

Square dancers keep in step with life



Liz and Paul Carter (right) are still swinging.

(Photo by Ed Cori)

Twice a month the Nottowa Swingers, a square dance club that meets at the Blackstone Intermediate School, leap joyously into square dancing like children into a pool. They hug and greet each other, square off in pairs...then jump in.

Liz and Paul Carter fell in love at the square dance in 1989 and married. "Paul asked me to the square dances," said Mrs. Carter, "and I thought, well, it's a way to have a date every other weekend." Now they are among 12 regular members and seldom miss a dance.

"The dance teaches you to listen, pay attention and think...and not to anticipate the calls. You can't let your mind wander," said Mrs. Carter, a school teacher who seems to enjoy the chance to become a student. The Caller was George Shell, who came to Blackstone that night from Roanoke,

and who, would be on the road six nights the next week, he said, calling dances in five states.

Doug Mills of Clarksville, a new Caller, said Shell was the best in the state.

The square—an ancient symbol for the earth—is made up of four pairs of opposites, each with a matching costume. That's so the Caller can keep track of the couples as they mix and move through the complicated steps.

“You've got to know how to get your partners back together at the end of the dance,” said Mills, to underline the biggest sin a Caller can make. And maybe the color coding helps the partners remember who they came with after having their minds swept clean by the dance.

There is an unspoken game played between Caller and Dancers. The Caller doesn't want the Dancers to know what's coming next and if he senses that he is being anticipated, he throws an unexpected call into the square. If a mind is out of focus, this will trip it up.

“There's not a dancer here that won't mess up tonight,” continued Mills. “But he's going to have fun while he's dancing, that's the main thing.”

“That's called “breaking down the square,”” said Mrs. Carter. “And that's part of the fun of dancing. Everybody laughs about it and puts the square back together.” It sounds like a recipe for a happy life.

And then there is the respect the pairs of opposites give each other. The dance has definite male and female roles. “From a lady's standpoint, it's fun to dress up. It's the old-fashioned concept of a lady being a lady,” said Helen Light, who came that night from Victoria with more crinolines under her skirt than any woman there.

But just to make sure no one gets stuck in their roles, the Caller will often reverse the dance and the men will follow the women's steps, and the women become the men—which really confuses everybody, said Mrs. Carter.

A Caller must memorize all the calls being used in the western square dance, which became standardized in 1951. Shell said there were 5,700 calls, “but we only use about 200 of them,” he points out, so as not to make it sound too difficult.

As you listen to him run these calls by his lips, you get the image of a stream flowing into a garden. As long as the flow continues, the garden is alive with the movement of color. When he stops, there is rest.

The Caller has two types of calls, The Singing Call and the Hash Call. The first is repetitious, and the Caller keeps repeating the steps like a refrain.

But the Hash Call is spontaneous, and neither the Caller nor Dancers can be sure what is coming next.

One of the goals of the Caller is to keep the Dancers in a state of surrender, or grace, if you will. They have to give up control of what they're going to do next and leave that up to the Caller. They must become like children to the Caller-parent. And that's difficult for many people to accomplish. Some couples who try square dancing don't last if one of them can't learn to let go Dick Forrester, one of the club's original members who is still dancing, recalled several people who just couldn't get it.

Make no mistake, these dancers are connected with something rather mysterious: what exactly causes all this joy? Why is it that a square dancer can go to any club in the country and hug the people like they were family? And why at the end of each dance do they come together in the center of the square, touch each other and laugh with a joyous sense of relief?

And the Caller: who is he really? Like the sun, he stands away from the square (earth) and gives it light. Or like a higher Self, he plays the role of the Observer, detached and aloof from the world, yet necessary for its consciousness.

Always in control, he plays the part of the Master. His job is to give the dancers the experience of humility: they can't second-guess him, and if they try, they'll surely "break the square."