

A Method To Help Rebuild Our Activity

The Jackson Claim Jumpers Story

Presentation by: Kip Garvey

June 30, 2018

The current paradigm for teaching new dancers hasn't changed much since the late 1980's. This is remarkable because of the horrible track record of attracting and keeping new dances the last few decades. What has changed since the decade of the 80's is more and more clubs migrating their dance program from Mainstream to Plus, making it more difficult for new dancers to easily join the activity. Without adequate changes in the methods used to introduce new dancers to the activity, the learning curve for new dancers is steeper and steeper, requiring them to learn substantially more calls in less available time. The results are predictable. The current status of the activity proves those predictable results to be both accurate and destructive to the activity.

Quote from CL SSD Teaching Guide

"Both the need for and the success of the SSD initiative hinge on a single basic fact. New dancers must attend lessons for too long before they can dance "in the wild". The length of the lessons deters many prospective dancers and results in fewer potential new-dancer intakes each year."

Plenty of energy has been expended analyzing the many reasons why things are as they are today, with the square dance activity losing so many dancers each year and unable to replace them with new dancers. This is not a recent phenomenon. The growth curve has been substantially negative over the last three decades. The results are evident as more and more well-established clubs close their doors and exit the square dance arena. The ripple effect is evident in all dance programs through Challenge, with fewer and fewer dancers coming in to fill the vacancies of those who choose or are forced to quit

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or retire for valid reasons. What we need are solutions, valid solutions that address the issues directly and provide substantial, measurable, positive results. In searching for such solutions we must be careful not to quickly adopt a solution that is valid in concept only, even if well articulated by a popular advocate. It takes time for valid solutions to prove themselves worthwhile. Accurate metrics are important in order to validate a solution. We are here today to discuss one of these solutions.

The Program

Jackson Claim Jumpers (hence, JCJ) agreed to a five year growth project that includes re-characterizing the club as a multi-level dance club, both Mainstream and Plus. There were no strictly Mainstream dancers in the club at the time of this decision. The dancers in the club who dance Plus, dance on Monday nights and they agreed that Monday night would continue to be their Plus dancing night. Thursday nights are devoted to building new dancers. The dancing on both nights is in the same hall and goes from 6:30 to 9:00 PM, except as noted. No round or line dancing is included in the program. The breaks between tips are timed and are no longer than 5 minutes, thus assuring a consistent dance program.

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The teaching program is the recently created Sustainable Square Dance teaching system developed by a special CALLERLAB ad hoc committee. It contains 50 basics designed to be taught in 12 consecutive dance sessions. JCJ sells the dance program to individuals as a package for \$60 per person, paid on the second dance session in advance. Price breaks are given to families with young members. This gives the club the opportunity to present 3 learn-to-dance programs a year starting in January, May and September.

The Thursday night dance is split into two dance sessions. The first session, from 6:30 to 8:00, is for new dancers who have purchased the 12-week learn-to-dance package. The second session is from 8:00 to 9:15 and is designed for those who have completed a 12 week Basic package. They pay an additional \$60 per dancer package fee for the next 12 week Mainstream teaching series. They continue and learn the remaining 12 Mainstream calls and expand their knowledge of the 50 Basic calls previously learned. Therefore, it takes a new dancer 24 weeks to learn all calls in Basic and Mainstream. Once a dancer has learned all calls through Mainstream, they have the opportunity to join the club as a dues paying club member. They are encouraged to continue dancing on Thursday nights, contributing their support to the new dancers learning the Basics and then dancing the Mainstream calls during the second session on Thursday evenings.

The dancers who purchase the second 12 week package can, and do, come early and dance with the new dancers in the next 12 week Basic session for no additional charge. This is a very important feature of this program, that dancers get to invite and dance with their friends soon after learning to dance. This is true for any regular dues-paying club member as well. This reinforces the social aspect of new dancers being very willing and able to invite their non-dancing friends as new dancers in a subsequent 12 week series. This addresses the serious issue we have today of new dancers who learn through Plus not being willing or able to invite their friends because of the huge differential in dancing interests and the steep learning curve. Our new Mainstream dancers are still very close to their early learning experience and are eager to help the new dancers.

The \$60, 12 week, 50-call, learn to dance package has been very well received in the community. It is typical of other types of 'learn to...' programs that are also offered in a bite-sized limited series package. It creates other challenges regarding having new dancers 'stick' and become regular club members. However, it does get them in the door, in substantial numbers.

One specific purpose of this program is to give new dancers a chance to gain dancing experience and build self confidence in their dancing ability before moving on to the next dance program, Plus. Our experience has been that these Mainstream dancers are not at all eager to learn Plus, even after several exposures to open Plus dancing offered locally by clubs that sponsor combined Mainstream and Plus weekend dances (red light/green light dances.) After two years with this new program structure, it is only now that a few of them indicate their willingness to learn Plus. Our new program accommodates this need by offering a Plus learning program for those who want to learn the Plus calls and are ready to do so based on the caller's opinion. These dancers are offered a 15 week Plus learning package on Monday nights that we conduct on an as-needed basis. JCJ charges \$75 per dancer for this package,

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payable in advance. Dues paying club members do not pay this fee, which encourages them to join the club. The Monday night is then split into two sessions, one for the learners and the later session for the experienced Plus dancers.

Charging the package price for these learning series has worked out very well. It not only bolsters the financial feasibility of the program, it gives dancers incentive to complete the learning series. JCJ does make allowances for situations where dancers are unable to complete a series for valid reasons by giving these dancers credit toward the next series when the learning program comes around again.

The implementation

First step, secure the hall for the Thursday night program. Communicate clearly and often with club members both the details and rationale for the new program.

Jackson Claim Jumpers Class Summary

Class	Gender	Total	Grad?	Join?	Current?
2016Jan	Male	9	5	4	3
	Female	17	12	7	6
		26	17	11	9
2016May	Male	0	0	0	0
	Female	5	4	3	3
		5	4	3	3
2016Sep	Male	6	3	1	1
	Female	7	4	2	1
		13	7	3	2
2017Jan	Male	13	8	6	7
	Female	26	18	9	11
		39	26	15	18
2017May	Male	4	2	2	2
	Female	11	6	4	1
		15	8	6	6
2017Sep	Male	11	6	0	0
	Female	21	11	2	5
		31	17	2	5
2018Jan	Male	7	3	1	1
	Female	22	10	4	5
		29	13	5	6
Cumulative Totals:		158	92	45	49

58% 28% 31%

Advertising is very important. JCJ uses all available opportunities to advertise upcoming classes, newspaper, banners, club website and social media. I reserved and created www.trysquaredancing.com and use it in conjunction with business cards that promote the club and square dancing. We purchased a few magnetic signs that we put on our vehicles the month before classes start. Club members set up and participate in demonstration dances at various locations, focusing on schools and churches.

Communication with all prospective and participating new dancers is also very important. We build various contact lists for direct email contact, including a class distribution list for all new class members, a distribution list for prospective new class members, as well as a Mainstream distribution list for those who successfully complete the classes but are not yet qualified to join the club.

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Six weeks out from the start of a new class we begin the advertising blitz. We remind all club members, guests, and those participating in our weekly dances that word of mouth is our most important asset and they should begin to talk the new class up with their non-dancing friends.

After considerable dialogue with both the JCJ Board and club members, explaining the plans and options, we braced ourselves for our first class in January, 2016. We set our goals: A 5 year plan that would triple the size of the club, dancing two nights per week, a multi-level dance program focused on Mainstream and Plus. Budgets and financial projections were developed to assure the club would not go broke in the effort. All existing club dancers danced Plus, yet they now have an opportunity to dance twice a week, not just once. Dues were raised slightly to help with the finances while we got the program off the ground.

In the Fall of 2015 there were 27 JCJ members. Two of the original JCJ dancers have since passed away, 8 quit dancing altogether for health reasons, 4 moved out of state. Thirteen of the original club dancers are still with us, along with 49 new dancers, a total of 62 club dancers as of this writing. In the 2 ½ years since starting this new program, the club has more than doubled in size. The club treasury is very healthy and the future of the club is secure. The table on the previous page illustrates how the numbers worked in each of the 7 classes conducted since January, 2016.

The Challenges

The program is successful, but not without some new challenges. With the notable exception of the September, 2016 class, in all other classes the females outnumber the male dancers 2 to 1. This disproportionate imbalance has caused some discomfort in that many of our male club dancers end up dancing with new female class dancers while their regular partners sit out. We have met this challenge by having several of our single female club dancers learn to dance the man's position. They are available now to dance with single female new class dancers.

The 'sacrifice' aspect is borne mostly by existing Plus dancers. In order for them to 'buy in', they need assurances that their dance time will not be negatively impacted with the new program unless absolutely necessary. This is the primary reason for going to two nights a week, to help preserve the current dance program for Plus dancers in the club. The benefits to them include continued Plus dancing with the same or similar frequency, opportunity to join with the newer dancer night to help with the growth aspect, and a heightened prospect that the club will survive well into the future. Their sacrifices include knowing that when conditions require a cut in the program, it more than likely will involve their dancing time in order to preserve the integrity and primary intent of the program—developing new dancers. In the case of the JCJ Plus dancers, they gave up their Plus dancing in the summer of 2016 in order to help the financial situation. As it turned out, there were only two squares of Plus dancers, not enough to afford a caller and the hall. Later in the fall of 2016, with the introduction of the 3rd beginner class, income on Thursday nights bolstered the club coffers and once again the Plus dancer's Monday program was re-implemented and has been running consistently since.

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The 'package' deal presents a new challenge that was unanticipated. Many class participants feel like once the 12 week period has ended, so has their dancing. We continue to require constant explanation that they can continue to dance in one of several ways. They can buy the Mainstream package and learn the remaining Mainstream calls. Or, they can buy the next upcoming class package and redo the class. Many of the new dancers choose this option, choosing to repeat the class rather than go on to complete their Mainstream calls. Once our numbers are skewed downward to account for the repeaters, the 158 new class dancers becomes more accurately 137 unique individuals. This makes our actual graduation rate 67% and the rate of those who become club members 33%. Very good numbers by any measure.

Another challenge is closely related to call difficulty and the learning process. It remains difficult to complete all 50 calls in 12 weeks. With only 1 ½ hours of dancing each session, the new dancers have only 18 hours of dancing under their belts as they complete the 12 week package. This is not enough time for them to learn all the calls completely. The applications of the calls they do learn is kept minimal, meaning they are learning basic flow patterns more so than completely understanding the calls. This is how people learn anyway, so it is not a huge impediment. However it should be noted that these new dancers are only expected to know the calls from standard applications, certainly not from all positions and applications. For the most part, all classes have completed the full 50 call program. Some of the classes were extended one or two weeks in order to complete the program. This was done at no additional cost to the dancers.

The new dancers are treated to special sessions along the way that coincide with regular holidays. There's a 'Sweetheart' night in February, St. Patrick's theme in March, etc. It became challenging to figure out how to hold the club annual meeting where voting for officers and similar tasks need addressing. There is a combined graduation night at the end of each 12 week session where the new class members receive their diplomas and the Mainstream dancers who just finished their 12 week Mainstream class receive their diplomas and are given applications for membership into the club.

The club is now planning on sponsoring more Mainstream/Plus red light/green light dances with an emphasis on interesting Mainstream dancing. It is hoped other clubs will follow suit and likewise provide more places for Mainstream dancers to enjoy dancing. Rebuilding the activity begins with rebuilding Mainstream. The only areas in the United States that have strong square dance communities are areas where Mainstream dancing prevails. It just makes so much sense that new dancers have a much better opportunity to remain in the activity, participate regularly, and be willing to invite their friends into the activity when their first destination dance program is Mainstream and not Plus.

I am very happy and pleased to say that any and all challenges were met with heartfelt support and smiling faces by all club members. The 'face' of the membership continues to change as the club grows, dancing 4 to 6 squares on Thursdays and often another 4 squares on Mondays. We see daylight ahead as we continue to work toward our 5 year goal of tripling the size of the club to around 90 dues paying members, or more.