

Square Dance Calling Basics

Carol Ormand, December, 2006

carol.ormand@alumni.carleton.edu; (608) 213-1618

***My guiding principle: The dancers, the musicians, and I are all there to have fun.
I want to do what I can to facilitate that.***

If you've never called a square dance, there are three things you need to know before you start: the structure of the music, the structure of a square dance, and the grand purpose of calling. I'll start with the last one: for me, the purpose of calling is to facilitate fun. Fun for the dancers, fun for the musicians, and fun for myself. If you keep that idea in the back of your mind whenever you're working on your calling, you'll always be heading in the right direction.

The structure of the music: Most square dance tunes, regardless of style, are made up of two musical parts (we call them A and B), each of which is repeated. When musicians play the tune, they play it AABB. Each part is typically 8 measures long, or 16 musical beats. So the whole tune lasts 4 x 16 beats, or 64 beats. There are plenty of exceptions to this pattern; some tunes have 32 beat phrases that don't repeat; others have three parts, played AABC; etc.... But the vast majority of dance tunes fit this simple pattern. Note: "Crooked tunes" are tunes that do not fit the 64 beat model described here.

The structure of a square dance: Most (but certainly not all!) square dances consist of a "figure" that takes 64 beats for the dancers to complete one time. (I would say that it is more common for dances to break this pattern than for tunes to break the pattern described above, but I could be wrong about that.) Many of the exceptions take 96 beats to complete, but some are quite irregular.

In general, square dance "figures" are danced four times through: once for each couple, or twice for the heads and twice for the sides, or just four times. If the square is a mixer, four times through the figure will return all dancers to their original partners, at their original home places. To spice it up, "breaks" are interspersed between the figures. The most common pattern is to dance an introductory break, figure, figure, middle break, figure, figure, and ending break. Sometimes callers will throw in a break in between each and every figure: introductory break, figure, break, figure, break, Occasionally the caller will use only an introductory and an ending break, with no middle break. This is entirely a matter of personal taste. I suggest that you call whichever pattern of breaks and figures you would most enjoy dancing.

Breaks!

Okay, so what are the breaks? Breaks are just a series of calls (usually, but not always, one time through the tune) that callers use to "spice up" the square. They can be choreographed in advance or improvised on the spot. And, in my opinion, they are what make squares slightly more difficult and way more fun to call than contras. The key to improvising a break is to get the dancers back to where they started the break, and to use up one time through the tune (or, if the dance doesn't use a whole number of times through the tune, to use up however much of the tune you have before the next repetition).

Improvisation can be intimidating.... But keep in mind that improvised breaks don't have to be complicated to keep the dancers entertained! Because the dancers don't know what you're going to call next, improvising really keeps them on their toes. And when you get to be really good at it, you can play around with the dancers - as soon as they start to anticipate your next call, you call something different. When I first started square dancing, this was the most enjoyable aspect of it - the element of surprise. Two more advantages to improvisation: it cuts in half the amount of memorizing you have to do, and it cuts in half the amount of time you spend teaching the dance. That typically means less work for you and more fun for the dancers.