

My First CALLERLAB (Version 1.3)

By Allan Hurst – Last updated 1/23/05

I've danced for 9 years and called for 7, but I've never attended CALLERLAB until 2004, when it was held in Reno, Nevada. It was an interesting experience on many levels. Many things didn't operate the way I'd expected, and I discovered more than I'd intended about the differences between the LGBT and straight square dance worlds. (Not that that's a BAD thing, you understand...)

There's a myth that attending CALLERLAB is only for professional callers. In reality, it's a wonderful opportunity to meet other callers, and to get to know the square dance community at large.

A Bit of History

A very brief history of CALLERLAB: The publication by Dr. Lloyd Shaw in the 1930's of a book called "Cowboy Dances," spurred many people to become callers. The dances in that book had very little resemblance to modern western square dancing. Shaw held calling classes through the 40's and 50's, and inspired an entire generation of callers. From that movement sprang a magazine called "Sets In Order" (which later became "Square Dancing Magazine"), dedicated to publishing generally accepted calls and routines. CALLERLAB started as a "Square Dance Hall of Fame" banquet event in 1971 ... which led to other meetings in the early 70's, resulting in the formation of CALLERLAB as we know it today. The first CALLERLAB convention was held in 1974.

By the way ... the official name of the group really *is* spelled in all caps. "CALLERLAB" doesn't stand for anything ... that's just the way the organization chooses to refer to itself, and I believe that's how the name is trademarked and registered.

Orientation

CALLERLAB consists of three days of conference sessions, evening banquets, BOF (birds of a feather) sessions, committee meetings, a general membership business session (generally held on the morning of the last day), and occasional special dances.

It all looked a bit daunting to me at first, but CALLERLAB was kind (and smart) enough to schedule an orientation for first-time attendees on Sunday evening. Among the pieces of useful advice offered:

- If you want to eat at any of the evening events ... wear your badge.
- If you want to attend any of the sessions ... wear your badge.
- If you want to attend two sessions ... attend one, and buy a tape (or CD, or MP3) of the other session.
- If you want to attend two sessions, and one of them ISN'T being taped ... attend the untaped session, and buy the tape/CD/MP3 of the other.

With a couple of exceptions, I've only called for the LGBT community ... which means that I ran into a few "cross-cultural" issues at CALLERLAB.

Some things other callers have mentioned were absolutely true: I've never seen so much polyester in a single place outside of a bad 70's movie, and the number of dinner-plate-sized belt buckles and bad hairpieces was truly staggering.

Gender-Based Dancing?

What I wasn't prepared for was just how solidly the straight square dance calling community relies on gender roles as a cue for callers and dancers, rather than on positional definitions.

For example, I was sitting in a session that Andy Shore and Tim Marriner were moderating about teaching tips, when I realized that I was hearing two highly specific and distinct types of definitions being bandied about by the audience participants.

The first set of definitions was what I'm used to as a LGBT dancer/caller: APD/DBD definitions, involving positional rather than gender differences. (E.G., "each center and the adjacent end trade")

The second set of definitions made little sense to me, because I personally have never thought of calling that way. Everything was phrased in terms of where the boys and girls are. (E.G., "each boy and his adjacent girl trade".)

In LGBT square dancing, while experienced callers generally teach both standard and extended applications of calls, usually standard apps aren't made a big deal over. For example, I've often heard Andy Shore say something along the lines of, "usually it's the boys 'recycling' the girls, but sometimes girls can 'recycle' boys, or boys can 'recycle' other boys, etcetera."

Several people in Andy & Tim's session became somewhat agitated whenever a teaching tip was presented using APD/DBD definitions. Many times after the tip had been explained, I would hear (sometimes angry) comments such as "you can't teach this call without making sure that the boys are on the end, of the wave, or the dancers won't get it right!"

After talking with a number of experienced (straight) callers during and between sessions, it became clear to me that many straight callers teach calls only for a limited range of standard applications, cuing dancers based specifically on where the boys and girls are, rather than using dancing-by-definition (DBD) terms.

For example ... in the straight caller community, sashaying or left-handed Mainstream or Plus choreo seems to be - at best - considered unusual and/or challenging. At worst, I heard such choreo termed "undanceable." (Once callers start working with A&C dancers, it's not unusual to find extended. Non-standard applications in choreography.)

Pride & Prejudice

When I originally wrote this article, I was uncertain about including the following section. However, I wrote this article for the Gay Callers Association newsletter, and I believe it's appropriate, given the audience of the GCA Call Sheet.

I did encounter a bit of anti-LGBT prejudice at CALLERLAB, but I need to stress, (a) it was only a small amount, (b) I'm still glad I attended, and (c) I absolutely still encourage other LGBT callers to attend future conventions.

One of the first sessions attended was a session on Challenge Choreography (moderated by Mike Jacobs and John Marshall. Ken Sale and I happened to end up sitting near each other. At one point, Mike called for a demo square, and since there weren't enough biological girls to go around, Ken & I looked at each other, shrugged, and squared up together.

Mike nodded at us and smiled, and obviously wasn't thrown a bit. However, one of the (younger!) callers in the square shot us a look of pure disgust...until he found he couldn't keep up with the comparatively simple C1 choreo that Mike & John were calling. As some of the choreo became more complex ... well, I won't say he was smiling at us by the end of the tip, but he was a lot more respectful.

In another session, I was quite surprised when a moderator asked for a demonstration square, and as soon as he saw Ken & I get up to help, quickly added, "Uh, I think we only want a Biological Square, so as not to confuse some of our newer callers."

One caller who heard this story, strongly suggested that Ken and I had been two straight callers, nobody would have said a thing. I've since been informed by another caller that it's not uncommon for moderators to ask for a gender-correct square if sufficient members of both sexes are present. However, the look on the moderator's face when he saw Ken & I stand up together, still makes me think he was highly uncomfortable with two (unknown to him) men dancing together.

Despite these minor problems, I say again: I found CALLERLAB to be extremely useful, and I encourage other GCA members to attend future conventions.

The quality of the technical sessions was extremely high, although I found much of the material to be more elementary than many of the GCA Caller Schools I've attended in the past.

It's worth noting: while I enjoyed CALLERLAB, I was simultaneously impressed by the high quality of material I've seen presented over the years at GCA Caller School. GCA Caller School is NOT a "watered down version" of a "real" caller school.

The Afterparty The Night Before

One of the more curious CALLERLAB traditions I ran into was the "Afterparty" ... which takes place on the evening BEFORE the main convention begins. Kris was kind enough to point out that afterparties normally take place after dancing at a festival. Since I've never attended a straight festival, I'd never heard of an afterparty. Evidently the CALLERLAB afterparty is designed to give callers ideas to take back to their local clubs and festivals.

The best way I can think of to describe the CALLERLAB afterparty is sort of a straight version of a Honky Tonk Queen contest ... only without most of the costumes or a contest. Many short skits, some slightly off-color, but all of it rather tame when compared to an HTQ contest. (There's nothing at the afterparty you'd be terribly surprised to see or hear on "Hollywood Squares".)

All of this isn't a reason to NOT attend the afterparty ... but I noticed that all of the experienced GCA callers (such as Bill Eyer, Andy Shore, Kris Jensen, etc.) stayed away in droves. The next morning, whenever I mentioned the afterparty to other callers, they looked at me in disbelief and said, "You ATTENDED the afterparty?". I think this is one of those things you need to attend once, just to see what it's like ... and then you can skip it in future years.

There's very little actual dancing at CALLERLAB. There was a "Canadian Callers" dance the first evening, and a "Duets" dance the second evening. It's worth noting that at the duets dance, Kris and Andy did a terrific job together, singing "Katie Wants a Fast One"! (It was so good, I bought the record when I got home.)

Over the course of the duets evening, Clark Baker organized a hexagonal square that later grew to either 12 or 16 couples, all dancing to full Mainstream! At one point, one of the callers onstage said, "I don't think we can call to that arrangement..." and Clark yelled back, "Don't worry about us; you call it, we'll dance it." And to everyone's delight, they did.

The REAL Afterparty

After the dance, Clark gathered a bunch of interested people together, and he took us through a series of hex/duodecimal/hexadecimal variants on choreo, including a fascinating contra figure that was based on back-to-back squares that exchanged dancers back and forth!

This wasn't an officially sanctioned activity, but I found it immensely enjoyable and interesting. And I thought to myself afterwards, THIS is why I came to CALLERLAB: To be exposed to new ideas that I would normally never run across.

Socializing

Overall, socializing with CALLERLAB attendees was pretty easy. Since it was my first CALLERLAB convention, I was given a red-white-and-blue "First Convention" ribbon to wear. This was a nice icebreaker, and I appreciated it. (I wonder if "First Convention" dangles or buttons should also be given to first-time IAGSDC Convention attendees? Future Convention committees, take note!)

Depending upon the person(s) I was talking with, I wasn't always comfortable using the words "gay" or "lesbian", or self-identifying as a person who only calls for LGBT groups.

Several attendees were old enough that I was honestly afraid of giving them a stroke. "Yes, I call only for lesbian and gay square dance clubs..." <*CLUNK*>

If I was talking with a caller who I thought might be a bit intolerant, I substituted the “code words” of “APD/DBD clubs” instead. It was probably a stupid thing to do, but it made me feel comfortable at the time. And yes, even with all this, I still really enjoyed meeting new people at CALLERLAB.

In actuality, there were many friendly and familiar faces present: Vic & Debbie Ceder, Barry & Pam Clasper, Jerry Jestin, and Deborah (Carroll) Jones, to name a few. I also ran across about a half-dozen other GCA members in attendance – myself, Ken Sale, Kris Jensen, Bill Eyster, Rich Reel, Richard Tuck, Andy Shore.

At banquets or meetings, I usually sat with people I already knew. At one banquet, the Ceders and Claspers joined our table, which already held most of the GCA members mentioned above. A fine time was had at our table by all ... including the two ROUNDALAB visiting VIPs who walked in late and ended up sitting at our table.

We weren't quite certain they'd feel comfortable, but as soon as they realized we were a largely GLBT table, they were delighted. So much for my using code words. Next time, I'll just take my chances and tell people I call for gay/lesbian groups.

Taking Care of Business

The primary purpose of the CALLERLAB convention seems to be for the various committees to be able to meet in person, solicit opinion from CALLERLAB members, and make decisions about everything from what calls should be included in each program, to how long it should take to teach a given level. I didn't attend any of the program committee sessions (Mainstream, Plus, Advanced, etcetera), although I've been told they could be quite lively.

All of these proceedings mean a lot of well-known callers (and their partners) are usually present ... which leads to a very long string of endless announcements and introductions at each banquet or general meeting. (I believe a full half-hour was spent each evening just introducing all of the VIPs sitting at the head table, plus other VIPs sitting in the audience.)

The other purpose of the convention is bringing members together to vote on proposals. At the conclusion of CALLERLAB, there was one proposal brought before the members for a vote.

The proposal dealt with how often should all of the CALLERLAB dance programs be required to undergo a review. The current standard was every 2 years. The proposal expanded that to every 3 years. I didn't understand the significance of the proposal until I happened to ask Deborah Jones about it.

My understanding (and this is a gross oversimplification of what Deborah was kind enough to share with me) is, a few years ago, when the Mainstream, Plus, and Advanced programs had a comparatively large flurry of calls migrate from list to list ... it caused quite a commotion in Europe and Asia. By the time the changes had been communicated to CALLERLAB members outside of North America, many of the callers were already teaching dance classes – using the wrong version of the official list. (Whoops.)

The international members decided that CALLERLAB needed to be more cautious about making drastic changes to the various program lists, and introduced the resolution to increase the program review cycle from 2 to 3 years.

This made me realize that CALLERLAB can be a very political organization, and one which doesn't always realize it truly is an international group.

One of the best sessions I attended during this convention was a session on "CALLERLAB History and Traditions". I found the early history of square dancing to be fascinating, especially since some of the more elderly panel members were dancers or students of early callers! This session was both audio and video taped ... and if you happen to run across a showing of the videotape, I suggest it's worth taking the time to watch it.

There's much more I could say about CALLERLAB convention, but it's easier to reiterate that I think it's worth every GCA caller's time and money to attend at least one CALLERLAB convention, if only to get a better sense of the larger square dance community outside the GLBT community.

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