

# GCA Caller School: Debunking Six Common Myths

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So, what *really* happens at GCA Caller School? Are you forced to run naked through an obstacle course while instructors slap you with wet crinolines? Are you mercilessly quizzed on obscure calls until your head explodes? Do they strap you down and inject "caller drugs" into your brain?

I've now been to GCA School two years in a row, and I remain amazed (in a good way) at what happens there. Last year, I attended the School's basic class without any prior calling experience whatsoever. This year, I had a base of regular calling experience to build on, and attended the advanced class. Oddly enough, the class structure/format didn't change between the beginner and advanced classes. But I'm getting ahead of myself...

When I first realized I had an interest in calling, I was very shy about expressing it to other people. A lot of people in my home club were very surprised that I was going to attend caller school, while others commented that they'd been expecting me to go for some time. Almost universally, however, there appeared to be a distinct lack of understanding of what actually goes on at caller school. Chances are, if I'd known up front what was involved, I would have felt more comfortable attending the first time.

There seem to be a number of myths and misunderstandings surrounding caller school. Kris Jensen asked me to write up some of my experiences for the GCA "Call Sheet" newsletter, in an attempt to dispel some of the fear and mystery of GCA Caller School. I've organized my thoughts according to specific myths and misunderstandings that have been thrown at me the past couple of years.

**MYTH #1: "Only experienced callers should attend caller school."**

**REALITY #1: GCA Caller School is for callers working at all levels, even people who haven't ever called before.**

The first day began with an all-students meeting at which we were split up into three groups: basic, intermediate, and advanced. There were students at GCA Caller School with experiencing ranging from several years' worth of calling to those who had never picked up a microphone before, and everything in-between.

The calling coach staff sat down before school started and reviewed the calling experience of each student for the past year. Based on the amount and quality of the experience, each student was assigned to one of the three groups. The quality of the GCA Caller Coaches is always top-notch; this year, the coaching staff included Anne Uebelacher, Sandra Bryant, and Johnny Preston.

A special note for those with little or no experience calling: GCA Caller School is an especially good (read: "safe") way to find out if calling is something you really have an interest in.

**MYTH #2: "GCA Caller School is a boot camp, not for the faint of heart."**

**REALITY #2: GCA Caller School is a supportive learning and coaching environment.**

The school's teaching format rotates each of the three coaches through a full day with each group of students. Assistant coaches are usually on hand to provide additional help and support to the coaches and students as needed.

The first thing each coach does at the beginning of each day is talk with each of the students to get an idea of what their calling experience has been to date, and what specific things (if any) each student wants to work on during the current session. A general discussion of common areas of interest often kicks off the session, followed by the coach getting each of student up on-stage, on the mike, to evaluate the student's experience and skill level.

The actual curriculum covered in each of the three class levels (Basic, Intermediate, and Advanced) is surprisingly similar. The main difference in each class lies in (1) the average length of experience of the students, and (2) which subjects are covered in more depth than others. Some of the subjects covered include stage presence, mike technique, choreography, sight calling & resolution, music selection, turntable use & technique, and the business side of calling.

**MYTH #3: "Experienced callers don't get nervous, and I get nervous, so I probably don't belong at GCA Caller School."**

**REALITY #3: All callers-experienced and new-with whom I've talked have admitted to being nervous before starting each dance, and GCA Caller School, while it can be an intense experience, is a safe environment in which to "try one's wings".**

Last year, all three caller coaches told me, "If you're not at least a little bit nervous when you step up to the mike, something's wrong." Anne Uebelacher told me she believes the nervous energy gives the caller a bit of a performance edge.

I quickly realized that if veteran callers can be nervous in front of a group, it's OK for newer callers to be a little nervous, too. While I started out quite nervous on the first day of both schools I attended, by the third day I had relaxed substantially, and was very sorry to see the school end.

**MYTH #4: "Everyone else at caller school will laugh at me."**

**REALITY #4: Everyone I've met at GCA Caller School the past two years has been very supportive.**

Last year, I was scared to death of being made fun of when I admitted I'd never called before. Nobody laughed, and several people were actively welcoming and encouraging that I was trying this.

This year, when I raised my hand and said that I'd primarily been calling from cards for the past year, I expected a barrage of laughter. What I actually received was lots of support and encouragement to use cards to work out complex sequences (especially at higher levels), but to try sight calling during the School, as a means of expanding my calling horizons. Nobody at GCA Caller School, either last year or this year, ever laughed at or made fun of me...or each other.

**MYTH #5: Caller school must have some pretty weird rituals and exercises.**

**REALITY #5: GCA Caller School is designed with a number of calling exercises that encourage the students' professional and technical growth as square dance callers.**

In that context, while some of the exercises push the "comfort envelope" a little bit, none are rude or mean-spirited. Following are some samples of actual exercises I've worked through over the past two years at GCA School. Please note that not all of these exercises are performed in every class, every year. The exact exercise and curriculum is determined by the coaches each day of school. I've been

told by many of the coaches and other attendees that these exercises are fairly typical for most caller schools, not just GCA's:

### ***Choreography***

- Write three short figures, which will ideally resolve.
- Call the choreo you've just written, and make sure it works in a "live" square.
- Coach and peer analysis of choreo to check for bad flow and overflow.
- Call anything EXCEPT the following three calls...(e.g., find alternative sequences)
- Fill out the "Analyzing A Call" worksheet for a call or family of specific calls.
- All class members hand in three pieces of choreo, which the coaches shuffle
- and then call while the class dances, to pinpoint common choreo mistakes,
- and make callers aware of how it feels to dance their own choreo.

### ***Sighting & Resolution***

- Get up on-mike and call for five minutes, not worrying about resolving; just
- keep the dancers moving smoothly.
- Each student take a turn resolving a square which the coach has mixed up.
- As a group, work through the sight resolution process on a mixed-up square.
- (I've seen this done with the students both inside and outside the square.)
- Pick out identifying features of a primary and secondary couple in the square.
- Have each student start calling, then turn the student around and continue
- calling without actually watching the square, to build formation awareness.

### ***Performance Technique***

- Perform a patter tip and a singing tip.
- Work through singing or vocal exercises.
- Talk about and practice breathing techniques.
- Discuss appropriate professional behavior, demeanor, and attire.

**MYTH #6: "I'm not 'good enough' to go to Caller School yet..."**

**REALITY #6: If you never attend school, learning is much more difficult.**

Judging from a number of conversations I've had with other GCA Caller School students, contemplating attending the school is far scarier than the actual experience. People attend GCA School for a number of reasons, including, but not limited to:

- Wanting to be a club caller
- Wanting to be a square dance teacher
- Wanting to improve skills in either of the above roles
- Wanting to learn more about how choreo works to become a better dancer
- Wanting to write choreo, but not necessarily perform it
- Wanting to perform an occasional singing or patter tip, but don't want to write choreo
- Just curious about what's involved in learning to be a caller

It's also a great way to meet other callers (newer or experienced) and begin building life-long professional calling relationships. Many of the experienced callers you see performing so smoothly together today, most likely first met each other many years ago in the same calling class.

GCA Caller School can be a lot of hard work, but every student I've attended with has expressed an incredibly strong feeling of accomplishment and achievement of goals they'd never dreamed they could reach. I personally would encourage anyone with even a minor interest in calling, choreography, or performance technique to consider attending GCA Caller School.

Remember: today's GCA Caller School student is often tomorrow's rising and/or established square dance caller!

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