

Call of the Month: Why advance? by Barry Leiba

It's the time of year when square dance classes have just started, and that reminds me to talk a bit about the process of advancing one's square dancing level. People often wonder how quickly they ought to advance, why they would want to, and just what it is about Advanced and Challenge levels that make them "harder" or more interesting.

Many dancers have rules of thumb about how soon one should advance to the next level. A common one is that one should dance a level for at least a year before moving on. Another is that one shouldn't advance until one is bored at the lower level. Unfortunately, for every rule of thumb (stick out thumb) there are four exceptions (wiggle fingers). The only thing any of us have to go on is our own judgment. With that in mind, every dancer must realistically decide when s/he is ready to move up. You must be completely confident and fluent at all lower levels before you consider going on to a higher level. That doesn't mean that you must never make mistakes; everyone makes mistakes. What it means is that you must be able to do all the calls at the lower levels from all manner of setups and positions, and you must know the definitions of the figures — it's not enough just to dance by feel. As you move to the Advanced and Challenge levels, that's particularly important. It's important at Plus too; if you're not a solid Mainstream dancer, learning Plus is not going to improve your Mainstream dancing. If you find that you're often the cause of your square's breaking down, then give yourself some more time at that level.

That said, we come to the question of why you would want to dance at higher levels. Certainly not everyone does want to. As the levels get higher, the activity becomes more mental — more of a puzzle-solving thing. Not everyone wants square dancing to be that way, and one can dance Mainstream all one's life and enjoy it perfectly well. On the other hand, if you do want to have your synapses sparked, then Advanced and Challenge square dancing might be the thing to do it.

What makes higher levels more challenging? Well, the first obvious answer is that there are more figures to remember. Mainstream has some 65 calls, and Plus adds another 25 (these are approximate numbers; I don't want everyone to correct me!). The Advanced program adds another 80, so by the time you're dancing A2 you must know some 170 calls. Each of C1 and C2 add another 70 or more. And at each level, you must be able to retrieve the definition of any of those calls within the course of two beats of music.

More than just that, though, there are two other factors that add challenge to the dance programs. One is that some of the calls get more complicated. At Mainstream, the most complex call is SPIN CHAIN THROUGH; for other calls there aren't too many things going on at once, with only one or two things to remember. At Plus, there are several calls made up of multiple parts. There are more calls where the leaders do one thing and the trailers do another. At Advanced, calls like CAST A SHADOW and CHAIN REACTION have four completely different things to do, depending on your starting position in the set-up, and CAST A SHADOW can start from several different formations. That adds to the analysis required to dance the figure, since you not only must retrieve the definition, you then must decide which part of the call you have to do.

Another complicating factor is the introduction of *concepts*. You see your first concept at Mainstream, actually, in COUPLES CIRCULATE, but at Mainstream that's all you do with it. AS COUPLES is not introduced as a concept until Advanced; as a concept it can be applied to any call that involves only four dancers: AS COUPLES, WALK AND DODGE, for instance, or AS COUPLES, SCOOT BACK. So concepts can vastly increase the repertoire by modifying many of the calls you already know. At Advanced you learn the AS COUPLES concept and the ALL FOUR COUPLES concept. C1 introduces BLOCKS, PHANTOMS, CONCENTRIC, STRETCH, TRIPLE BOXES, and others. At C2, you add CROSS CONCENTRIC, FUNNY, CRAZY (you can also be HALF-CRAZY), PARALLELOGRAMS, INTERRUPT, REPLACE, ONCE REMOVED, and more. These can make old familiar calls quite challenging, indeed. You can see why it's very important that you be fully competent at the lower levels before you move up, and why you must know the definitions of the calls — if you have trouble doing FLUTTER WHEEL, you're surely going to have trouble doing PHANTOM HALF-CRAZY FLUTTER WHEEL, BUT INTERRUPT WITH A REGROUP!

So if you're taking a class this season, learn well, and enjoy the lessons. If you find that you're having trouble, think nothing of repeating the class next time, and be sure to get in as much dancing as possible. If you're not taking a class now, but are thinking of taking one soon, get out and dance, and make an honest evaluation of how ready you are to learn more. The way to good dancing is the same as the way to get to Carnegie Hall in the old joke: practice, practice, practice.