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## Getting Started

If you're reading this book, it's a pretty safe bet that you've at least considered learning to call country dances. You may not be sure, though, if you have what it takes. This chapter is designed to help you decide that question, and to give you some pointers on how to begin to turn that goal into a reality.

### What Is a Caller?

A caller is a curious mixture of teacher and entertainer. He or she must give clear directions to the dancers, but must blend those directions with the music in a pleasing way. Like a singer or a stand-up comic, a caller must keep a crowd of people feeling that they're having fun. But unlike other performers, a caller also teaches people a valuable skill which they can enjoy using for the rest of their lives.

Never forget that a caller's purpose is to make people happy. Technical skills are important, but they're only a means to an end. No matter how much you learn about material and delivery, from this book or elsewhere, remember that you're there to give the dancers a good time.

### Soul-Searching

Before you get started as a caller, you'll need to do a bit of soul-searching. What kind of caller do you want to be? One who travels all over the country and can handle any kind of group? Someone who knows a few dances and can liven up a party if there's no one else around to do it? Or somewhere in between?

The amount of time and effort you put into learning to call will determine the amount of skill you'll develop. Think about how much time and energy you're willing to divert from other interests – family, work, school, other hobbies, spiritual life – to your study of calling. It's nothing to be ashamed of if you choose to stop short of the top of the pyramid.

Another important question to ask yourself is: Why do you want to call? There is no right or wrong answer; there are many legitimate reasons for calling. Some of these are:

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- A desire to see people enjoy themselves
- Love of dancing and music and a desire to do more with them
- Ego gratification
- A wish to ensure the future of enjoyable dancing
- Willingness to take the initiative if there are no callers in your area
- The need to add calling to your repertoire if you're a teacher, camp counselor, or recreation leader

Money is not a good reason for becoming a caller. It is possible to come out ahead financially from calling, but like any other honest occupation, it takes a deal of time and energy. If calling is right for you, even as a sideline, the money may well be there; if you go into it expecting to get rich, you're sure to be disappointed.

There are three general requirements for success as a caller: talent, technical knowledge, and a sense of historical and cultural perspective. Given a bit of talent to start with, all three can be developed with time and practice.

### **Talent**

Your talent is a gift from God. It's appropriate to be thankful for it, but you don't need to be apologetic about it. A caller needs a moderate amount of many different talents, rather than a great deal of just one (see the list below). We're given talents in varying amounts, but we have the ability to develop them. It's important to be honest with yourself about your talents. Then you can be thankful for the ones you have in greater measure, and willing to work on your weak spots.

Don't get discouraged just because you have those weak spots. No one, not even your favorite caller, has a full measure of every possible talent. One of the finest callers I've ever known had what some people might think an insurmountable handicap: he was not at all musical. He compensated for this by learning everything he could about the structure of dance tunes and by making careful notes on what tunes worked well with each dance that he used.

Another caller suffered from near-terminal shyness when he began his career. He dealt with it by treating his calling as an act, in which he could relate to people under a different persona from the one he used offstage. Little by little the act became a genuine part of his personality, and now he is only moderately shy.

Here is a list of talents or qualities that are helpful to the caller. Some of these apply more to the professional than to the casual caller; others will come in handy in any calling situation.

- Self-confidence
- Patience
- Good judgment
- Emotional balance
- A sense of rhythm and timing
- A pleasant speaking and/or singing voice
- Good diction
- Musical ability
- Good memory
- Spatial sense (ability to see what's happening in the set)
- A love of people and a desire to see them happy
- A delight in bringing order out of chaos
- Perseverance in the face of disappointment and frustration

Remember, no one has all of these to the same degree. If you're lacking in some, you're just as well off as anyone else who's starting out. If you feel you lack nearly all of them, though, you might reconsider your decision to be a caller.

Above all, you must enjoy what you're doing. If you do, your dancers will too.

### **Technical Knowledge**

There aren't many rules or principles involved in traditional dance calling, but the few that exist are extremely important. To become a caller, you'll need to learn the mechanics of calling thoroughly. At the outset you'll be in for a great deal of practice and drill. Eventually the responses you need will become second nature, like turning on the water in the morning. When you've reached that point, you can "fly on autopilot" from a technical standpoint and use your conscious mind to deal with the variables – the things having to do with the people present rather than your dance material.

It may be that you're a teacher, camp counselor, or other professional working with people in groups, and that you've been ordered to become proficient as a caller in two months. This is hard to do well; like any other skill, calling takes time and practice. But you can shorten the learning period by disciplining yourself to do some work every day, and by acquiring and listening to a variety of recordings with calls (see the Resources section). If the time allowed you for

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preparation is extremely short, you may be better off if you use called recordings with your group and focus on learning the basics of country dancing and how to teach them.

### **A Sense of Perspective**

Country dancing wasn't invented yesterday. Many callers make classic mistakes – such as using inferior material or doing an inadequate job of teaching – that could have been avoided if the callers had done a little digging into recent history. Older callers and some libraries have dance books, recordings, and perhaps most valuable, magazines. Books and recordings are increasingly available through online dealers and auction sites, too. Learn as much as you can about what's been done so far, what's worked and what hasn't. Studying dance history will not only provide a wealth of practical information, it will give you a sense of the dedication that leaders of the past have had, and heighten your feeling that the dance is worth preserving.

All this, of course, takes time and effort. All the good things in life do – there's no shortcut to success. But think of the sense of accomplishment you'll have when you've mastered the skills of calling – not to mention the fun you'll have along the way!

## **The First Steps**

The initial stage of learning to call can be divided into several parts. Some things need to be done before you ever try calling to live dancers; others can only be done after you've tried a few times. Many of the habits you develop at this stage should be kept up as long as you continue calling.

### **Dance**

First, make sure you know how to dance. You shouldn't even think about trying to call until you can react automatically to all the calls you're going to use. You should also be familiar enough with the calls that even if you couldn't list them all from memory, you could tell whether or not a given set of words was a legitimate call. Many years ago a fellow camp counselor with little dancing experience persuaded me to try to teach him to call some simple squares. He had a good voice and a good sense of timing, but he didn't know the calls. In a dance that began "First lady to the right, circle three hands around," he persistently called "Circle three times around." If he had been dancing longer, he would have seen what was wrong.

I generally recommend two years of dancing, or one year of extremely intensive dancing, as a minimum before anyone tries to call. The only exception to this rule would be someone who is thrust into the caller's role by circumstances. Perhaps you're a schoolteacher who is ordered to teach a unit on square or contra dancing. Or you've just moved to an area that has no regular dancing and you want to start some. Or the only caller in town has moved away and no one else wants to take on the job. It is possible to start calling with very little experience on the dance floor; you'll just have to work that much harder.

### **Keep Dancing**

Regardless of your experience level, you should keep dancing even after you've begun to think of yourself as a caller. You'll remember more easily how much fun it is, and you'll continue to get valuable insights into the dancers' viewpoint. Visit dances other than your favorite local ones whenever you get a chance. Eventually you'll be able to size up the callers and compare your progress with what they're doing. If you're not sure you have enough knowledge to judge, ask some of the experienced dancers if they think the caller that night is good. You might even ask why or why not.

As you dance, practice being aware of what's happening in the set. What does each movement accomplish? Does it give you a new partner? Does it change the direction you face? Does it alter the shape of the set? Notice, too, how the figures fit the music. Try to pick out the first beat of each eight-beat phrase, and the beginning of the tune as it comes around again. (Don't worry if you're confused by some of this language; the rest of this book should answer most of your questions.)

### **Listen**

Listen to other callers, at dances and on recordings. Find as many different ones as you can. Make your own recordings of callers at dances – never without permission, but most callers will be flattered that you asked. The older ones, especially, will be glad to know that someone is interested in keeping the tradition alive. Listen till it comes out your ears. (But ask yourself or a trusted friend whether the callers are good or not. Don't assume that a famous caller is strong in the areas you're focusing on. Often, though, you can glean one or two good things from a caller who is otherwise undistinguished.)

Buy a few recordings of dance music without calls. You'll need them for your practicing, and they'll help give you the feel of country

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dance tunes. Away from the distractions of a live dance, you can listen again for the phrases and subphrases of the typical 64-beat tune. You'll hear the difference between reels and jigs, marches and hornpipes, smooth tunes and bouncy ones, in a way that no book can tell you.

In addition to commercial recordings, you may want to record some local dances if there are any near you (and if the band doesn't mind). "Live" recordings will give you more of the feel of an actual dance than recordings made in the studio. If you're allowed to plug your recorder into the sound system, you may be able to record the music without the calls – it depends on the system. If this is impossible, you can try to ignore the recorded calls when you practice, or use only the portion of each dance after the caller has stopped calling.

### **Practice**

Now that you have some music, it's time to start practicing. If some of your called recordings have dances you like, try calling along with them. Do it several times, until you think you know the dance by heart. Then put on the same or similar music without calls and try calling the same dance on your own. Like training wheels on a bike, recordings with calls can give you the extra confidence you need at first. But like training wheels, they can become a crutch; make sure you do at least part of your practicing without them, making up your own wording.

You might try dancing with an imaginary set while you call. Some people find it helps, others think it's confusing. Try standing still and visualizing a set of dancers in front of you, too. As you gain experience, they'll act more and more like real dancers.

Record yourself as you call. Play the recording back and listen as critically as you would to any other caller. You don't have a sound recorder? Get one right away. It's an indispensable tool of the caller's trade. Even an inexpensive machine will tell you what you need to know.

At the outset, concentrate on learning a few dances well. It's better to know three dances thoroughly than to be acquainted with ten dances but not really sure of them. The same principle holds later: it's better to know ten dances well than two dozen poorly, and so on.

Be prepared to give a lot of time to practice and planning, both now and later. Experienced callers often spend more time programming a dance than calling it. Even occasional calling is going to make demands on your time; only you can decide if it's worth it.

## **Breaking In**

So far we've talked about the things you can do by yourself. Most of them should be kept up even after you start calling to real people. But now it's time to think about how you're going to find those people.

In some cities, like Boston, it's become hard to break into the calling scene, precisely because dancing has become so popular that it's attracted a large number of callers. But in many places the field is wide open.

There are two ways you can start calling to live dancers. One is to seek out and accept guest slots on other people's programs. The other is to gather some friends and call to them privately. You can, of course, proceed along both roads at once.

### **Guest Sets**

Guest sets are the accepted way of developing new talent in some localities. In other areas you may have to approach the subject delicately. Many callers will be sympathetic and quite helpful. If there are older callers near you, talk to them about opportunities to call. As with the question of recording, older callers will often be delighted to help you because they're concerned about the future of country dancing. They may even be looking for new blood, thinking of the day when they'll die or retire. Ask their advice, and listen to their answers – even if you think their best years are behind them and they should be getting advice from you!

If you do a guest set, of course, remember your manners. Thank the dancers, the band, and anyone involved in letting you call. Choose a dance you're sure you could call in your sleep; try it and your delivery out on a friend to make sure. The dance should be easy enough for everyone there – when you're a new caller, it's better to underestimate the crowd slightly than to risk "stopping the floor." Think beforehand about how you're going to teach it, what words you're going to use. Have a second dance ready, but don't offer to call it unless you're asked to in so many words. If there's a stated time limit, as there often is at festivals, observe it slavishly; make sure your walkthrough doesn't consume most of your allotted time.

Then take a few deep breaths, relax as best you can, and try to enjoy yourself. Remember how much fun the dancers are having. Remember, too, that most of them don't care how good or bad your calling is as long as they can get through the dance – that's one reason for picking an easy one. If you do happen to do a good job, the

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sponsors of the dance will take note, and you'll quite likely be asked to do more guest sets. In an area with few regular callers, you may be offered an entire evening quite soon, possibly before you feel ready. You should accept if at all possible – the only way to get good at calling is to call.

### **Calling for Friends**

The private method of starting to call requires three things: enough people to form a set, enough space to dance comfortably, and absolute candor on your part. You must level with the group about your lack of experience. Don't try to pass yourself off as an expert; they'll discover the truth as soon as they go out into the dance world and compare you with other callers. Instead, emphasize the positive aspects of being "all in this together." It's often easier for people to share a good time if they feel they're equals, with no pecking order to worry about.

The dancing space can be someone's basement or spare room, a classroom, or a conference room at work. If you can get the use of a small gym rent-free (at a school, church, or club you belong to), so much the better. But a space many times larger than you need can work against you – the acoustics are often poor, and your group will start to feel like a handful of people waiting for something to happen, instead of a cozy party.

The informal set of dancers can be helpful even before you're ready to try calling. You can dance to called recordings at first, doing only the walkthroughs yourself, then switch over to your live calls as you build confidence. This approach works particularly well if none of you has had much experience with country dancing. If you're a schoolteacher assigned to do a dance unit, for instance, you'd do well to try yourself and the dances out on a group of peers before you take on an entire class of children or adolescents.

### **Starting a Series**

Almost every budding caller dreams of having a dance series to call home. In Chapter 10 we'll talk about some of the factors involved in running a successful series. Here we'll just discuss the question of when and how to start a series.

#### **A Shared Series**

If there are other callers or would-be callers in your area, try setting up an "open mike" dance – one at which anyone is welcome to call a

single number, with a second one later if time allows. Dancers will support such a dance if admission fees are reasonable. You can keep costs down by using recorded music or, better, making the band “open mike” too. The dancing space doesn’t have to be large, so rental costs can be low.

If there are only a few callers around, you may want to get together and organize a multi-caller dance. This differs from an open mike dance in that the number of callers is fixed beforehand. How much calling you each get to do, of course, will depend on how many of you there are. A multi-caller dance can mean anything from two callers splitting the program, either in halves or one or two numbers at a time, to half a dozen callers each appearing once or twice during the evening.

### **Your Own Series**

Maybe you can’t find enough support in your area for an open mike dance, and no one wants to share a multi-caller dance. In that case, you’ll have to use your judgment about when (or even whether) to start a series of your own. As a rule, a series will succeed only if it has a solid core of people who will come regularly and share the work of making it happen. This core can be your friends, perhaps the ones you’ve trained in your basement. Or it can be an existing affinity group – a school, church, or club. One of the longest-running dance series in the Boston area began as a church party, the kind that callers term a one-night stand (see Chapter 10). The group had such a good time that they scheduled another dance soon afterward. In a short time the dance had become a monthly series, which ultimately ran more than fifty years.

But don’t just hang out your shingle and assume that people will come. I made that mistake once, back when I lived in New York City. A dancer asked me to call at an event she was planning in her hometown, a New York suburb. She had rented a church hall and advertised a square dance with the idea of turning it into a series if there was enough interest. I agreed to do it on a volunteer basis; I was pretty new at calling, and I’ve always believed in supporting new local series. It was a good thing I hadn’t asked for any money – we got to the hall and set up the sound, and one person showed up.

Speaking of affinity groups, seize every opportunity to call to non-dancers, even if there’s little or no money in it. I’m talking about cases where a church or club presents you with a ready-made audience, not situations like my New York fiasco. As with your basement set, don’t misrepresent yourself. Make sure everyone

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understands that you're new at this. But if the group can accept that, everyone can have a lot of fun while you get some welcome practice. If it's your own school, church, or social group, there's the added appeal of having the leader be someone everybody knows.

### **Hang In There**

You'll almost certainly get discouraged at some point during your startup period. Many new callers get acute stage fright the first time they call in public, even if their "public" is just a handful of friends. Other people make it through that first time on adrenaline, but begin to fall apart a bit later, when the initial thrill has worn off and they realize how vulnerable they feel up there in front of the group. Mastering the skills needed for effective calling begins to feel like keeping half a dozen plates spinning on poles.

If this happens to you, remember that it's normal. Don't give up now – the worst part of learning to call is nearly over. Things will seem much easier once you've passed through the initial stage of practicing at home. Likewise, the first few times you call in public are the hardest. The confidence you build in yourself through experience is something you couldn't get in any other way.

Mistakes are normal too. Like bee stings, they hurt, but they'll hurt ten times as much if you spend all your time dreading the ones that might happen. Once you've made a mistake, admit it and try to learn from it. Ralph Page, one of the most influential callers of all time, said, "The person who never makes a mistake is a person who never does anything."

If you've read this far, chances are you've got the will to succeed. Welcome to the world of calling – I wish you all the best!