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**Dear Steve,
Is it really
cooler near
the lake?**

Pat S.



Entertainment

Not your daddy's do-si-do

Sept. 30, 2005

By T. Grant Fitch
Post-Tribune correspondent

Leads to the middle and back . . .”

All around the room, groups of eight people stand in circles — actually, squares, made up of four couples — facing each other. Two pairs move toward each other in a bouncing step, high-five each other, then prance back.

“Now sides to the middle and back,” says the caller in his rhythmic chant, and the other two pairs converge in the center of the square, slap hands, and step back in time to the music.

The high-five is not strictly required, but it's one of many flourishes the dancers throw in for fun.

Tonight's beginning square dancers are being encouraged to find the fun right from the beginning.

“Now heads to the middle and doh-si-doh. Ah, you weren't expecting that, were you?”

Raised hands are quickly lowered as the pairs of dancers, laughing, move past each other — each stepping to the right once they think they're clear, then backing up. Some have more coordination than others, but the majority manage to go around each other, without looking, and without falling down.





This is the cafeteria of the Hebron Elementary School, and the laughing dancers are the Wrong Way Squares and their guests, people of all ages from around the area, most of whom are square dancing for the first time tonight.



Mike Argue, a square-dance caller for 12 years, is leading the introductory lesson with a showman's line of banter.



"The most important thing to remember," he said before they started, "is if you make a mistake, you laugh about it, and you move on. We're here to have fun."

And what fun it is.



All eight hold hands and move in a circle — sometimes after some confusion about "left" and "right." The women step to the center and make a star with their hands, then the men step to the center and make a "manly" star. At the end of each dance, some are sweating and all are grinning.



"This is cool," says Bethany Sodo of Hebron, who with her mom, Cheryl, has clearly been enjoying herself. The 11-year-old is one of several girls from her Girl Scout troop, all of whom are trying something new tonight, with their parents.



Earlier, she demanded the other woman lower their hands so she could reach to make the star; now, she snacks on brownies, popcorn and soda and wonders what they'll learn next.

"I saw this in the paper over the summer," says troop leader Patti Casella, "and it sounded like real fun. So, we thought we'd bring the girls, and we could all learn the right way to do it."

Patti's daughters, Emily and Bethany, and her husband Stan, are also enjoying the "family time" — and have decided with the Sodos to come back the following week.

Since 1972, the Wrong Way Squares have been dancing at the Hebron school, making friends, getting exercise and participating in probably the most mentally engaging and challenging form of dance — because you never know what you're going to do until the caller gives the command.

And then, usually, they eat.

"We tend to do a potluck when we dance," says Bill Stockwell, who has been dancing for two years.

"Everybody brings something, we get a workout for a couple hours, then we sit and eat together. And really, where else are you going to go

dancing all night and have a full dinner with good friends for under \$10 a couple?"

Larry Hakes came to an introductory dance like this one seven years ago, to see what square dancing was like.

Today, he and his wife are co-presidents of the group.

"It's a very positive and uplifting experience," Hakes says. "The four couples are really working as a team — the square is working together in unison, listening to the beat of the music and the calls. The caller gives instructions for movements which can take anywhere from 2 to 32 beats to perform. There's usually no talking, we're too busy concentrating!"

"The first few times of the new season, it's more teaching — it's definitely lessons," says Argue, the caller, who says there are three levels of expertise — basic, mainstream, and plus — and a little more than 90 different calls, or commands, among those levels.

"But most of the year, the veterans want to do some of the hard stuff, so we'll do refreshers on some calls, but mostly — they're here to dance!"

For that reason, the Wrong Way Squares run a "season" from September to May, with special introductory dances that provide "jumping-in" points for potential new members.

For much of the year, beginners would be simply lost at one of their dances — not that they aren't entertaining just to watch.

"I think that's one of the smart things this group does, that some don't," Argue says. "They're always looking to expand, to introduce more dancers to the group, and introduce square dancing to more people. You have to keep growing, or your group can really age and dwindle."

While he's got some records of the good old-fashioned "barn dancing" music, Argue likes to use a lot of modern country music and classic rock and roll for his dances. He shifts from the latest Toby Keith number, just out on square-dance record, to an Elvis tune.

"I like 'Rockin' Robin,' and 'Devil Went Down to Georgia,' " he says, "and we usually do something with 'Pink Cadillac,' which is one of my all-time favorites."

While some music is on CD, most is on special records made just for square dancing, and the turntables can be sped up or slowed down by the caller.

Many people come as couples — it's great fun with a loved one, since

so much of it involves dancing with a partner — and many others come as singles, to see old friends and meet new ones. Several veteran and beginning dancers are widowed, and just “getting out there” again.

“Oh, I love this. It’s a wonderful mixer!” Rose Telligman of Portage says. The feisty beginner hasn’t square danced before, but she’s no stranger to the dance floor.

“My husband and I used to go ballroom dancing all the time, which was great fun,” she said. “Some friends brought me tonight, because they thought I’d like this as much as they do, and they were right.”

Paula Vaughan is here from Valparaiso, trying to “reinvent” herself as a woman on her own again.

“I’ve been getting involved with ministries and church things, and taking computer classes, and I have some girlfriends who have been dancing here for a while, so it sounded like fun,” Vaughan said. “It’s been great exercise so far, and a great way to meet some really nice people.”

“It really is a great night out,” says Cherie Cope of Leroy, who is dancing as usual with her husband Larry.

“We go dancing all over, in Griffith and Munster and Midlothian. It’s great for the blood flow, and it keeps your brain going, because you have to concentrate. Did you know Paul Harvey said square dancing actually helps hold off Alzheimer’s?”

“Because you’re keeping your body active, but you’re keeping your ears and your mind active too. You have to!”

The music starts up again, and the 60 or 70 dancers are on their feet again, in different groups, again mixing veterans with beginners. They learn what it means to “allemande left,” to “bow to your partner, bow to your corner,” and “swing your partner, and promenade.”

As the night’s teaching goes on, the caller has a longer list of commands to throw out to the students and veteran dancers. He sets up patterns, so they can anticipate the next step, but he also keeps them on their toes by occasionally breaking a pattern.

“Once you learn the calls, you can start mixing them up,” Argue says. “And the more you know, the more the caller and the dancers can do together.”

There’s an art to being a good square-dance caller — he is almost painting sometimes, with the squares as his canvas, or a conductor waving a baton of words to coax a symphony of dance patterns from them.”

“It’s a partnership. We’re creating something together that’s never the same twice,” Argue says. “I never know what I’m going to say, and I love seeing what they can do.”

“And we love working with different callers, because they’re all going to have their own style. They make it different,” says Stockwell, who notes that square dancers and callers around the world use the exact same calls, in English. “We were at a national square dance convention recently in Portland, Ore., and it was wonderful to dance with other people, and be led by callers who were Australian and Japanese. Their accents sometimes made things interesting, though!”

Square dancing seems to be making a comeback, and square dance groups in Griffith, Michigan City and Munster, as well as Hebron, are still going strong. New people keep discovering that it’s a lot more fun, and engaging, than they might have thought.

The students are released, and the members who have been dancing for years get up to show off a little.

Argue puts them through their paces, throwing a variety of high-level commands at them, and singing in between.

There are the occasional flubs, but they’re always followed by a laugh, and renewed dancing vigor. No one leaves — they’re all watching the pros dance.

John Cambe of DeMotte is smiling as he looks on, wiping at a sweaty forehead.

“I’ve got friends who have been telling me to come do this with them for a couple years,” he says, “and I’m glad I did. I think I’ll bring my granddaughter with me next time — she’d get a kick out of it.”



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