

# Building for Tomorrow

Presented by Mike Hogan  
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## How do you keep them coming back?

Losing beginners as the transition through lessons and into your club has always been a problem.

### Stats:

Two studies have happened over the years. One was conducted in the late 60 to early 70's by Jim Mayo, the other was conducted in the 90's. The result of both studies showed:

- You will lose half of your beginners before they complete lessons.
- You will lose half or those who complete lessons within two years of graduation.

### Why do you lose them during class? I don't know, but I can guess:

- Just wanted to try a new thing but never planned to make it a permanent hobby
- Class is too long
- Square dancing was harder than they thought it would be
- Didn't make a connection with other students or club members
- Other responsibilities kept them from completing
- Politics
- Didn't feel they fit in
- Didn't feel welcome
- They were not having fun

### How do you solve these problems?

- Most important is that they are having fun. Entertain them, don't just teach them.
- Shorten class length – less calls followed by workshops maybe.
- Try to have social time between tips to allow for connections to be made. You must educate square angels to do this!
- Give them more dance time and less teach time. This will make the dance easier.
- Improve your teaching skills. Sometimes it's the teacher, not the student.
- Stay in touch between classes by making phone calls and sending emails. Phone calls from the caller or a club officer will often uncover frustrations the student is having. Address those frustrations as needed.
- There is nothing you can do if they just wanted to try it or have other responsibilities that keep them from completing class. You can invite them, but you can't make them come.

### Why do we lose them after graduation? I don't know, but I can guess:

To start with, transition from class to club is difficult. Often, we graduate dancers and then ask them to come dance on a different night, at a different location, with many people they have never met, where the caller calls faster, and calls movements they don't think they've ever done, and dance with dancers who are not tolerant of their mistakes. And within a few months of dancing, they are asked to be the club Secretary. Really? Really!

### **Why else?**

- Just wanted to try a new thing but never planned to make it a permanent hobby
- Can't dance on the night your club dances
- Didn't make a connection with other students or club members
- Other responsibilities kept them from completing
- Politics
- Didn't feel they fit in
- Didn't feel welcome
- They were not having fun

### **How do you solve these problems?**

- First – be aware that these problems exist
- Second – it is our responsibility to entertain them so gear down if you must
- Hold lessons in the same location as your dance
- Hold lessons the same night as your dance
- Hold workshops before the dance to increase their floor time and expertise
- Invite students to your dance while they are in lessons at no charge and have a tip they can dance
- Make sure they are welcome by many club members
- Offer them free membership for the first year
- Involve them with banner stealing and retrieval – this will get them dancing and make them feel welcome because they were invited by a club member to go to other dances with them.
- Don't ask them to have host and hostess responsibilities in their first year
- Don't ask them to hold an office until their third year of dancing

**Building for Tomorrow**  
**44<sup>th</sup> CALLERLAB Convention in Mesa, AZ**  
**Justin Russell**

I graduated from the University of Memphis with a BA in Political Science and a minor in Sociology. I vaguely remember but often tell a story of an experiment done with monkeys. The short version goes like this... A group of scientists placed five monkeys into a room with a rope in the very center with fresh, beautiful bananas at the top of the rope. Every time a monkey tried to climb the rope the scientists would use a fire hose on the monkeys and blast them down until eventually all five monkeys just quit trying to climb the rope. Then, the scientists started removing one monkey at a time and replacing him with a new one. Immediately the new monkey would see the bananas and try to climb the rope but the other monkeys would quickly pull him down. The scientists continued switching new monkeys with the old ones until the very end when all new monkeys are in the room. Without ever having water sprayed on them, they learned to never even try. If it was possible to ask the monkeys why they constantly pulled each other down, their most likely answer would be **“I don’t know. It’s just how things are done around here.”**

Full disclosure – when I tried to look up this experiment recently, I found out it never happened. It was inspired in part by the experiments of G.R. Stephenson as well as certain experiments with chimpanzees conducted by Wolfgang Kohler in the 1920s. But the meaning is still relevant. Too many times, especially in this activity, one enthusiastic volunteer will make a suggestion only to be told “that’s not the way we do it”. As we discuss different options, let’s try to do it with an open mind.

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Over the past two decades, with the decline in square dancers, leaders around the country have created programs to try and revive the activity. CALLERLAB created Target 2000 in the late 90s, the American Caller’s Association (ACA) had a *One Floor Dance*. Nasser Shukayr, Jerry Story and the Rio Grande Valley Caller’s Association created Square Dance ABC. You may have also heard about The Nest, the Multi-Cycle Program, and the Blast Class.

The reasons for all of these programs is to recruit more dancers in the activity through a different system than the 30 year old “September classes” that lasts a year and takes people thru Plus. In the late 90s, CALLERLAB spent over \$150,000 on market research. (These reports are available at <http://www.arts-dance.com>) The market research points to two key factors: people do not like committing to yearlong classes and they do not want costumes. That is what Top Spinners is trying to address.

No one is really running towards Modern Western Square Dancing, but for the people who try it – they generally give positive feedback. What if we could develop a program that met people's need of *Entertainment, Socializing, Exercise, Learning Something, Getting out of the House?*

**At Top Spinners, our #1 goal is to get people dancing! We are less focused on a class graduation, finishing the Plus List, or recruiting new officers.**

### **Beginner Series**

Twice a year – September and February we start a 15 week beginner series. My goal is 50 “Core” calls that you would see at most mainstream dancers. We leave out Thars, Spin Chain Thru, etc. The class dances from 7:00-8:00. For our first tip at 8:00, we dance at whatever level the beginners are at. As we go further into the 15 weeks, we ask them to stay longer with the club. Once the 15 weeks are over we tell them to dance every tip with the club. My job then is to slowly integrate the remaining calls into their vocabulary.

- This does present obstacles with out of town callers coming thru and State Festivals; however, I believe this is a better product for new dancers.

### **Five Ways to Recruit**

- 1.) Word of Mouth – most powerful and highest success rate. Offer to pick them up and bring them. Our club has even sent out “personal invitations” in the mail.
- 2.) One degree of Separation – HOA, Church Groups, 4H Club, Camping Group. Find groups you or your dancers are in and set up Square Dance Party Nights with them.
- 3.) Causes/Charities (James Emery White book Rise of the Nones) Team up with a local non-profit or charity and make your first night of class a Party Night supporting that group. We do a Food Drive or Fayette Cares and have also teamed up with the Animal Shelter and American Cancer Society. Let them advertise the event with all of their members.
- 4.) Meetup.com and other internet advertising - Meet Up is a website that can be found in most cities in the US. The promoter of the event pays a monthly fee to advertise for their event. It's specific to your location. Facebook has “Ads” where you pay per click with many features to make it specific to your target audience.
- 5.) Reoccurring Promotion – Club website people can Google. A Facebook page someone keeps updated. Articles for the Newspaper. (Items not specific to the next class, but just have information about your club.)

### **First Night Fives**

- 1.) Be Inviting – Have a sign in the Parking Lot pointing them where to go. Be set-up and ready to welcome them.

- 2.) Music Playing – The moment they walk into the door have a playlist of music because it changes the energy in the hall.
- 3.) Sign-In – Have name tags handy and get their information. Have information ready for them. Brochures, magnets, etc.
- 4.) Variety of Music – This might be your one shot to showcase the activity. Have a wide range of music. Ex. “Moves Like Jagger”, Tropical Song, Mountain Dew, Braveheart, etc.
- 5.) Be the Activities Director – Make it a point to have people mingle with each other. Maybe play an ice breaker game to get to know each other. Set the tone as caller.

### **Keeping New Dancers**

- 1.) As quickly as possible have the beginners dance with club members. From the first night, we do a tip together at 8:00 and dance at class level.
- 2.) Be a group people want to belong to. – We eat a lot of cake at Top Spinners. Have a sign listing Birthdays and Anniversaries. Honor milestones in people’s life like retirement or birth of grandchild, wedding, etc.
- 3.) Theme Dances – Dancing Thru the Decades, TV Night, Halloween, Remembering Our Vets, Beach Ball, etc.
- 4.) Non Dancing Activities – Biggest Loser Weight Lost Challenge, Book Swaps, NCAA Tournament Brackets, Game Night, Picnic, etc.
- 5.) Communication –
  - a. It’s easy for square dance lingo to be lost on new dancers. Yellow Rock, DBD, Hot Hash
  - b. Have club members onboard to stop the rush to plus attitude.