off Plus by February. But the students have asked that we keep the class going into May just because they like dancing together, and I think I can get them to greater degree of competency by adding more difficult material at the end. One of our goals is quality dancers.

May – August: SSD Beginners (class 5)

Mid February – Mid March: SSD Beginners Boot Camp

This is the SSD material taught over four consecutive Saturdays.

I was very impressed with Rocky Mountain's 90% retention rate. We haven't been able to match that. I'd put ours at around 60%. People hurt their knee, or they need to put in long hours on a project at work or they get a chance to go on vacation with their family. Suddenly they're gone. And then there are those who just aren't getting it. When I asked Jim Langdon of Rocky Mountain about the people who just can't get it, he admitted that they screen carefully at the intro parties. He didn't go into the details. But they are making an effort to select the dancers they think they can succeed with.

I think all clubs have to contend with this. I would guess a quarter of people can't square dance. They can't see the square. They find it all terribly confusing. They're not stupid. It's just not how their brain works. I have a very good brain for square dancing, but my abilities at name retrieval are abysmal. I talk about all this at the intro party. Square dancing is very appealing: community, fun, exercise. Who wouldn't want to be part of all this. "But if you find the dancing itself confusing, then it's not a good fit." I talk about my disability with recalling names. "It doesn't mean I'm stupid. It's just the skill set I was given, or not given. Find an activity that fits your skill set."

Dragging people through lessons when they're lost and unable to understand what everyone else can see serves no one. Least of all their fellow students whose learning is slowed by the lost soul clogging up the center of the square.

There is one flaw in what we've done. I think people like Jerry Story would prefer to see clubs that are exclusively SSD. We felt that wouldn't work with the established base being exclusively Plus. So we went the route of the mixed bag. But I think Jerry's got a point. When you're part of a club where half the people dance at a higher level than you do, it creates a pressure to move up to the higher level. And while I talk all the time about how SSD is enough, the pressure is still there. Yet my students go to dances at other clubs, see the Plus in action and come back demanding to be taught. They just have to learn Load The Boat. So we now offer a Plus class each year. Keep in mind, by the time they finish Plus they've been dancing for either 70 or 88 weeks minimum. And that can result in a quality dancer.

With more than one SSD class going at a time, our goal is to sync up the classes. That way if you miss your normal class you have the option of attending the other class that week. We even would like students to feel free to go twice a week for the extra floor time. *If you'd like to fill in the square for the other class, let us know and we'll try and accommodate you.*

Why did I succeed? It's not because I have a special skill set. I'm smart, can crack a joke and I'd like to think I'm a good teacher. Plus I have that background in music, and that truly helps when

it comes to the singing calls. But I wasn't an accomplished caller. I had only been calling for a few years, and that's not ideal. So I was not the best possible candidate for doing this. Except it worked.

Wait, there's something else I think I do well. I let people contribute from the floor. I let the students help each other at the breaks. I let the angels teach. Sure I listen in and correct when needed. But corrections are so rarely needed. The more advanced dancers will even hold weekend practice sessions which fosters friendships while providing more floor time. I'd like to think the students who lead such sessions are becoming more invested in square dancing and might even be on their way to becoming callers. I don't insist that I'm the only one capable of passing on the information. So I've end up with a very involved club. Everybody pitching in and helping out the students.

I will also admit to getting lucky. The talent and organizational abilities I've discovered within the club have surprised me. We've created videos of the calls which we've made available online. We've created booklets showing the calls and distribute these as the students begin lessons. We have flashcards we pass out. We have remarkable people handling the intro parties, lessons, dances and club events (we're having a private party with chili and dancing on an afternoon later this month; the annual picnic, you get the idea).

The club, christened North Shore Squares, dances once a month on a Saturday night. More than one caller has remarked on the enthusiasm and high-energy at our dances. And with the extra time we've given people to learn the material, we're turning out quality dancers.

I really do not believe I was essential to our success. I succeeded because I avoided the negatives, and because the positives are enormous. Square dancing shouldn't be in decline.

