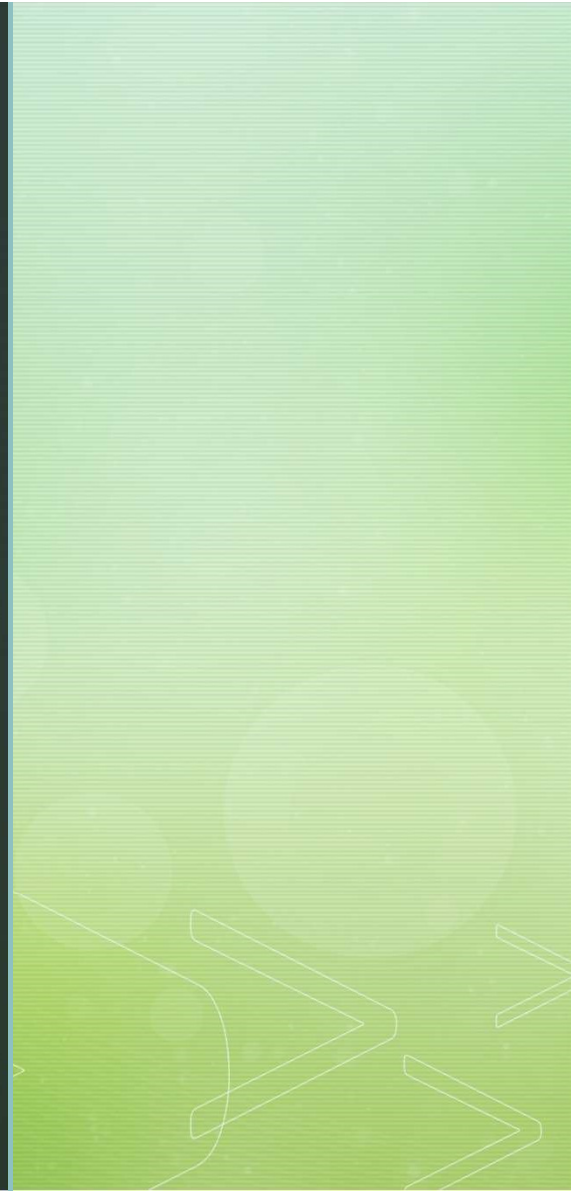# Social Square Dancing (SSD)

California Council of Square Dancers

May, 2021

Barry Johnson

- Calling about 17 years, teaching every year since 2007

- Normally teaching 3 or 4 nights per week, 45 weeks / year

- Past President of Illinois SD Callers Association, Member CALLERLAB Board of Governors

- Working to earn Accredited Caller Coach

Breaking News!

- In April, CALLERLAB's members were asked to vote on a resolution adding the SSD program to the list of official dance programs.

- Two days ago, the results of that vote were announced.

- The resolution passed! The SSD program is now an officially recognized dance program, with as much stature as the Basic, Mainstream, Plus, Advanced and Challenge programs.

So much to talk about!

- What is SSD and why are so many people talking about it?

- How is it different than everything else we've tried?

- Why are we fussing with a list of calls
when we can't get dancers in the door?

- For callers, how can we use it?
Some of our favorite calls are missing!

- Will dancers accept it? Will other callers accept it?

- What happens to my club's dance format?

- What happens to dancer portability and conventions?

- Why don't we just workshop everyone up to MS?

What is SSD?

- "Social Square Dancing" is an approach that can dramatically increase club membership over a medium term (a few years)

- More than a list or a teaching order, it's a process

- Key principles:

    - Reduce barriers for new dancers to start and to finish

    - Let people enjoy dancing within 90 days of starting

    - Harness fresh enthusiasm **immediately**

What do you mean, a "process"?

Quite Simply:

- Teach ~50 calls in 12 weeks (90 days)

- Dance

- Rinse and repeat. Right away.

A brief digression...

- Robin Ragen of Ottumwa, Iowa (with help from Tom Manning)

- In about 2012, when asked to teach a new group in nearby Fairfield, Robin chose to not worry about the full MS list. Instead, he would teach for a couple of months, hold dances, then repeat over and over. Success!

- Jerry Story returns to his hometown and realizes *this* is what we've all been missing

- He gets out his metaphorical megaphone, recruits others across the nation, and begins formalizing the approach

That success is replicated…

- As the program becomes more formalized, people across the country start using it and reporting success

- In this area (Chicago suburbs), Bob Asp takes a stand

- First Woodstock Squares & McHenry B 'n B, then Glenview Squares, then North Shore Squares, then Arlington Squares, then others…

- Repeated successes, multiple clubs, average callers, differing demographics

How much success?

- Woodstock: Membership up 60%, still growing
  beginning to accelerate after some turnover of club callers

- Glenview: From 20-some members to 90+ in 3 years

- North Shore Squares (new spinoff of Glenview):
  0 to 60 members in first 2 years, continued growth from there

- Arlington Squares: 50% growth in first two years, then Covid
  hit. Had 14 more new dancers in class at the time.

- McHenry B 'n B: Dropped the program. Membership
  declining.

Where do we lose dancers?

- Long lesson time discourages some prospects from starting

- Holidays, vacations, illnesses cause losses

- Dancers overwhelmed by complexity drop out

- Lose dancers during transition to club membership

- Lessons not fully preparing them for pace of dances, then drop out

- Long breaks (particularly summertime) cause losses in Fall season

- Long time until next start of class means friends can't start right away

- Big gap between beginners and graduates means friends can't dance with friends for a year (or more!)

SSD provides incremental improvements in all those areas

- "Dancing in 90 days" sounds much better than 4 to 5 (or 9!) months of lessons

- Can schedule lessons so holidays don't interfere

- 3 (or 4?) lesson sets per year gives unwilling dropouts a chance to rejoin "in just a few weeks"

- The call list intentionally skips "harder-to-learn" calls to avoid new dancers being overwhelmed

- Club dances are aimed at the level of new graduates

SSD provides incremental improvements in all those areas

- All this results in larger classes, higher percentage of graduates, better transition to club members

- More frequent classes quickly pick up those that need to start over, and

- **Friends bring friends!** New, enthusiastic graduates are the best recruiting tool for a class that starts "In just a few weeks"!

Not a magic bullet with instant results!

- Because these are incremental improvements in many areas, the first class is probably not much different than current classes.

- But a second class same year? Probably as big as the first.

- Now you've got two sets of recent graduates recruiting for your third class: Generally larger in size

- And then the growth really starts to show up

Moral: It's not the list!

- The success in SSD is not because of the list of calls

- It's because of the shorter lesson cycle, repeated 2 or 3 (or 4?) times per year

- Small improvements reducing losses across many areas add up

- Sustained application of the program over time (at least a couple of years) yields best results

Why *this* list of calls?

- Original "Club 50" list had proven success for 12-week lessons in Rio Grande Valley, with literally thousands of dancers completing the lessons in a season.

- About same size as current Basic list, **but**

- Most calls involving ¾ arm turns or dancer moving forward in ways that aren't like a Circulate are left off

- The most-popular (but still easy to teach) MS calls are added

Focus is on easy and fun, not technical completeness

- As teachers, callers *want* to produce good dancers

- But look at every other sport or hobby with lessons and coaching: Does *anyone* else attempt to teach "full complexity" to raw beginners?

- Our stated goal of teaching each call from many positions and many arrangements to *beginners* is really just hubris: excessive pride.

- It's perfectly OK to leave some of the nuances to "Continuing Education" that happens later

Remember: this is for FUN!

- An important point: Club dances should be at a level that new graduates can succeed.

- Callers should avoid trivial dances; use "different but not difficult" and symmetry approaches (SSD calls it "Standard with Variety" vs. "Extended Applications")

- OK to workshop something used just at that dance, but shouldn't expect people to know it coming in the door, or to remember it when they leave

- Our observations in this area: SSD dances are typically higher-energy, faster moving dances than other clubs. More "wind in the face" flow leads to more enthusiastic dancers.

SSD should be a destination, not merely the first a rung on the ladder

- The clubs that have shown large growth have been those that embrace SSD as their **primary dance level**

- Those that have offered it as a "part-way to Mainstream (or Plus)" level generally have *not* shown as much growth

- "We're an SSD club with some Plus tips" works much better than "We're a Plus club with some SSD tips".

- That doesn't mean SSD must be the *final* destination for *every* dancer

- It's OK to provide opportunities for further growth, but putting pressure on dancers to move up is counter-productive.

Now some of the hard questions!

Callers have to ask themselves:

- "Can we put on a fun dance without using Spin the Top, Allemande Thars or Walk and Dodge?"

- "Can we find things to do that are different but not difficult and still be entertaining at dances without choreographic complexity?"

- "Are we willing to give up some of the choreographic treats we enjoy in exchange for having much larger dances?"

It's harder for clubs to accept

In general, many club leaders are initially "less than enthusiastic" about the perceived lower dance level of SSD.

There are many fears:

- "We've always been a Plus (or Mainstream) club!"

- "Our dances will be boring, and our members will quit"

- "Other clubs won't come to visit us"

- "We can't take our new dancers to other clubs or conventions"

- "Our angels couldn't possibly support 2 or 3 sets of lessons each year"

This program isn't necessarily for every club

- The earliest adopters are usually clubs that are *very* concerned about declining membership, and willing to risk change to fix that problem.

- Some groups may refuse to consider it until they see someone else having success locally

- Some groups may adamantly refuse to consider it, because they think that they're doing just fine as they are.

"Think of it as evolution in action": Those that cannot adapt to changing conditions may be at risk of dying.

Success Breeds Success

BUT: Once the first brave (or most desperate) club commits to this program and shows success,

THEN: Others are more willing to follow.

And then, when two or three clubs are showing success, associations begin to talk.
… and then even more clubs change.

The soul-searching question:
"Are we willing to risk changing for a good chance at much better growth?"

Consequences of Changing

- "We've been a MS/Plus club with Lines or Rounds. How do we fit SSD into that mix?" Or "We're a Plus club with Rounds and other star tips. How do we handle that?"

- It's not an easy question to face, but consider how much floor time a new graduate would have at a typical dance. If they only get 2 or 3 tips in a night, that's not enough.

- Highly recommend that the first and last tips be SSD, along with at least half of the remainder.

- Some clubs in our area (again, often desperate at the time) have chosen to drop Rounds, or to offer SSD/Rounds at one dance and Plus/Rounds at the next. One club does alternating SSD/Plus tips, with a 15-minute round dance break in the middle of the dance

How have experienced dancers reacted to SSD dances?

- Short answer: Better than expected.

- SSD dances in this area are typically faster, more flowing, and somewhat more towards a "hot hash" feel.

- Experienced MS dancers often don't even realize that not all of the MS calls are being used during the night

- Experienced Plus dancers usually join into the SSD tips because of the energy level. Some experienced dancers prefer to dance only SSD.

- In my club: Guest attendance has *increased* since we switched to SSD, and we're doing better than we have in any of the previous 10 years
(although still not up to the level of 20 years ago)

Glenview Squares

- New format is no rounds, alternating SSD and Plus tips with short (1-2 minute) breaks, and one longer (~15 minute) break in the middle of the 2½ hour dance. First and last tip are always SSD.

- 80-90% of the Plus dancers are on the floor for the SSD tips

- The nearly non-stop action has a real "convention"-like feel throughout every dance.

- Callers work harder but generally have more fun, too. Plus they get paid more because money isn't split with a cuer, and the gate is larger than most other clubs in the area.

Glenview Squares

Don't want to understate the emotional stress accompanying their change from a Plus/Rounds club to one focused on SSD with some Plus.

It did cause a significant rift within the membership, including some bitter feelings that have lasted for years after "the younger members" "held a coup" and "changed our identity".
A few members did quit and join other clubs.

However, the club is far stronger and far larger since their change.

They've gone from one of the smaller, older clubs in the area to perhaps the most dynamic and vigorous groups with dances consistently considered to be fun, and draw many guests.

North Shore Squares

Some members of Glenview, happy with the growth and program, started their own SSD-only new club about 10 miles away.
(The first new club in Chicago area in decades)

Worked with the local park districts, recruited, and went from 0 to 60 members in the first two years, then continued growing.

Articles about their journey and success are available on the CALLERLAB web site

My Club: Arlington Squares

- After seeing the success of Glenview and their spinoff, North Shore Squares, our conversation was much less traumatic.

- Nearly all club members eventually were in favor, with one vocal objector (who has remained with the club).

- Biggest discussion was how to change the dance format from Plus with Rounds to something else

- Trying several different formats: SSD w/ Rounds; SSD/Plus with round-dance break; Some dances alternate SSD/Plus with no rounds

- Falling number of cuers in the area may reduce options

Dancer Portability

- Having a mixture of clubs in an area offering different dance levels certainly does affect "who can go where".

- It can feel lonely as the only club in an area trying to implement SSD.

- BUT: Bringing in a mix of callers can make that club's dances feel like going to different places

- It doesn't hurt if everyone can come to you – instead, it hurts when fewer groups can come

- Success breeds success: When one club succeeds with SSD, others notice and are willing to change. Now you have partners!

Weekend and Convention Dancing

- At least in this area, there are no weekend dances at the Mainstream or SSD levels – all of the special weekends are Plus.

- As an experiment, our local association agreed to turn the MS hall into an SSD hall for our two annual association dances

- That SSD hall now often has more squares than the "big hall" at the Plus level (although it's also nearer the food and has better sound)

- Our state convention was going to replace the MS hall with SSD in 2020, but both 2020 and 2021 conventions have been cancelled.

- Conversations with the NEC and various national conventions are ongoing.

But it's so close to Mainstream!

Why not take the same approach, but with Mainstream instead of SSD?

The SSD program list is the CALLERLAB Basic program,

> **Minus** Do Paso, Walk Around Corner and SeeSaw,

> **Plus** Hinge, Centers In/Cast Off ¾, Slide Thru, Folds, Tags, Scoot Back and Recycle

Depending on how you count calls, SSD is only missing about 12 calls from full Mainstream.

As experienced dancers, that seems so close! Why not just "workshop" those last dozen calls, and get everyone up to Mainstream not long after graduation?

Look at it from the Beginner's perspective

- Adding 12 calls to the "50 call" SSD program increases the program size by 24%.

- BUT: Calls like Allemande Thars (and Shoot the Star, Slip the Clutch), Spin the Top, Dixie Style, etc. are often considered the harder calls to learn. Even Walk and Dodge has someone moving to a vacant position in a way that's NOT a circulate they've seen before.

- When you factor in the increase in difficulty, the MS list of calls is more like 50% or 60% more difficult than all of SSD

But that's not all!!

- And even more: SSD is generally "standard position only", where full MS should include many formations and arrangements

- **Going from SSD to full Mainstream is about as large as Zero to SSD**. (CALLERLAB recommended teach time for full MS is **58 hours**)

- That's the true simplification in the program that allows us to teach the SSD list in just 24 hours of class time.

- Moving someone up to full Mainstream is fine – but only as a "continuing education" separate class, taken by just those dancers that *choose* to go beyond SSD.

- Even though it's "just 12 calls", it's a LARGE increase in complexity from the beginners point of view.

SSD "Continuing Education"

- Dancers first learn Standard Applications

- Callers can use "Standard Applications with Variety" by using easy symmetry any by adding some gimmicks or quirks

- Then look at teaching or workshopping "Extended Applications": Think "SSD DBD" -- many arrangements, many formations
Even (shock!) Half-Sashayed Right and Left Thru!

- Provides an outstanding foundation for those dancers that choose, when they feel ready, to learn additional programs (MS, Plus, Adv, etc.)

- Can offer SSD to Plus for motivated dancers, but it takes 16-20 weeks

In Summary

- SSD really isn't a list of calls – it's a method for growth

- At it's heart, **SSD is shorter classes offered more often, combined with the joy of the dance**

- Clubs members are often resistant, but those clubs that embrace the methodology have generally shown large growth: Doubling and tripling membership (over a few years) is not unusual

- Everyone needs to recognize that the change in self-identity can be traumatic

Where can I get more information?

- **Google "CALLERLAB SSD":** Look for the "Lesson Plans" or "Teaching Guide" – most recent revision is July 21, 2020. Contains suggested lesson plans, sample choreography and singing calls for each week, commentary, SAV suggestions, etc.

- Google "CALLERLAB SSD FAQ": Just being published, contains many questions, discusses obstacles and ways to overcome.

- CALLERLAB KnowledgeBase: callerlabknowledge.org

- Facebook "Social Square Dance" group – over 1,000 members!

THANK YOU!

Questions?

Comments?