

WHAT DOES GRADUATION MEAN - Part 1 of 3 (NSD February 2013)

A common statement for years has been: "Anyone can learn to square dance." Is this statement true? No!

My observation is that about 3% of all those who try square dancing cannot make it. This is not because of any physical impairment. It is just that mentally they cannot combine the call name with putting their body in the correct place.

What do we do with this 3%? We graduate them. What does "graduation" mean? Graduation in any activity means one has achieved a minimum level of skill required to perform the activity. So, we are saying to these 3% that they have achieved the minimum skill needed to square dance.

Whether because we say "everyone can square dance" and therefore it is socially unacceptable not to graduate someone, or because with the decline in square dancing clubs are so desperate for bodies that they will take anyone no matter how bad they are, the result is that people who have no idea what is going on are being told they "belong" and that it is proper for them to be on the dance floor.

EXAMPLES OF THIS. On a recent calling trip I witnessed a new graduate square up in the #3 position and then ask someone: "Is this the head position?" This couple had been dancing 7 months and they don't even know where the heads are? You can imagine how this couple did with the calls - it was a disaster.

I have seen people who have been dancing for 9 months and have been given a diploma have no idea how to do a Square Thru from the standard position, have no idea how to Circulate from waves, break down on Right & Left Thru, and have no idea what hand to put up for a Star Thru. These people just wander around the square with a blank look and wait for someone to put them in place, which is necessary on almost every call. Of course, they are also moving very slow, so this impacts everyone in the square - even those who are not helping them at the particular moment.

I heard a great description of these people: they are like liquid cement, because you never know where they are going to set up.

(Next time we will look at how clubs react to this situation and the impact these 3% have on other dancers.)

WHAT DOES GRADUATION MEAN - PART 2 of 3 (NSD April 2013)

Last time we noted that a small percentage of people are not able to learn to square dance, but they become graduated dancers anyway, because clubs are desperate for bodies and some people consider it socially unacceptable not to graduate every person who takes lessons. How do clubs justify this behavior?

CLUB MINDSET. The biggest club rationalization is: "No one minds helping people." Therefore, clubs graduate people who cannot dance, because it is felt that club members will pull these people thru for the next year or more, and that these members will have great joy in doing so. Is this true? Not necessarily.

I have had experienced dancers say to me: "We are tired of pulling thru new graduates who don't know the calls. We've done it for years, we've paid our dues, and now we just want to dance. If we are expected to keep pulling people thru every year, there is a good chance we will just stop dancing." So, in their desperation to bring in more people, clubs risk losing experienced dancers.

But because it is socially unacceptable to complain about helping new dancers,

people who are going to drop out will not tell anyone - they will just cut back on how many times they attend until eventually they do not attend at all. In other words, these people just gradually ease themselves out of dancing because they are frustrated, and the club will have no idea why they stopped attending.

One club president actually told me last spring: "If you see new graduates break down, stop the dance and square everyone back up." The president actually wanted me to sacrifice the squares that were successful in mid-stream, without letting them achieve the success of a Left Allemande.

Another reason that clubs graduate everyone is that they think the class teacher will be offended if anyone in the class is not graduated, no matter how poor a dancer that person may be. The club believes the class teacher will take it as a personal affront to their teaching ability if anyone is denied graduation. Obviously this hurts the club. The solution is for the club and class teacher to discuss beforehand the fact that not everyone may have the ability to graduate, that if someone graduates who cannot dance it will hurt the club and that if someone is not graduated it is not a reflection on the abilities of the teacher.

(This article will continue next time, when we look at the mindset of people in beginners class and what clubs can do to improve the graduation situation.)

WHAT DOES GRADUATION MEAN - PART 3 of 3 (NSD June 2013)

In previous months we have examined the lack of knowledge of new graduates and how everyone is graduated, no matter how little they know. We have also looked at how this results in experienced dancers dropping out of the activity due to the frustration of having to pull dancers thru after graduation year after year. Last month we looked at the mindset of the club regarding new dancers. Now we will look at how new dancers think.

CLASS MINDSET. Dancers in class know they must learn the calls. At least they know this deep inside. But on the surface they get no reinforcement for this, because club members convey the attitude of: "Don't worry about mistakes - we'll pull you thru." So this tells the class members that they don't have to think much about call definitions. If they remember how to do a call, fine, but if they don't, so what? Usually class members are never told to review what they have learned during the week because the club thinks this will feel like "work," which would then cause people to drop out of class.

There is also a major component lacking in the minds of class members:

PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY. I would be devastated if I knew that my lack of knowledge was the cause of 7 other dancers breaking down. But this doesn't seem to bother today's class members. They just don't seem to care that their lack of knowledge is reducing the fun of other dancers. Perhaps they have never thought about this.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE. There are several things that clubs can do to improve the situation.

(1) **DO NOT AUTOMATICALLY GRADUATE EVERYONE.** Clubs must be willing to not graduate those who cannot meet minimum standards of proficiency. Clubs need to recognize that graduating everyone, no matter how poor a dancer they are, hurts the club by causing long-time members to drift away out of frustration. It can also reduce the number of guests.

(2) CLUB OFFICERS AND THE CLASS TEACHER MUST AGREE. The decision to not graduate everyone must be discussed with the class teacher BEFORE class ever begins, so that everyone is on the same page at graduation time. The minimum standards of proficiency must be agreed upon.

(3) CLASS MEMBERS MUST BE TOLD AT THE BEGINNING THAT SOME MAY NOT GRADUATE. Explain that there are minimum standards and that some people take longer than others to understand the calls. Explain how graduating people who don't know the calls would hurt the club, and that they will be invited to take the class again. This eliminates the surprise factor. If someone is told to take the class over, they can be reminded of the discussion about this which was held at the start of class. This presentation at the start of class should be made by someone who has good people skills and good command of words, so that at the end of the discussion all the new class members are in agreement that this is a good idea.

(4) CLASS MEMBERS MUST BE TOLD TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY. They should be encouraged to review what they have previously learned prior to the latest lesson. Class members need to be reminded that if they break down they are causing other people to break down also, thereby reducing the fun for everyone. If this is presented correctly with the right words, all the class members will see the wisdom in this.

SUMMARY: The practice of graduating everyone, no matter how poorly they dance, because "we need their money," or because "it is socially unacceptable not to graduate them," just hurts everyone. It causes frustration in long-time dancers who will simply drift away from the activity. It also causes frustration among class members who work hard to learn the calls only to see the caller and club members cater to those who have not put forth any effort. The square dance activity needs to stop graduating every person who comes in the door regardless of whether they learn anything. This is simply hurting our activity more than it helps.