

Sussing Out a Floor

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CALLERLAB Convention 2010

During one of my first CALLERLAB conventions, I happened to eavesdrop on a group of experienced callers, several of them icons in the field, discussing how they go about “reading” a floor. By that they meant how they judge what sort of choreography and presentation will probably be most successful with the particular people they have in front of them at the time. The general consensus seemed to be that they didn’t know. They all agreed they “did something”, but they weren’t exactly sure what it was or how to explain it to somebody else. I found this immensely reassuring, since it conformed precisely to my own feelings on the subject.

Since that time, being more aware that there was some sort of subconscious process at work, I paid more attention to what was going on and have evolved a general set of principles that seem to be at work, at least for me. I mentally labeled this process “Sussing Out a Floor”. While “sussing” is a perfectly good English word (you can find it in Webster) that is in common usage in Canada and Britain, it seems to be very seldom used in the US. It means to investigate or figure something out, which I think is an apt description of this process of evaluating a floor. So consider this my campaign to bring “sussing” into more common usage in the US.

If you are hoping to see revealed the magic silver bullet – the “do these three things and it works every time” sort of thing – then you’re going to be disappointed. What follows is more along the lines of recipes that say things like “put ingredients in a bowl and stir until thick”. Such instructions invariably generate additional questions such as “How thick is thick?” In other words, much of what I’m going to say leaves lots of room for interpretation and probably generates as many questions as it answers.

As I considered the subject, I came to a couple of realizations. First, I realized that I go through this “floor reading” process for every single dance – even with groups that I call for every week. That is because every dance is unique, even if the same dancers attend each time. Individuals bring parts of their “real life” to the dance with them: something bothering them at work, allergies acting up, pain from an injury, change of medication, household guests, barometric pressure, phase of the moon, new shoes – an endless list of external factors that can change the “mix” of a dance floor and thus change how the floor as an aggregate behaves. These same factors affect my performance as well – some nights I can’t find a corner to save my life, others I go dyslexic and call a lot of wrong-way grands, and every once in a while my fairy godmother sobers up and I can do no wrong. So, a second part of that first “sussing tip” is to evaluate how I’m feeling that night.

The second thing I realized is that the process is not one-way. It is not solely a case of my evaluating what the floor seems in the mood for, but I am also communicating information to the floor: my vocal habits, my sense of timing, my expectations of how they will move, flow patterns they can expect, etc. So, in a sense, it’s a sort of conversation: I’m telling them what I’d like to do, and they’re telling me if they want to do it.

That said, it’s time to get into some specifics.

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As is so often the case, the first steps happen before I start calling. I usually try and get to the dance in time to get set up and put on some “interlude music”. This is non-square dance music that nevertheless tends to put people in the mood to dance. It should have a strong rhythm, although it does not have to be one you could square dance to. It should have an upbeat emotional tone. It helps if it’s familiar to the crowd. But it should not be too intrusive – it should just form a pleasant “pro-dance” background. During this time I watch the floor. What is their mood? Are they tired or rarin’ to go? Is there lots of conversation or are people sitting around by themselves? Sometimes people get up and line dance or couples dance to the interlude music – that’s always a great sign.

Based on those observations, I choose the music for my first tip. The music for the first tip has to have certain characteristics. First, it can’t be too extreme: not too fast, or too slow; not too energetic, or too quiet; not too intrusive, but noticeable enough for the dancers to move to it easily; no strange or unusual rhythms – go with basic boom-chuck. Basically, I want the dancers to focus their attention more on me than the music, but I want enough music to give them the impetus to dance. From my own perspective, I want music that I find easy and natural to work with. I have enough on my mind without diverting brainpower to the task of calling to the music.

The first two or three sequences will be absolutely vanilla, simple, familiar choreography. I tend to use shorter calls to increase the rate at which I deliver calls. This provides the opportunity to habituate the dancers to my voice, my vocal phrasings, my patter filler, etc. During these sequences I evaluate the general dancer performance. How well do they move to the music? Do they shortcut? How is their reaction time? Do they seem confident or hesitant? Do they touch hands and make clean formations? Do they have any special stylings that I might need to accommodate? This is also the time to evaluate how well the sound seems to be working for the room. Do the dancers seem to be having to concentrate to make out the calls?

Based on my observations of the first two or three sequences I start to make adjustments. If they appear to be having problems with the sound, I generally pull the music level back and adjust the tone controls to provide maximum prominence for my voice. I will also reduce the amount of “non-call” clutter I provide to ensure the commands stand out. Conversely if the dancers appear hesitant or unsure of calls I may increase cueing and adjust my timing to allow them more time to think.

I then move on to some more specific tests. These tests vary by level, of course, but here are some examples that are fairly generic:

- Dancer “pre-programming” – the expectation that certain calls will ALWAYS be followed by certain other calls. If I call Swing Thru from zero waves (RH waves, boys on the ends), do I get an automatic Boys Run and Bend The Line? If I call Centers In from a completed DPT, do the dancers automatically Cast Off $\frac{3}{4}$? If from facing lines I call Right and Left Thru and Half Sashay, do the dancers do a Roll Away or what I actually called?

My reaction will depend on the level of pre-programming that seems to be evident. If the floor is heavily pre-programmed, I usually just go with it and give them the combinations they expect to

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hear. If the floor seems less hide-bound about it, I make a game out of “de-programming” them. For example, I’ll call Centers In and pause, and give those that started the Cast time to undo it, then call something else such as Centers Trade.

- Listening Skills: I try to make sure they are listening to what I am actually saying rather than what they think I might say. This is related to the earlier point, but slightly different. For example, if I call Centers Pass Thru from facing lines, is that what happens, or does everyone Pass Thru? If I call Touch $\frac{1}{2}$, what happens? If I call Wheel and Deal from 2-face lines, do I get a Ferris Wheel?
- Tolerance for “Unusual” Positions: If I call a Slide Thru that leaves some people facing out of the set, do they turn around to “fix” it? Will they “fix” left-hand waves? Will they accept same sexes together in waves or lines? Will they “fix” sashayed couples?
- Tolerance for Calls From “Unusual” Set Ups: For example, Centers In from an Eight Chain set up; Cast Off $\frac{3}{4}$ from inverted lines; Follow Your Neighbor with the girls looking in; Scoot Back with mixed sexes going into the center, Spin The Top starting with boys on the ends.

Don Beck has written an informative article titled “Non-Destructive Testing” that provides another take and some additional detail on how some of the tests described above can be carried out. It is available on Don’s website at http://www.summersweet.org/Square_Dance_Articles_of_I.html.

Just in case you were thinking this evaluation business only takes place in the first tip – think again! The second tip may be different because there is a different mix of dancers in the squares. Granted, it won’t be completely different, but you need to be aware that the floor in general may perform better or more poorly than they did the first tip, and you will need to adjust accordingly.

I don’t claim that I do all these tests, in this order, every time. Rather they are just examples of things that I do when I judge the time is appropriate. We’re back to “how thick is thick?” As with so many elements of calling, exactly what you should do at any given time is a matter of judgment. Unfortunately, developing good judgment usually requires the prior exercise of a lot of bad judgment. Skill comes only with practice and experience. But there are things you can do to speed up the process:

- When you are dancing to other callers, pay attention to the sorts of items we have been discussing. Ask yourself, “What would I do with this floor?” Watch what the person calling does with it. How successful does their approach seem to be?
- Talk to callers you respect about what they do. Not everyone can articulate it well, but you almost always pick up something.
- Evaluate your own performance when you call. If things are not going well, try to understand what is contributing to the problem. When things are going right, try to remember how it feels so that you can recreate it next time.

If this all seems too much for you to absorb or cope with, do not despair. The important thing is to develop your “connection” to the floor – a thorough awareness of how they are reacting to what you are doing. You will find yourself making appropriate adjustments in material and delivery more automatically than you might imagine.