

Restructuring El Camino Reelers' Classes

Version 2.1, Allan Hurst and Kurt Gollhardt, 5/29/17

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Introduction

When I attended CALLERLAB this year, I had the opportunity to discuss our club's situation with a set of terrific callers who are more experienced than I am regarding teaching. I learned what did and didn't work for their clubs. Based on feedback from those callers and from Kurt, here's a plan offered for consideration:

Rather than the traditional class format, which we already know isn't working, I suggest that we utilize a three-track approach to recruiting and retaining dancers:

1. Monthly "Drop-In/Fun Nights" with no experience required.
2. A series of blast classes, which will eventually cover all of Mainstream and Plus.
3. Club nights with full level Plus/Advanced dancing.

Let's go through these tracks one at a time.

Track 1: Monthly "Drop-In Fun Nights"

Unlike traditional Intro Nights, these aim to be fun as an ongoing standalone activity, with enough variety in the material to keep them interesting for people who come multiple nights (including experienced dancers), including (at the caller's discretion) things like line dances, mixers, couples dances, contras, high-level calls, made-up calls, simple games, etc. Anything that can be taught and used in a single night.¹

Schedule for Fun Nights

There are many options, such as:

The fun night could take the place of our monthly Friday dance.

We could hold fun nights in place of one of our regular weekly club nights.

Fun nights could be run in conjunction with a regular weekly club night (e.g., first hour – Fun Night, second hour = Full Mainstream, Plus or Advanced).

Fun nights could be run twice a month...for example:

- 1st Wednesday: Fun Night
- 2nd Wednesday: Full Plus (or Advanced)
- 3rd Wednesday: Fun Night
- 4th Wednesday: Full Plus (or Advanced)
- 5th Wednesday: Bonus Fun Night/Special Programming (WFH MS, Contras, Intro to Rounds, etc.)

Please note that Fun Nights need not be on Wednesday nights. They could be on Tuesday nights. Wednesday is used here only for example purposes.

Fun Nights: Free or Paid?

Since Fun Nights would replace Intro Nights, we could make them free, but since we're also gearing them as ongoing drop-in entertainment, like Contras, we could probably get away with charging for them.

Some people will assume "you get what you pay for" so we might get *higher* attendance if it's *not* free. However, you could offer coupons for "First Night Free", or we could simply say "\$5 suggested donation or Pay What You Can".

Whether or not we charge is something we will need to discuss and/or experiment with.

Who will call Fun Nights?

For Fun Nights, we would utilize our existing club callers (and occasional guest callers).² Due to the number of beginners and the inclusion of various dance forms, Fun Nights might be a bit more challenging to call for some of our callers.³ However, we can schedule accordingly.

¹ This idea was lifted directly from Chi-Town Squares, who use this technique to gather names for their mailing list, and periodically advertise blast classes to that list. Temple Squares uses a similar idea called "ABC Dances", where there's a three-dance rotation of, essentially, intro nights, each night utilizing a slightly unique set of calls paired with a number of overlapping calls. Temple Squares recruits for their regular classes from the ABC attendees.

² I suggest Andy Shore would be a good fit for a square/contra fun night, for example.

³ On the other hand, this might also provide a bit of professional growth for our club callers. 😊

Track 2: Blast Classes

A blast class is a one to three day (generally weekend) intensive class intended to cover a dance level (or predefined subset) to get new dancers up to speed.

The original idea was to have three blast classes, each one covering one third of Plus, so each can be taught in a single Saturday. However, a more practical approach might be:

"Level 1": Selected Basic & MS "FUNdamentals", similar to the SD 101 nights Kurt designed and taught for Oaktown 8's.

"Level 2": Picks up from Level 1, finishes off GDP (or a subsection thereof).

"Level 3": Picks up at GDP, goes to full Plus.

We will need to decide how much we feel can be taught in a single day, and adjust this accordingly. The Level 2 blast class shown above, for example, might require a Friday evening paired with all day Saturday.

We could decide to try and do a blast to full Mainstream, for example, which would probably require either 2 full days (Saturday and Sunday) or perhaps even add a Friday evening.

Whatever the level of the blast class, *the club will need to commit to calling that level during a club night for as many weeks as it takes dancers to become proficient enough* before we can offer the next level of blast class.

A blast class will also require the participation of as many members as possible to fill out all squares. It is important that the students can dance in every tip, and that we schedule sufficient rest breaks that people can maintain the accelerated pace.

As a prerequisite for the first Blast class, students should have already attended a Fun Night, so they have basic familiarity with core calls like *Circle Left, Dosado, Right & Left Grand, Allemande Left*, and the general idea of moving through the square to the caller's instructions. This will save time at the beginning of the class, and will also make sure that we only take people who have some clue as to what they're getting into.

After each Blast class, the students will immediately start dancing their Blast Level at (Wednesday) club nights. We'll exercise all the calls they've just learned, gradually upping the speed and difficulty over a number of weeks. We could include a certain number of prepaid club night admissions (3? 4?) in the price of the Blast class, and after that they can pay the regular (or a reduced) club night fee.

Rather than locking ourselves into a fixed schedule, we can hold each Blast class in the series whenever the group (or enough of a group) has mastered the previous level sufficiently to be ready to move on. This might be 3 months, or more, or less, depending on the group.

I anticipate one cycle of classes the first year, and if they are successful, we can work up to two (or more!) "interlocking" sets of classes each year. In general, we can run Level 1 Blasts whenever we've gained enough interest from the Drop-In Fun Nights (or other sources).

Who will teach blast classes?

It is suggested that we bring in an outside caller with blast experience for the first couple of blast classes, and ask our club callers to serve as teaching assistants and/or angels so that they can learn how the format works and reproduce it themselves in the future.

My specific starting suggestions for guest blast callers (in alphabetical order): Vic Ceder, Bill Eyer, or Darren Gallina.

Although not well known as an “entertainer” style caller, Rob French would be another potential blast calling resource.

External resources for blast classes

Chi-Town Squares has been doing blast classes for a couple of years, with great success. Their board and their callers will be happy to answer any questions we have on tips such as scheduling breaks, food, price, etc.

Advantages of blast classes

- Students don't have to commit to a weekly class for months at a time.
- No time taken away from club night dancing in order to teach. There will need to be more reviewing and workshopping at club night, but many of our club members would benefit from that.
- No worries about people missing weeks here and there, or starting a class several weeks late. We can get RSVPs and plan exactly who's going to be there, including angels (with small allowances for last-minute cancellations).
- To a certain extent, people may be willing to travel farther for a Blast class than a weekly one, so we may be able to draw in additional students.
- In particular, we should attempt to coordinate with other clubs who may be willing to send their students and/or angels to our Blasts.⁴ Ultimately, we might even be able to work together with 2 or 3 other clubs to *jointly* sponsor/promote/fund blast classes.
- Lower cost vs total for a weekly class.

Items for discussion:

- What should we charge for each Blast class?
- How much do we pay the caller?
- When would students become club members? After Blast 2? Blast 1? After they attend a certain number of weeks?
- Would club dues be included or charged separately from blast class fees?
- What is the exact schedule for a blast class? Friday evening and Saturday all day? Saturday all day/evening? Saturday and Sunday days only?

⁴ At a minimum, I suggest this should include all Bay Area IASGDC clubs, CPSD, SCVSDA, and SCV Callers' Association.

Track 3: Club Nights

Whichever night (or portion of a night) isn't dedicated to Fun Nights will need to be one of three levels:

- Current blast class level
- Full Plus
- Full Advanced

As before, these would be called by our regular club callers, with an occasional guest caller.

Marketing & Advertising

Drop-In Fun Nights will be advertised via Facebook, NextDoor.com, Meetup.com, Twitter, and/or similar social networking sites, as a regularly-scheduled repeating event.

Blast classes will be similarly advertised, along with direct emails to GLBTQ employee groups (Apple Lambda, Gayglers, etc.). ("Learn Square Dancing in JUST ONE DAY!")

We could also send out press releases to local papers such as the Bay Area News Group (San Jose Mercury News) and local TV stations.

Items for discussion:

- We will need to become adept at managing social media and presenting a consistent message across all of those platforms, including but not limited to:
 - Frequent website updates⁵
 - Twitter
 - Facebook
 - NextDoor
 - MeetUp
- We will need to look at the use of an advanced mailing list system such as MailChimp which will let us track how many people open each email, link on links, etcetera. I have recently begun experimenting with this for the GCA Call Sheet distribution notices, with some early success.

What about Advanced classes?

At some point when we have a sufficiently large group of strong Plus dancers ready to move up to Advanced, we can take one of two approaches:

- Use a blast class, probably held in 3 or 4 parts, adding alternating tips of Blast-level on Tuesdays.
- Do a traditional format weekly A2 class on Tuesdays, with full A2 from 7:00 - 8:00 and class from 8:00 - 9:30.

⁵ This would start with posting of an event flyer to the website with a direct and unique URL that can be cross-referenced in all social media postings, such as: <http://www.reelers.org/flyers/intro-2017-08-16> (Not a real URL; please don't click on it.)

Potential Schedule

There are many ways we can schedule all of this. Here's one suggestion, but the board may well have other and better ideas:

Tuesdays

7:30 PM - 9:30 PM..... Advanced (or Plus/Advanced)

Wednesdays

7:00 PM - 8:00 PM..... Partial-/Full-Level Dancing

On Fun Nights: The most recent Blast level, with one A2 star tip.

On other nights: Full Plus, with one A2 star tip.

8:00 PM - 9:30PM..... Fun Night -or- Partial-/Full-Level Dancing

On Fun Nights: This whole portion is a no-experience-required mix of calls and dance forms. No star tips. We should tell people to arrive and sign in at 7:45, so that anything taught at 8:00 doesn't have to be re-taught for late arrivals.

On other nights: Most recent Blast level, with 2 quick star tips at Plus. The Blast-level portion is a mix of workshopping, review, and dancing.

Monthly Fridays

Instead of a monthly full-level potluck dance, we could have a potluck Fun Night. The potluck aspect would reinforce our image as a welcoming club to first-time dancers.

Items for discussion:

- Do we want to add a final A2 star tip at 9:30 no matter what the program is?
- We still need to determine the exact schedule for Fun Nights, regarding how many times per month.
- Note that Oaktown 8's has a standing Intro Night on second Wednesdays.
- We may want to reach out to the Committee to Promote Square Dancing to cross-advertise our fun nights, and also cross-promote their fun nights as well.

Outside Resources

If we want to get some pointers from someone with more experience with drop-in formats, I would suggest bringing in Ross Lopton-Crawshaw from Temple Squares, as he's been doing ABC classes for several years, and that's how they've brought in most of their new dancers.

He would be happy to call an ABC dance for us and sit down with our club callers to discuss his experiences with ABC dances. ABC is a little different from what we're envisioning, but it's in the same general category of no-experience nights with variety.

Another potential resource would be Arlene Kaspik from Chi-Town Squares, as she's been doing quite a bit of work to mix in different types of dancing to keep Fun Nights interesting for the experienced dancers. For example, some nights she might teach a C2 or C3 call (it's a one-time dance, the dancers aren't going to care!) or something like Sicilian Circles or even rounds.

Potential Objections

It is possible that some club members may have objections to this proposal. Some of the objections I am anticipating:

- *“But this is a PLUS AND ADVANCED club!”*

When I joined ECR in 1996, I was told that we were chartered as a Plus and Advanced level club. It would not be surprising to find that some club members may be attached to the idea of Plus being our minimum club dance level.

There is nothing in this proposal that removes Plus or Advanced dancing from our program.

- *“But this is how we've always run classes!”*

What worked before has now been shown to no longer work now. Other clubs have had to change their recruitment model. By changing their model, Chi-Town has retained well over 100 members with an extremely aggressive and healthy dance program and is continuing to grow their membership.

Temple Squares has managed to grow and maintain their membership in what is probably the most politically hostile social climate for a GLBTQ square dance club...by using ABC dances and Mainstream to appeal to a wider potential audience.

Clearly, we could do worse than follow either or both of these club's models.

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