

Don't Cry Over Broken Squares; Fix Them!

By Allan Hurst - 1/18/04 (ver 2.0)

"...but nobody talks about it."

It's one of the ultimate cultural taboos in square dancing: *Don't talk about broken-down squares*. It doesn't matter if you're a caller or a dancer; there seems to be some unwritten rule that it's bad manners to discuss how squares break down and how to fix them.

If you're a dancer, have you ever watched another square on the dance floor break down, then seen them recover, and then wonder how they did it? This article will provide some basic tools to use in recovering a crashed square. (Although this article is targeted at dancers, callers may want to consider teaching or reviewing some of these techniques.)

In the real world, *all* squares break down sooner or later. (If you're a dancer whose squares never, ever break down, you probably only dance with 7 phantoms.) Perhaps you're new to dancing a given level, and haven't yet developed confidence. Perhaps there are a few "nightmare calls" that you just can't get the hang of yet. In any event, for whatever reason, broken squares always happen, at every dance, at every class, and at every level.

In general, some of these concepts aren't taught until Advanced or higher levels, because some dancers may rely on these tools more than learning the dance level.

Please keep in mind, these tools are intended for use by dancers only in conjunction with already knowing their current dance level well. If dancers don't know their calls, none of these recovery techniques will help.

For the purposes of discussion, let's assume a broken square is the result of two (or more) dancers swapping places by accident in a tip in which the caller is using fairly straightforward, symmetric choreography. (Sorry, asymmetric choreo fans!)

More than One Way to Recover

There are several techniques available for recovering a "crashed" square. We'll go through them in approximate order of simplicity, from easiest to most complex.

Remember, the point of all of these methods is to allow the square to keep on dancing, even if a dancer has to scurry back into their correct home position at the end of the sequence.

CALLERLAB Recovery

CALLERLAB's suggested method of recovery is for everyone in the broken square to return to their home (starting) positions, and the heads slide right to form lines facing side walls. The caller will either pick up the facing lines (often using the hint, "Lines forward and back") and keep going, or resolve the sequence quickly, in which case the heads just slide back to their starting position.

If any of the techniques in this article don't work for you, use this method as your fallback. It's quick, it's easy, it's standard, and any experienced caller will recognize what's going on immediately. (Note: If you're a caller or a club coordinator, CALLERLAB once published a one-page sheet illustrating this technique. I've seen it in several caller school and "newer caller" kits. It may be useful to obtain and distribute copies of the sheet to your students.)

"Half-Broken" Square Recovery.

If only one-half of your square is broken (for example, during a "spin the top" involving both sides of the square), here's a good "just keep moving" strategy. If you're in the broken half of the square, make up a formation that looks like the unbroken half of the square, even if everybody's not matched up correctly.

For example, if the unbroken half is in a right-hand wave with boys on the end, in your half of the square, make a right-hand wave with boys on the end. It doesn't matter if the right boy is on the right end. The objective at this point is to keep your square moving to the end of the sequence!

If you're in the unbroken half of the square, and the other people are having a hard time recovering, you might want to quietly tell the other people what formation you're in, and where the boys and girls are. For example, "Psst! Make a right-hand wave with boys on the end!"

Caller-Directed Square Recovery.

Often, a caller will notice something's not right in one or more squares, and will cue the dancers so they know what formation they should be in. For example:

"We should have right-hand waves, with boys on the end..."

"Centers *who are facing*..."

"We've got standard lines, up to the middle and back..."

In such cases, if you're lost, and the caller cues you to what formation you should be in, just get into that formation, whether or not you're in the correct place for successful resolution.

Those are the basic methods for resolving broken squares, and require a fairly minimal amount of practice. However, these methods just keep the square moving...you still have to scurry back into the correct place at the end of the sequence. How do you actually FIX the square mid-sequence? Let's move onto some more advanced methods and find out.

Symmetry and Image Dancers

In his book, "The Extemporaneous Caller," Bill Davis defines the concept of "Image Dancers," which are dancers who are diametrically opposite across the set from each other, and at the same distance from the flagpole center of the square. Image dancers will always be the same dance genders. (E.G., two girls or two boys.) Many people refer to image dancers as "mirror dancers" or "mirror opposites." [See Figure 1]

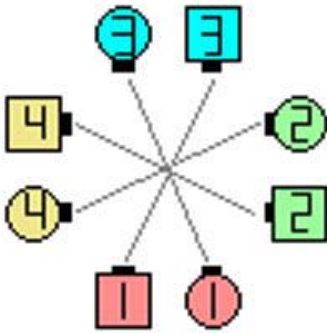


Figure 1. Every dancer has an "image dancer" opposite them in the square. If a dance sequence uses [only] symmetric choreography, then each person's image dancer will always be in a corresponding position on the opposite side of the square, relative to the flagpole center of the square.

Assuming all called choreography in a given sequence is symmetric in nature, all image dancers will always remain symmetric, and at the same distance from the flagpole center of the square. It doesn't matter what the formation is. [See Figure 2]

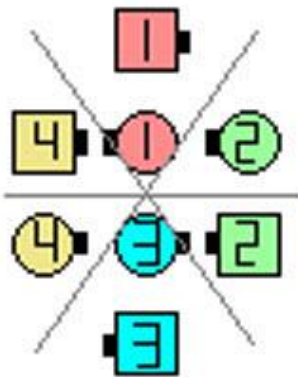


Figure 2. A symmetric formation remains so, no matter how it is "sliced" through the flagpole center of the square. Each pair of image dancers in this square is at the same distance and facing the same direction relative to the center of the square. For example: Boy #4 and Boy #2, Girl #1 and Girl #3, etcetera.

A formation is considered symmetric if both of the following conditions apply:

- (A) A line from any dancer through the flagpole center of the square intersects a dancer at the same distance from the center on the other side.

(B) Any two image dancers are facing the same direction (e.g., clockwise, counterclockwise, in, out, etc.) relative to the flagpole center of the square. [See Figure 3]

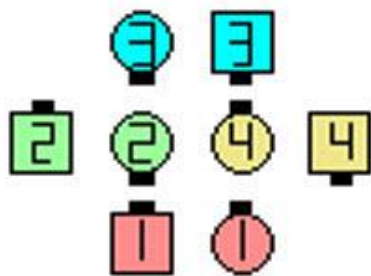
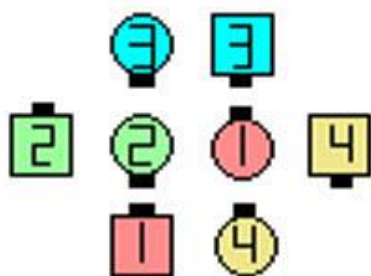


Figure 3. This formation is symmetric, and the dancers are in their correct sequence. Note that Girl #1 and Girl #3 are in "matching" positions on opposite sides of the formation. This square can be successfully resolved.



While this formation appears symmetric from a dance-gender standpoint, the dancers are out of sequence. Girl #1 and Girl #2 are no longer in "matching" positions. This square cannot be successfully resolved.

Using Your Image Dancer to Recover.

Now that you know what an image dancer is, you can easily use this concept to recover your part of a broken square.

If you're dancing in a square, and suddenly don't know where you should go, or are uncertain that you ended up in the correct spot, just look across the flagpole center of the square. Is that your image dancer? If so, you're probably OK (unless both of you made the same mistake, in which case there's nothing more you can do). If it's not your image dancer, move into the position in your half of the square that corresponds to your image dancer.

Speaking frankly, this method will only work if you have an image dancer that you know dances at least as well as you do. If you think your image dancer is weaker than you, this method probably won't work.

Using Your Mirror Dancer to Recover.

If you have a weak image dancer, don't give up - there's still hope!

It's always a good idea when squaring up to make a mental note of your partner, your corner, and your image dancer. (This is one of the reasons many callers often deliberately draw your attention to those people at the beginning of a tip - for example "Bow to your partner, Yellow Rock your corner...") Let's add one more person to that list: your "mirror dancer" in another square.

When you square up, after you figure out who's who in your square, make a point of finding another nearby square, and make a mental note of who in that square is dancing *in your position*. If you're the #2 girl in your square, note down the #2 girl in the square next to you. If you're the #4 boy, note down the #4 boy in the square next to you. And so on. All you have to remember is the person dancing the same position as you.

If you find yourself losing track during a complex sequence, take a quick glance at the other square, and see where your mirror dancer is. I've observed this technique being used frequently in Advanced and Challenge dancing, where I've heard it termed "check pointing." If you get lost, this may be the fastest way for you to get back into the correct position.

Please note: check pointing, or using your mirror dancer, is *not* a substitute for knowing dance calls! This is a technique I suggest using only during complex or unfamiliar choreography, where you think you're doing the calls correctly, but perhaps missed a call or part of a call, and got confused.

The Last Resort.

Finally, there's the method of last resort, which I've often heard termed "find a hole and fill it." If you get totally lost during a sequence, and can't possibly remember any of the other methods outlined in this article, you always have the option of standing back until the dust settles, then dashing into the only empty spot in the formation. Hint: If you know who your image dancer is, you can dash into that spot much more quickly! People may laugh at you for a moment, but at least your square will keep going.

Don't Ignore the Caller!

If your square breaks down, and the caller starts calling specifically to your square ("Just that square, make waves with girls on the ends..."), don't freak out, don't argue with the caller, just do what he or she says.

I've observed a number of callers having fun with a floor by giving a broken-down square specific instructions, then having the rest of the floor do something different, until finally all of the squares converge. ("In that square only, swing through; everyone else, centers trade...")

What to Do Next?

Don't wait until your square breaks down to start practicing some of the techniques in this article. Make a note of your image dancer each time you square up, and periodically notice where he or she is during the tip. Once in a while, glance over at another square to see where your mirror dancer is. Start being aware of where the girls are and where the boys are in your square. You'll eventually find you can fix a broken square nearly automatically.

The Point is to Have Fun.

One of the unbreakable rules of square dancing is, sooner or later, you're going to dance in a square that breaks down. Regardless of which of the above techniques you decide to use (or not use), the most important thing is to *have fun*.

When your square breaks down, don't get mad, and don't place blame. Just keep moving, keep on dancing, and keep your sense of humor intact. Some of the most fun squares I've ever danced in were broken down during most of the tip, but we were all laughing so hard, we had a great time anyway!

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Note: The images accompanying this article were generated using the CSDS 0.94 choreography program, and then enhanced using a paint program. Thanks to Vic Ceder for permission to use the original bitmap images from CSDS!