

Computers for Caller Training – Jim Mayo

I learned to call back in the dark ages. When we began to change the choreography as we called, we had to learn what each call did to the arrangement of the dancers. Jay King devised a method of drawing diagrams to help us understand. I drew thousands of diagrams, literally. Today's callers have a much easier way to practice. There are several computer programs available that let you enter the call and see on the screen a moving "diagram" that shows exactly what that call did to the positions of the dancers in a square.

The program that I have used for this is Callarama Pro. It was created and is available from Reinhold Roedig. Any of these programs can be an extremely valuable learning tool if you use them properly. Although the point is not adequately made in many caller schools, a caller must know when he gives a call what that call will do to the formation of the dancers and the arrangement of boys and girls in that formation. Unfortunately, many callers wait for the dancers to complete the call and then look to see where they are. This inability to visualize the results of a call is an important reason why much of modern square dancing is poorly timed.

To get the most benefit from these computer programs and the practice opportunity they offer a caller must resist the temptation to push the "Enter" key before he or she has tried to visualize what the ending formation/arrangement will be. It's tempting to push "Enter" and then say "Oh yea, that's where I expected them to be." That doesn't work. When I was drawing diagrams I didn't have that option. The only way I could get the ending picture was to draw it and to do that I had to know what the call did to the dancers.

Another way to practice this same skill is with a game we call Who's On First. I first heard about this game from some very popular callers in the early 1960's. They were from Ohio which

was the hotbed of challenging choreography at the time. They traveled together to festivals and conventions and they would play the game going and coming. The idea is that one of them gave a call and the next would identify the formation and arrangement of the dancers after they had completed that call. That caller then gave the next call and the next caller identified the ending positions and gave the next call. We now play this game at caller schools to give students practice in visualizing the effect of each call.

With the computer and self control you don't have to draw diagrams nor have other callers to play Who's On First with you. You can select the call and then visualize the ending position of the square you see on the screen. Then - and only then - push "Enter" to see whether you were correct. If you don't visualize before you push "Enter" you're kidding yourself and the exercise is mostly wasted. If you use this tool correctly it is a wonderful way to learn one of calling's most essential skills without the need to have real dancers to practice with.