

Report of Attendance at Heart of America Callers School

The classes started on Sunday June 12th at 2:00 pm and went through 2:00 pm on Thursday June 16th for a total of 40 hours of instruction. The instructors were: Jerry Junck, Paul Henze, and Tim Marriner.

We began by introducing ourselves and telling about our calling experience. I had attended this school last year, but did not fully understand the immense amount of material that was provided to us. We were divided into two groups, those with “more” experience and those with little or no experience. I was put in the group that had more experience both this year and last year.

We were expected to have a good understanding of the chicken plucker routine, as well as how to invert and rotate the square and convert back and forth from “0” boxes to “0” lines before the classes started.

The experienced callers were assigned to teach calls at the A and Challenge level as our homework assignment the very first night. Monday we began to go over the mechanics of choreography and the various methods of putting it together. Each of us had mic time initially using just the chicken plucker, invert and rotate, convert to and from boxes and lines. The experienced callers taught their assigned calls.

We experienced callers went to a different area to work on our patter. I had an extreme amount of difficulty getting it “smooth” enough to satisfy Jerry Junck. I am having problems in following only half of the square and not worrying about what the other half is doing. I have memorized a lot of modules, but I don't truly trust them and keep waiting until the dancers have completed each movement before giving the next one. I need a lot of work forcing myself to call more to the beat of the music and giving the commands a little ahead of the dancers. I don't get a lot of time working with real dancers and need to find a way to get a few people together to practice with. Jerry basically told me that it is “smooth” patter that sells a caller to the dancers, not the ability to do the singing calls. He told me that I have got to smooth out my patter if I really expect clubs to hire me.

Tuesday we talked extensively about the importance of analyzing each call knowing where it begins, where it ends, what hand is free, what can be called smoothly after it, the number beats of music it takes to complete it, and etc. We talked about body flow and how that some calls that we use aren't always comfortable for the dancers. They gave us some very good suggestions for replacing those calls that have been used for years, but sometimes overwork the dancers. We did some singing calls. Some of the new callers had not ever done even a singing call, but the instructors were very patient with them. These new callers live in areas where there either is no caller any longer, or the ones that are there are getting ready to retire.

Wednesday we had a long discussion about “party dances”. These type of dances can earn a caller a lot more money than regular square dances, but there are a lot of things that a caller must be aware of before attempting to do them. We began to practice for the “graduation dance” the class was calling out at Croco hall Wednesday evening. I was assigned to do a singing call since my patter is still so jerky. They did tell me that I do a really good job of delivering singing calls, especially putting a lot of feeling and inflection in my voice. We had another long session about teaching --- dos and dont's and how to handle “angels” that are too helpful. It was especially fun to see all that could be done from a Sicilian Circle which alleviated the problem of having an uneven number of dancers complete a square; and got the dancers used to dancing with everyone in the group.

Thursday we continued to work with the instructors in our separate groups. I continued to struggle to get some timing and smoothness into my patter, but began to get a little more understanding of what they wanted me to do. I discovered that I needed to switch to better patter records that had a defined “boom-chuck” type of beat and just work chicken plucker over and over till I could feel that beat and call to it without worrying so much about where the dancers were until time to resolve. There was very little emphasis on sight calling at this school. All three instructors use more memorized modules than they do sight. I have been observing that most of the callers I dance to use specific “routines” that they have memorized. It sure takes a lot of pressure off knowing that what I am calling will take them where I want them to be. I know just enough about sight calling at this point to use it if I realize I left something out of a memorized module and the dancers did not end up where I expected them to be.

Thursday afternoon we began to discuss showmanship, and some of the business aspects of being a caller. Most of the callers around this area consider calling to be more of an expensive hobby than a money making business. I would like to make enough to cover expenses, if possible. There were multiple handouts along with our manual on many other topic. We talked about equipment and the transition taking place from records to computers. We discussed the use of alternative music and the need to become less "square".

I was able to absorb much more of what they were trying to tell me last year, but I plan on attending the school again next year also as there is just too much I still need to learn. The instructors are very observant of where you have improved and where you still need work. Last year they mainly pushed me to learn the modules, use chicken plucker to move dancers around, invert and rotate, convert from lines to boxes for more variety. This year they began to really push for me to "trust" those modules I have learned and call more to the beat of the music. I plan to work throughout this year on analyzing each call and really knowing them. I hope to teach another set of lessons and maybe get some dancers together to help me begin to smooth out the jerkiness between calls in my patter. I want to go back next year and be able to show them that I have improved so that they can push me in another area that will make me a better caller.

Thanks so much,
Diana R Wagner