

Why is timing important?

How many of you round dance? Can you dance comfortably if the cues are late? Of course not.

How many of you do Contras? Is the Dance comfortable if the cues are off the beat? Again, of course not.

Why then; do we treat square dancing differently? For some reason as caller's we feel it is okay to not worry about correct timing when we call unless we are doing a singing call and even then, some callers don't worry too much about timing.

When we introduce new people to square dancing, we tend to "go slow" for the first little bit. Sometimes caller's mistake going slow with giving too many beats to do a call. Either because they don't understand how many beats are required or they think they are helping the dancers. What is created is, the dancers are left standing and feel the need to be doing something so, they adjust because they feel they are wrong. This creates sloppy dancing habits.

It is better, in my opinion, to give them the correct timing and beats required but slow your tempo down. So, tell me how many beats per minute do you call at?

There is a standard number of beats per minute that callerlab publishes as a universal standard for today's dancers. Anyone know what that is - I will tell you it is a range. 124-128.

There certainly are occasions when you want the dancers to see the setup, especially when doing a workshop but that is just for teaching purposes not for dancing. Once they are dancing, they need to use the music with the calls.

See, the activity is called square DANCING. Not square walking.

I have heard callers refer to the music as background noise. The music is what creates the Dance experience. You need to use the music to provide the rhythmic flow that your choreography creates.

So then how do we do that?

There are several components.

First... Knowing your music is critical.

Second... Knowing how many beats each call takes.

Third... Lead time on call delivery.

Fourth...knowing where the call starts.

Fifth... knowing where the call ends to be able to deliver the next call.

Let me give you a couple of examples.

We all have singing calls with Grand Square in them. Most of us cue the grand square perfectly so we can sing the words of the song. That gives the dancers the first beat to dance on as they should have. Same thing with circle left. Why then do we steal the first beat on four ladies chain or four ladies promenade? Why don't we pre cue that to give the dancers the first beat?

In the early days of modern square dancing we had basically circles and stars, arm turns and shoulder passes. That was the basis of our difficulty. The event was all about dancing and flow. That is one of the main reasons for "chatter patter". Many callers still use it today. "up to the middle and back you float load the boat" or "up to the middle and back you reel pass thru wheel and deal" why did they use these? It helped with timing. It took the correct number of beats to say for the lead time required. Too many callers today call; lines up and back pass thru. Wait a minute they haven't had time to move up and back yet. If you use the call, give them the time to do it. If you don't the result is dancers start clipping time, then they start taking short cuts. Now there is no timing or flow.

Be aware you can't always trust the called side of a record and just because a big name caller recorded it doesn't make it good!

So, how does timing affect your dancers? There are a few ways but the biggest is fatigue. If the timing is off dancers who feel the music will feel they are climbing up hill through-out the dance - they will be tired. Dancers who don't feel the music may or may not understand the fatigue but will notice they are tired. Dancers will tend to sit out more often than you would like and may even go home early.

Another factor is the dancer will feel they are doing stop and go dancing or the reverse they are rushing to keep up, called clipping - depending on which way the callers timing is off.

So, what is stop and go dancing verses clipping and how do we cause it and fix it.

Stop and go happens most often in sight calling but also happens to callers who read their material, and don't watch the floor.

Its biggest cause is when a sight caller has to wait to see what setup the dancers are in so he or she can give the next command - this is simply lack of education and experience and homework. You must know all the components of each call but especially where each call starts and ends before you can sight call with good timing and flow. The best timing and flow come from memorized modules. You can watch the floor and deliver the call with precise timing. Is that the only place? Of course not. Anne Uebelacker is one of the best known Female callers in the world, Anne reads much of her material and she is so smooth no one knows. She is not the only one like that. And of course proficient sight callers also have excellent timing and flow.

So, then what is clipping? Clipping is most often caused by callers who read their material and either don't watch the floor or don't know the correct number of beats for each call. They just simply read the words without regard to timing. Hot hash is often called incorrectly and creates clipping.

Timing and flow are developed skills. Will you call every single tip with perfect timing and flow? I doubt it! What about overflow? That can also be a big issue if you are not aware of what the dancers are doing.

We have some mind-boggling choreography in today's dance routines. Some of the calls don't even time properly to make it flow unless you are really creative in your calling. BUT, Creative Choreography is the next session in the fall.

It has been said by some of the great icons in this activity that modern square dancing went to hell in a hand basket with the introduction of square thru. So much so, that Jon Jones from Texas went on a campaign to get callers to stop using it.

There are a number of calls that simply don't time out as well as they should for all dancers. In Plus for example all diamond actions take three beats. We use 2/4 or 4/4 timing so three beats doesn't fit so well. You need to learn to utilize better lead time and know where you are going so there is no standing for the dancers. Is it possible to generate perfect flow and timing all the time with today's choreo? It is doable, but requires a lot of work on the part of the caller.

Will the dancers accept poor timing and flow, of course they will, they have been for many years or maybe that is one of the reasons for the decline we have.

I was talking with some dancers recently who were dancing to a caller they had not danced to before. They told me the dancing was difficult – the caller didn't call anything the dancers didn't know it just seemed that almost every call they were reversing flow or turning sideways against “the grain”. They said it just didn't flow and the whole night was like that, not just one tip. That was the way this caller called. At the end of the night, they were exhausted and said they wouldn't be disappointed if they never danced to that caller again.

Can we be better than we are? Personally, I believe we can and should. It is done in rounds, contras and line dancing, it can be done in square dancing too.

You also need to understand that if you choose to call with good timing and flow and your dancers are not accustomed to it, they will stumble. That is when you need to practise your triage skills. Some will be healthy and won't need your help, some you will be able to help with some extra words or tempo adjustment

and some, well it doesn't matter what you do they just have to die that tip. You must base your flow on the music and the majority of the floor. If you are too fast for the majority then back off your tempo. Don't adjust your timing, have them still dance on the beat with the calls.

- Dick Ledger was the master who created our timing charts
- Look at number of beats per call and delivery timing
 - Calls like pass to the center – 6 beats. However, the Pass Thru is 2 while the Partner Trade is 4. Therefore, the Centers' next call must be delivered immediately.
- Know your calls:
 - Right and left thru from SS is 8 beats. From boxes is only 6 beats.
 - Square Thru from SS = 10 beats. From boxes = 8 Beats

You need to know these things if you are going have good timing in your delivery.

Go through the calls you use, know them well. starting position, ending position, number of beats to complete, number of “lead time” beats to execute.

Ask any professional dance choreographer, they will tell you...
“Timing is Everything!”