How Good is Good?

Barry Clasper – barry@clasper.ca

In a previous article, Bill Heimann did an excellent job of delineating the difference between “high quality” and “high level” dancing. I'm taking the liberty of summarizing the main points of Bill's article (or at least what I perceived as the main points), to use them as a springboard for my own remarks:

1. *Good dancers are usually recognized as such by other dancers*, and most dancers aspire to be in the group that is so recognized.
2. Bill discussed the criteria he uses in evaluating how well or how poorly a dancer performs. In point form, they were:
    - Number of mistakes - *better dancers make fewer mistakes*.
    - Command of fundamentals - *better dancers have a superior grip on certain fundamental elements* that form the basis of a large number of calls and concepts - examples are Circulate, Rotate, Trade, Hinge, Roll, etc.
    - Ability to help - *better dancers can assist others*.
    - Adaptability – *better dancers can adapt* to a situation that represents a logical extrapolation of known material without having to be taught or walked through.

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    - Ability to handle distortions - *better dancers can handle distorted setups* that are legal at the level being danced.
    - Precision - *better dancers make precise formations* and adopt precise facing directions.
    - Ability To Recognize The "Unright" - *better dancers realize when something does not make sense* and therefore a mistake has been made.
    - Ability to Recover - *better dancers tend to recover from their own mistakes* without assistance.
    - Confidence - *better dancers display confidence* that they know what they're about.
3. The above characteristics are *level-independent*. They transcend the material associated with any given CALLERLAB program.
4. Thus, it does *not* follow that any given C4 dancer is necessarily a better dancer than any given A2 dancer, simply by virtue of habitual dance level. It is entirely possible for an A2 dancer to be better than a C4 dancer, despite the C4 dancer probably knowing more calls.
5. Because the square dance movement has not done a good job of articulating the characteristics that contribute to good dancing, a great many *people mistakenly assume*

that there is a direct correlation between the level somebody dances and how well they dance.

6. Since we all wish to be well-regarded by our peers, *this mistaken idea that dance level is synonymous with dancing ability fosters an inappropriate compulsion to advance through the levels*.
7. The equation between dance-level and prestige has resulted in an unfortunate decline in the average dancing skills exhibited at the Advanced and Challenge levels.

But why *are some dancers better?*

The first thing in Bill's article that struck me was that his list of "good dancer" criteria consists of a single point, with a number of supporting elements.

I believe better dancers make fewer mistakes because they: have a good grasp of the fundamentals; are adaptable; can deal with distorted setups; are precise; recognize errors; and know how to recover.

Moreover, dancers who make fewer mistakes tend to be more confident and more liable to help others. Therefore, I think Bill's list actually boils down to a single point: *"better" dancers make fewer mistakes.*

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While I don't wish to argue that a low error rate represents the *only* virtue a good dancer need possess, it seems clear that it is far and away the most important. This being so, I think it might be instructive to examine dancer performance from this point of view.

How many mistakes is it reasonable for a competent dancer to make in the course of an evening? How many sequences out of a tip is it reasonable to expect a square to execute successfully?

How can dancers make fewer mistakes?

First, we need to define "mistake". I'm referring to those "killer" mistakes that cause squares to crumble - the fatal errors. I define a "fatal error" as an incorrect action (or inaction) which:

1. if left uncorrected, would result in the square breaking down or resolving incorrectly, and
2. is not recovered by the perpetrator before it damages the square.

So my question really is, "How many such [fatal] errors is it acceptable for a competent dancer to make?".

Broken Squares = Decreased Dancing Time

Underlying this concern is the fact that such mistakes contribute directly to broken squares which, in turn, cause dancers to be transformed into spectators who stand and watch while other squares dance.

So another aspect of this problem is that I consider the proportion of time spent spectating to be growing to unacceptable levels. This line of thought splits my original questions into two:

- For what portion of the total dance time is spectating acceptable?
- How do mistakes influence spectator time?

The first question is a matter of personal judgment, but the second is open to analysis.

How can we quantify these terms in a way that makes analysis possible?

I think the most useful way to quantify mistakes is to express them numerically, at a rate based on the number of sequences danced.

For instance, if a dancer makes fatal errors at the rate of 1 error every 5 sequences, it follows that he or she dances faultlessly 4 out of 5 sequences.

In other words, you could say that the “4 out of 5” dancer executes without error 80% of the sequences called. This value can also serve to express the probability of that dancer executing any given sequence successfully.

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Henceforth, I will refer to such a dancer as an “80% dancer”. (Or whatever the appropriate percentage is in each case.)

Let's examine how well dancers with various probabilities for dancing error-free might be expected to do. Suppose that each of the dancers in the square dances 90% of the sequences without fatal error.

In school, a mark of 90% is usually considered pretty good. In dancing terms, that means that you blow only one sequence in ten.

We want to know the probability of 8 dancers, each with a 90% probability of dancing error-free, making it through a sequence without any one of them making an error.

Statistics tells us that the formula for this calculation is to take the product of all the probabilities. Therefore, a square composed entirely of 90% dancers could expect to make:

.9 x .9 x .9 x .9 x .9 x .9 x .9 x .9 = 43%

In plain English, they'd be able to dance *less than half* of the sequences! (Or you could say they'd be standing idle more than half of the time.)

I don't think many people would consider spectating (instead of dancing) for more than half of the time to be a satisfactory experience. Let's look at this from another angle.

How well must individual dancers perform in order for the square as a whole to make 90% of the sequences?

We need a number, N, such that:

N x N x N x N x N x N x N x N = 0.9

If you work it out, it turns out that N = 0.987 or 98.7%.

This seems very high. After all, in school only genius-level students get 98.7%.

Considering that the average 2½ hour dance comprises 7 or 8 tips, each containing 10 or 12 sequences, then 98.7% represents at most *one mistake a night*.

Perhaps attempting a 90% level of success for the entire square is shooting a bit too high.

Table 1 (next page) shows the dancer performance levels necessary to achieve several different success ratings for the square.

How much spectating time are you willing to accept?

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Square Success[1]	Dancer Error Rate[2]	# of Dancer Errors Per Dance (80 sequences)[3]
50%	91.70%	7
60%	93.80%	5
70%	96.60%	4
80%	97.2%	2
90%	98.70%	1

[1] % of called sequences successfully completed by the square
[2] % of called sequences danced without error by each dancer
[3] Number of errors per 2½-hour dance implied by dancer error rate

But I've danced in plenty of squares with totally incompetent dancers and we still got most of the sequences. These numbers can't be right!

And, of course, they aren't.

What the above calculations overlook is the fact that many mistakes are corrected *before* the square dissolves. In fact, when dancers know one another well, mistakes may even be anticipated and prevented before being made.

What we're saying is, there are dancers in the square who not only dance their *own* parts flawlessly, *they also correct at least some of the mistakes of others.*

Another way of looking at this is to say that dancers who correct others are, in effect, dancing higher than 100%. They are dancing 100% of their own parts, plus some parts that should have been executed by other dancers.

For instance, a dancer performing at 120% theoretically could compensate for another dancer at 80% (i.e., 100% of their own part plus the 20% that the 80% dancer is missing). Therefore, the square could average out to 100% success, even though not all dancers are contributing to that success in equal measure.

This phenomenon is an integral part of the dancing process.

More often than not, when one dancer makes a mistake, another dancer is able to correct it and avoid damage to the square. This process is essential to a healthy square and is a normal part of good dancing. We all make mistakes and require steering upon occasion.

In a balanced square, the individual dancers participate both as providers and receivers of

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help. The dancer who fixes somebody else's mistake during one sequence receives help for their own mistake during a later sequence - perhaps from the same dancer they had previously aided.

So this is a good thing, yes?

Not always. The square-self-correction process becomes pathological when the help always flows in a single direction. That is, when one person *always provides* help and another *always receives* help.

Applying this view of square dynamics to the more general square dancing scene, some interesting observations emerge.

Were we to survey the dancer population at any given level, the skills of the dancers could be grouped into three categories:

Phase 1: Dancers who are not fully competent at the level. They would successfully complete few sequences were it not for the presence of other dancers who correct errors.

Phase 2: Dancers who can dance their own level competently. They can dance their own part without assistance, provided other dancers in the square do likewise. A square of such dancers consistently should be able to attain success levels in excess of 90%.

Phase 3: Dancers who are not only capable of dancing their own parts at the 100% level but also are capable of helping others. These are the people who make it possible for the dancers in the first category to survive on the floor.

So why not dump the Phase 1 dancers?

It's important to understand that this mix of competence levels is not only unavoidable, *it is necessary*.

If we dispensed with the dancers in the first category, our problems would not be solved.

To see why, look back at the three categories, but this time *view them as three phases of growth* that a dancer goes through as he or she gradually masters a dance level.

"Phase 1" people are novices at the level. While they may know all the calls and concepts on the list, we can't reasonably expect novices to flawlessly execute all possible contortions of the material.

An example for higher-level dancers who might be a bit unsympathetic at this point: Even after you intellectually understood *Magic Diamonds*, how many times did you have to work in them before you could dance such material with any confidence and/or panache?

So we can't just dump these "Phase 1" dancers - *they are literally our future*.

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Since the “Phase 1” people still require help, they must be balanced by (hopefully) a corresponding number of "Phase 3" dancers.

In an ideal world, any given level would always be populated with dancers from all three levels in balanced proportions - for instance, 20% in Phase 1, 60% in Phase 2, and 20% in Phase 3.

But the world is not ideal. Therein lies the crux of our problem.

The real reason for declining dance levels.

Because of peer pressure to advance levels, many dancers short-cut the three phases.

They progress from Phase 1 to Phase 2 ... and then move up to the next level (where they revert to Phase 1). They never manage to make it to Phase 3.

As this phenomenon becomes more common, the proportion of Phase 3 dancers at all levels erodes, thereby diminishing the help that is available to new dancers.

With less help available, Phase 1 dancers mature to Phase 2 less rapidly - or not at all.

Now comes the most insidious part of the process.

Eventually, new dancers arriving at a level find that there are no Phase 3 dancers available to help them become competent. "Nobody at this level seems to know what they're doing".

The new dancers all believe that the better dancers must dance at some level higher than they do, so the obvious answer is to read through the calls on the list for the next level and move on up.

This is why we have dancers who have yet to master C1 showing up on C3 floors. Or Plus dancers who haven't mastered Mainstream. This applies at all levels of square dancing.

What can we do about it?

As Bill Heimann said towards the end of his article, *it's time to clean up our act*.

We must acknowledge the fact that when we join other dancers in a square, we incur an obligation. That obligation is to dance our fair share of the material. To the extent that we cannot dance our fair share, we represent a burden on the other dancers, one which we impose upon them unilaterally by arriving in their square.

What is our fair share? I believe that it varies according to our experience at the level:

Phase 1: When we first attempt a level, our fair share will be relatively low, perhaps 75% to 80%. Our mistakes, however, should not be due to ignorance of the documented list material. They should result only from a lack of experience in executing the material at dance speed - experience which can be gained only on the dance floor.

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Phase 2: With experience, our fair share increases to 100%. Other dancers have a right to expect us to dance our own part virtually error-free.

Phase 3: With a great deal of experience at the level, our fair share again increases to something beyond 100%. It is now our responsibility to help those who are novices at the level and compensate for their inexperience.

It is important to recognize that during Phase 1, we're imposing on the strength of others. The justification for doing so lies in the premise that in time we will progress from Phase 1 all the way to Phase 3 and, in effect, “pay back” the help we were previously given by others.

When dancers move on without “repaying” the help they've been accorded, they're short-changing everyone following them at that level in future classes.

If dancers move on before becoming competent at their current level, then they're short-changing both the level they're leaving *and* the level to which they want to move.

But most important of all, *dancers who move up prematurely short-change themselves*. There is no feeling for a dancer quite like the spontaneous rush of exhilaration that comes with the dawning realization "Hey - I can actually dance this stuff!".

[Editor's Note: Although originally targeted at dancers, it's easy to see how some of this material could be taught to new dancers starting with their first Basic class, to explain what angels are and why they're important.

Brian Jarvis of our Editorial Review Board believes Phases 1/2/3 extend to callers, since Phase 1 callers need mentoring from Phase 3 callers, who are paying back the mentoring help they received during their Phase 1.]

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For reprint or editorial inquiries, please contact:
Allan Hurst – allanhurst@gmail.com - 650.207.0215