

PROGRAMMING AND THEMING

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Programming

Programming has a broad scope. The goal of programming is to create an outline we use in presenting a dance or performance. As such, there are degrees or levels of programming that target certain goals. An overall program usually consists of many nested sub-programs, all dependent on differing variables, all working together to present an entire dance or performance.

The overall program is targeted toward a singular goal, maximizing the dancer experience by both meeting and exceeding dancer expectations. This very broad goal immediately turns our focus to the sub-programs, which are typebased, and which go to make up the overall program. Each of these program types deserves our attention before we venture out to a dance.

Advertised CALLERLAB

Dance Program We not only want to present the dance program the dancers expect, but in most instances, we are contractually obligated to do so. Printed material including dance program lists are readily available through CALLERLAB and every caller should have copies of the various dance programs that they take with them to dances.

Specialty dances, like Party Dances (one-night stands for non-square dancers) may require us to develop our own list of calls to be used based on the precise Party Dance program we develop and use. These lists should be kept handy as well.

Planned deviations from the advertised dance program should be clearly announced to the dancers ahead of time so they understand they will be doing something beyond their expectations. This includes calling calls not on the advertised program, whether they be listed elsewhere, dropped calls or newly created calls. Such calls should be labeled as ‘throw-away’ calls, and dancers need to understand they are not responsible for knowing and remembering these calls.

Accidental deviations from the advertised dance program require an immediate apology. Develop a method of delivering such an apology in a light-hearted and humorous way, so the dancers are not left feeling uncomfortable. Take responsibility for unintended errors.

Advertised Dance Theme

Very often, we are expected to call a dance that has a particular theme, such as a Hawaiian Luau, Cowboy Night, Disco Dance, or one of the many other themes. We should prepare ourselves to compliment the theme, both by dress and by the styles of music we present. Most often, the dance theme is complimented by the use of singing call music that goes along with the theme.

Advertised Dance Type Categorically, this can be broken down into several different types.

- Party Dance. Clearly, this is a specialized program. We can find examples of this type of dance program on the internet, on various information-sharing networks like Facebook, on caller blogs and at the CALLERLAB website. We can also develop our own based on what we are comfortable presenting to non-square dancers and what works to successfully entertain them.

- Club Class. This is most likely the most detailed program planning we encounter. Based on the goals of the class, we need a precise breakdown of how many sessions in total, all the calls to be taught in the series of sessions, details concerning which calls will be taught each session, and the order in which the calls will be taught. Callers should spend considerable time developing and programming these dance sessions. Dancer success is the ultimate goal, which includes reinforcement of dancer understanding of call definitions, smoothness of dancing, and styling.

This is also the arena in which most callers improve through self development. Being able to recite a call definition is different from having an in-depth understanding of the call, and is very different from being able to teach and explain a call to a learner.

We can't emphasize class programming enough. It is extremely important in many ways, both for proper dancer development and our own personal development. We highly recommend preparing a spread sheet with the calls individually listed in the teaching order you want to use on the left side of the spread sheet. Have as many columns in check box width to the right as needed to represent all of the sessions in the class series, formatted as check boxes across the same line as the calls. These columns could be labeled using the dates of each individual session in the series.

As the series progresses, use this check sheet to track not only the calls being taught each session, but also to assure that all prior learned calls are called to help reinforce the learning and prevent dancers from forgetting previously learned calls.

Above all, do your homework. Most of the time each dance session only includes two or three calls. Spend at least an hour preparing not only the call modules you will use in presenting these new calls (both patten and singing call figures), but also the words you will use to actually teach each call. Practice in front of a mirror, saying what you will say to the students in order to teach each call. The WRONG way to do this is to read the definition sometime during the day prior to the sessions, then go to the dance and try to teach the call. That is not effective and deprives the students of the best learning situation.

- Club Workshop. The club workshop is actually nothing more than an extension of the Club Class, with the exception that it generally does not include calls new to the dancers. It could, but most of the time is actually spent on delivering known calls from various extended applications. To plan this, a caller must not only be aware of extended applications, but must also keep an accurate record of which extended applications the dancers have learned in order to reinforce dancer understanding of the calls through repetition. All of the caveats above stated in reference to Club Class dance types also apply to the Club Workshop dance type.

- Club sponsored open dance. Planning for this type of dance includes the major aspect of guests attending the dance as well as advertised dance program. The guest aspect is one that most traveling callers deal with regularly. Callers must somehow gauge the general ability of dancers in the area, and they use several techniques. Some of these traveling callers will contact callers who are their friends, who are familiar with the dance area, to discuss particular eccentricities of the dancers in the area. To the traveling caller, all dancers are 'guests'.

Next, callers should not assume that all the dancers will know all the calls in the advertised program. Actually, this assumption can lead the traveling caller down a rabbit hole that could result in a disastrous dance.

The programming element that works best in this situation is to begin calling the program calls from nothing but standard presentations, then gradually feel the dancers out on some of the extended applications of the calls which includes various dancer arrangements. Usually, traveling callers accomplish this process in the first tip or two and by then have ascertained the overall capabilities, and faults, of the floor on a general basis.

The area caller hired to call an open dance by a club other than his/her regular club is faced with similar challenges with the exception that the caller knows or should know the general dancing capabilities of dancers in the area. Regardless, this caller should also start the dance by feeling out the floor. There could be (and often are) extenuating circumstances that affect dancer performance differently from what a caller would normally expect, such as the recent graduation of a newer dancer class into the club.

Today, as callers and clubs alike are setting more focus on rebuilding our entry level of dancing, we see many more 'red light/green light' dances advertised. These dances present many more programming challenges to callers than previously stated dance types.

The dance program as advertised could be multi-level, as is the case with 'red light/green light' dances, and is often the case with dances that include advertised 'star tips'. Callers need to not only be capable of delivering dancing tips relevant to each program, but must also be able to do so without hesitation, without mixing up the calls in the two programs, and without delivering call combinations that are totally or even somewhat beyond the ability of the dancers. This takes not only a significant amount of planning, but also a significant amount of experience.

- Regional event. These major events, usually sponsored by dancer associations, often include multiple callers and attract dancers from a much broader geographical area. When these dancers from all over the region gather, there is a natural dilution of dancer ability generally speaking.

Often, this is due to dancer misplacement. These events include multiple halls operating simultaneously, each hall conducting a different 'level' of dancing, be it a program difference or a difference in complexity of the calls used in a specific program. Dancers seldom are accurately aware of their own capabilities and often times will try dancing in a hall in which the dancing is beyond their capability, for whatever the reason.

For instance, a Mainstream dancer who has just completed a Plus class will try dancing in the Plus hall and will find themselves floundering. This is very discouraging for dancers, who feel they are highly capable at Mainstream, so why shouldn't they be equally capable at Plus.

If we are calling at this venue, it is important that we maintain the integrity of the advertised dance level in whatever hall we are calling in, and not totally cater to the weakest dancers on the floor. In some sense, then, our program for these halls must be flexible since there is a huge dependency on overall floor capability. The flexibility generally focuses on the depth of dance material the caller uses.

Callers at these events will generally move from one hall to another, calling a different program in each hall. They normally are scheduled for a relatively short time span in each hall, from ½ hour to 1 ½ hours. The good news is, callers generally receive a copy of their calling assignments days or weeks ahead of the event and are able to plan and program accordingly.

- National event. The ultimate congregation of square dancers would be at a World Square dance event.

Calling for dancers from all over the globe presents some very interesting challenges, including the fact that the English vocabulary the dancers understand is often limited to just the square dance calls, meaning that most of the helper phrases, cutsie clichés and double entendres callers use between calls in the States often are not fully understood. Where in the States these comments elicit general laughter from the dancers, on the world platform they result in polite but quiet stares.

Nationally, dancers congregate from many varying regions. Many of the programming aspects of Regional events apply equally to National events. A noted exception is when callers only call a single tip, then move to another hall. The basic programming consideration in this event is two-fold:

- a. stick to the advertised floor level, and
- b. deliver your best stuff, which should include standard presentations or presentations of calls that may be unusual but you are convinced are simple enough for all dancers to successfully execute. Total dancer success is the goal.

These often include clever Getouts that simply don't miss. Gimmicks can be incorporated as long as they are not overdone. Singing calls are a great asset. Be certain you have at least a half dozen singing calls that you know will elicit a very positive crowd response.

Theming

Theming is a process or method used in programming dances. We use theming to entertain the dancers with a concept, idea or variation that is consistently maintained for a predetermined period of time.

Theming is an integral part of programming, and therefore is dependent on the type of dance being presented. Theming consists of building a structure around our choreography that can be simply identified by a common thread or description. Often, this common thread is a call, but could also include a concept, or even a gimmick.

Classes are themed around building the dancer's overall vocabulary in relation to the class being taught. The goal is to teach the dancers the vocabulary and the actions associated with each term in the vocabulary. This, therefore, is the body of the theme at each session.

Workshops are dances that are nearly completely themed around the calls being taught, and more so the applications of those calls. When not dealing with calls new to the dancers, they deal with extended applications of calls the dancers already know. Programming themes used at local club workshops and workshops conducted at regional and national events are very similar in that they primarily deal with extending the dancer's knowledge of calls already known.

Theming is the process of threading what dancers know into what they don't know in such a way that the dancers can walk away and summarize their experience in a word or two or a simple phrase. 'He/she

went through all kinds of ways to do Crossfire', would be an example. Blending Centers and Ends Cross Run as an introduction of a call new to the dancers, such as Trade the Wave, is another example of theme building.

The themed experience should be carried into the singing call portion of the tip, meaning the caller should write some adequate singing call figures that utilize the theme.

Taken together, programming includes sub-programs based on the different types and venues of the dance, and may also include theming both in a simple one-tip context as well as theming to provide a workshop presentation.

Extraneous to the choreography aspect, theming occurs in the context of the advertised dance theme as well. Callers compliment these themes with singing call and sometimes patten music consistent with the theme, and sometimes even personal attire