Call of the Month: How we learn and dance by Barry Leiba

At the end of last month’s column I asked a question about when we think through the definition of a call and when we don’t. Perhaps some of you are aware of the debate among educators about how to teach children to read. There are essentially two methods: the “phonics/basal reader” method and the “whole language” method.

In the “phonics” method, students are taught the sounds of individual letters. They’re taught the different sounds that the same letter can have in different cases, and they’re given simple See Spot Run sorts of “basal reader” texts. They learn to sound out the words, and they learn the meanings of new words as they go.

In the “whole language” method, students are taught to recognise words as entities in and of themselves. They do not “sound out” words as in the phonics method; rather they’re given material to read and to write, and they’re encouraged to put their thoughts onto paper, with the vagaries of spelling and such to be worked out later.

In all of this, the question that comes up is, “How do experienced readers read?” As an experienced reader, do you sound out words or do you read words (or perhaps even groups of words) as whole units? Do you read phonically or in a “whole language” way?

For most of us, the answer is probably “some of each”. Most likely, when you see “the” or “and” or even “student”, you recognise the word as a word, the whole being more to you than the sum of its parts. But when you see “paralipsis” or “frabjous”, or perhaps “different”, you probably back up and sound the word out (the first because it’s unusual, the second because it’s nonsense (from Lewis Carroll’s Jabberwocky), and the last because it’s hyphenated and broken across two lines).

All well and good, you say, but how does this relate to square dancing? We’ve all learned to square dance, just as we’ve all learned to read, and the methods of learning and of applying the knowledge are not dissimilar. When we hear SWING THRU and we’re in a lefthanded wave, the fact that we’re in a wave might make us do the call by feel, and many will start with the wrong hand, doing a LEFT SWING THRU instead. When we get back home with the wrong person and the sentence proves not to make sense, in this case we can’t go back and re-read (re-dance) it. It’s not always easy to see when a call’s being done from an unusual formation. Always be aware of where you are. In particular, since left-handed waves are “unusual” for many calls, always note when you’re in a lefthanded wave so you can react accordingly. Then, just as when you read, you can sound the call out and get it right the first time.

For fun, the next time you’re dancing try to think about which calls you do as units and which ones you think about the definitions for. Think about what familiar calls you see in unfamiliar ways, and think about how you handle those situations. Er... then think about what that call was you just missed and handle those situations. Er... then think about what that call was you just missed and why your corner’s waving at you like a lunatic.

Oh, in case you can’t find it in your dictionary, “paralipsis” is what it’s called when you highlight something by saying that you won’t speak of it, as in “Prokofiev was a good pianist, not to mention his skill as a
composer.” See y’all next month.