

Full Swing

By PAUL LUKES

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Square dancing may appear to be a dying art form in many parts of the country—but not so in Santa Clara County, where enthusiasts have been thinking outside the box to help the American tradition make a comeback.

Nowhere is this more apparent than Monday nights at the Camden Community Center in South San Jose, where the city has partnered with the Committee to Promote Square Dancing to launch the first city-sponsored beginner's square dance class. Students arrive early to practice for 15 or 20 minutes before class. And as soon as there are eight dancers, chances are they will pair off and hit the dance floor with each couple forming one side of the square. The class has drawn both novice and experienced dancers citywide and has been such a success the city plans to offer drop-in sessions this fall in addition to the regular class. The first group of students is scheduled to graduate from the class this month.

Pat Hynes, a member of the Single Squares of Sunnyvale, a plus-level club for single dancers, is among the regulars at the community center. When she arrived at class recently, she was greeted with a cheer from the seven other dancers, who were anxious to join the squares already dancing. The enthusiastic welcome had her beaming from ear to ear.

Though the Camden class is designed for beginners, many experienced dancers such as Hynes drop in because they enjoy square dancing. Hynes says she like to get “more floor time.”

Veterans such as Hynes help the novices perfect whichever of the dozens of cues callers such as Roger Smith, who is usually at Cambrian United Methodist Church, might give, from an allemande to a zig-zag.

In the square dance circles, Hynes and other experienced dancers who help outbeginners are called “angels.”

One dance, called the Yucaipa Twister, ends with these whimsical calls:

“Meet your partner and pat her on the head.

If she don't like biscuits, give her corn bread Want to dance?

Then promenade, boys, promenade.”

Committee member Jackie Daemion, who is president of the Rockin' Jokers Square Dance Group, says local groups have had to make many adjustments to keep the dance alive in today's culture. Groups have learned to become more lenient when it comes to mixing single dancers with couples. Up until 10 years ago, groups were divided into singles clubs and couples clubs. Spouses who lost their partners would have to quit their club, she said. That's not the case anymore.

She says groups facing low enrollment have combined with other groups so they can continue dancing. The Rockin' Jokers is a combination of two clubs, the Rafter Rockers and the Jokers. The Rafter Rockers started with 17 couples in 1955 and eventually reached nearly 100 couples, maintaining that level until the 1990s. Today there are about 95 members in the Rockin' Jokers.

Daemion says groups have also began outreach programs at local schools. Smith has blanketed schools in the San Jose Unified School District to bring in younger dancers.

Daemion says the effort is working—slowly. The number of teens enrolling in the Yellow Rock 'n' Rollers in Sunnyvale has increased.

Although there are 15 clubs locally, square dancing still is not as popular as it once was, Daemion adds.

Karl Belser, current chairman of the Committee to Promote Square Dancing, says, “The number of square dancers, square dance clubs and square dance callers has been declining for many years. Cooperation between all clubs and callers is necessary to overcome the general trend in society to stay home.”

Josie Baumgarten, who assists Smith at the dances, lists the benefits of square dancing for everyone: “Students are required to listen carefully to instructions and focus their minds on the dance, working together as a team. The dance provides long-term, sustained moderate exercise that keeps the heart rate slightly elevated as the dancers translate what they hear into body, or kinetic action, as the dancers learn and practice what they've learned in a very rapid, iterative environment.”

For Cupertino resident Anna Hoegel, square dancing is all about participating in outside activities. Hoegel and her late husband, Tom, began square dancing 20 years ago, and

when he passed away, she followed his advice to “live life to the fullest—we don’t know how long we have.”

Hoegel says, “We joined for the social aspects and for the fun, and I still dance for that reason. There are more singles attending now than when I started, so I frequently dance with Tillie Tillman, whose wife is unable to attend.”

In the 1930s and 1940s, Lloyd Shaw, a young school superintendent in Colorado Springs, solicited definitions from callers across the country in order to preserve traditional American folk dance. In 1939 he published “Cowboy Dances,” which is credited with establishing modern Western square dancing.

Modern Western square dancing is danced to a variety of music, from pop to traditional country to Broadway musical to contemporary country music or even rock and techno.

Part of the Rockin’ Jokers’ outreach to attract new and younger dancers is their visits to local schools for demonstration lessons—and a chance for the students to step away from their video games and get some physical exercise.

Almaden residents Ina and Marv Tanner started dancing in 1962 on the East Coast and continued when they moved here in 1976. They belong to the Rockin’ Jokers. “We have such a good time. It’s great exercise, and we’ve met a great bunch of people,” Ina Tanner says. The couple has danced with groups throughout the Western states and together write a column for the monthly publication *Squares ’Round the Bay*. “Marv writes; I edit,” Ina says.

Ina says there’s no formal dress for square dancing, though many women wear colorful flared skirts with multiple petticoats that the dancers “work” as they circle the square. Many of the men wear cowboy shirts, but casual is the preferred style.

“We want newcomers to feel comfortable, so we usually dress casually,” Ina says.

In addition to their weekly dances, the Rockin’ Jokers participate in numerous other activities, such as attending the Santa Clara County Fiddlers Association Jamboree at Hoover School in March and its annual hoedown earlier this year, called Circus Circus, where many of the dancers donned clown costumes in lieu of Western attire.



Photograph by Vicki Thompson

Rockin’ Jokers Dance: Members of the Rockin’ Jokers square dance club get together with other local groups for a monthly dance at Hyde Middle School in Cupertino. The Rockin’ Jokers are the only South San Jose club. Members come from Almaden Vallley, Branham and Cambrian.



Photograph by Vicki Thompson

Patriotic Steps: Jackie Daemion, president of the Rockin' Jokers square dance group, spins with dance partner Ray Bareiss. Now that she's retired, Daemion dedicates most of her time to promoting square dancing. Her South San Jose-based dance group has 95 members who come primarily from Almaden Valley, Branham and Cambrian.



Photograph by Vicki Thompson

On the Floor: Mary Lou Watkins and Ralph Watkins (right) form one corner of the square during a dance with several dance clubs May 30.



Photograph by Vicki Thompson

Cornered: Janna Standridge dances to the caller's directions during a recent first class mail and \$15 e-mail. dance at Hyde Middle School



Photograph courtesy of Rockin' Jokers

Dance Tradition: Almaden Valley residents Marv and Ina Tanner celebrate Valentine's Day 2006 with a dance. The couple has been square dancing together for more than 45 years.

Want to Dance?

The current CPSD class, with caller/teacher Roger Smith, will be complete at the end of June, with a drop-in dance program at Camden Community Center on Tuesdays from 6:30 to 9 p.m. during July, August and September. The San Jose Department of Parks, Recreation and Neighborhood Services is sponsoring the class. For more information, call program specialist Bridget McKay at 408. 559.8553.

The square dance community will be dancing exhibitions in several places over the summer, including:

Aug. 1-5 at Santa Clara County Fair and Labor Day Weekend at the Tapestry Art Festival. The next beginner's class at Camden Community Center is scheduled to begin Sept. 18. For more details, visit Rockin' Jokers at www.rockinjokers.com or Committee To Promote Square Dancing at www.c-p-s-d.org.

Squares 'Round the Bay lists all local square dance events and is published 11 times each year by Erin and Scot Byars, editor@srtb.net, for \$20.

Square Dancing's History

As long as 400 years ago, square dancing was common in France and throughout Europe and was first described in 17th-century England, where some of the traditional dances included Morris dances and country dances. The French developed the *contredanse francais* or cotillon (later changed to cotillion), a dance done in a square formation with eight dancers. "Allemande" and "promenade" are both French words that connect these dance moves to their origin, though the caller is America's unique contribution to the square dance. Today, square dancing is enjoyed around the world, and 19 U.S. states have designated it as their official state dance. And if you should happen to find a square dance group anywhere in Europe, or even Japan or China, the callers all use English because square dancing is the American folkdance.