

THE 19 MAINSTREAM LESSON CHALLENGE: NEW WAYS TO ATTRACT AND KEEP BEGINNERS

CALLERLAB's decision to establish 19 lessons as the recommended pathway for new dancers to achieve competency in Mainstream dancing presents clubs with an important challenge—and an opportunity.

We know that learning to square dance takes time. New dancers need to develop skills, learn calls, understand how movements fit together, and gain enough confidence to participate successfully in Mainstream dancing. We want people to become competent dancers, not simply learn a handful of calls and be sent out onto the dance floor unprepared.

But here's the challenge: How do we attract people who have never square danced when the first thing we ask is to commit to a five-month lesson program?

Today's potential dancers have many choices about how they spend their time. They may want to try something new, meet people, get some exercise, or find an enjoyable activity to share with a partner, but they may be reluctant to commit to a lengthy program before they know whether they will enjoy it.

That doesn't mean they aren't interested in square dancing. It may simply mean we're asking for too much commitment too soon.

The answer isn't to shorten the learning process or compromise the skills new dancers need to become competent Mainstream dancers. The answer is to change how we introduce people to the learning process.

You don't have to lead with a five-month commitment. You can create easy, progressive entry points that let people experience square dancing, discover they enjoy it and gradually commit to the full Mainstream program.

Traditional approach:

NEW BEGINNER SQUARE DANCE CLASS!
Join us for 19 lessons and learn everything you need to become a Mainstream square dancer!

A more effective approach fortoday'ss potential dancers:

"Looking for something fun and different to do? Try square dancing! Meet new people, enjoy great music, get moving, and discover an activity you might love. No experience necessary!"

Both invitations can lead to the same learning program. But they approach potential dancers from entirely different perspectives.

The first sells the obligation. The second sells the experience.

People don't necessarily want another class, course, or long-term obligation. They want to know what's in it for them. They want to experience something before deciding whether they want more.

Our job is to get them interested enough to take that first step.

Create Progressive Entry Points

Instead of presenting the entire Mainstream program as one large commitment, break the experience into smaller, achievable stages.

This doesn't mean creating separate courses that leave people stuck. It means designing a series of entry points and milestones that keep people moving toward the same destination.

Three approaches clubs can consider.

Try It. Love It. Keep Going...

Start with a short introductory experience that lets people try square dancing without committing to the full program.

Stage 1: The Invitation

Offer a free introductory dance or open house. Let people experience the music, movement, and social interaction. Allow them to discover what square dancing actually feels like.

Marketing examples:

- Try Square Dancing! No Experience Necessary.
- Have Fun & Discover Something New!
- Looking for Something Fun to Do? Give Square Dancing a Try!

Stage 2: The Introduction (Lessons 1–3)

Invite participants to continue with a three-session introductory series. Make these sessions especially welcoming, engaging, and enjoyable.

At the end of the series, explain what they have learned and invite them to continue developing their skills.

Stage 3: The Learning Journey (Lessons 4–19)

Continue the structured learning program, introducing new skills and calls while reinforcing what participants have already learned. Celebrate milestones along the way. Help participants see their progress and understand what they are working toward.

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The initial three sessions are not a substitute for the full Mainstream program. It's a chance to see whether they want to pursue square dancing.

The Square Dance Challenge

Some people respond well to goals, milestones, and a sense of accomplishment. Turn the learning experience into a series of achievable challenges.

Break the 19 lessons into five stages:

Stage	Lessons	Milestone
Give It a Go	1–3	Discover the fun of square dancing
Getting Comfortable	4–7	Develop basic skills and confidence
Finding Your Rhythm	8–11	Put more calls and movements together
Becoming a Dancer	12–15	Build dancing skills and familiarity
Mainstream Ready	16–19	Complete the learning program and demonstrate competency

Milestones should reflect the actual curriculum and learning objectives, not simply the number of lessons completed.

Celebrate achievements with certificates, recognition, group photos, special dances, or small social events.

Marketing examples:

- Could You Learn to Square Dance? Take the Challenge!
- Your Next Favorite Hobby Might Surprise You.
- Learn Something New. Meet New People. Have Fun!





The objective is to make learning feel like progress, not an extended obligation.

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The Square Dance Social Club

People often join activities because of the people they meet and the friendships they build. The dancing is the activity, but the community may be what keeps them coming back.

Build the social experience into the learning program from the beginning.

- Allow time for socializing before or after lessons.
- Organize occasional pizza nights, game nights, or group outings.
- Create a communication group for new dancers.
- Pair experienced dancers with newcomers as welcoming partners.
- Celebrate learning milestones together.
- Encourage friendships outside the lesson environment.

Marketing examples:

- Meet New People. Try Something Different. Have Some Fun.
- Your Social Life Could Use a few new moves.
- Looking for Something Fun to Do Together?



Don't make people wait until they graduate to feel like members of the dancing community. Help them feel welcome and connected from their very first visit.

Market the Experience, Not the Curriculum

One of the biggest mistakes clubs make is advertising lessons from the perspective of people who already know and love square dancing.

We talk about calls, programs, levels, lessons, and how long it takes to become a dancer. But non-dancers don't know what Mainstream means. They don't know what a caller does, what a square is, or why they should care about learning a particular set of calls.

They want to know:

- Will I have fun? Will I meet people?
- Can I participate without experience?
- Do I need a partner? Can I do this with my spouse or friends?
- Will I feel comfortable and welcome?
- Is it worth giving up an evening to try?

Lead with the benefits, not the technical details.

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Focus your marketing on:

- Fun and enjoyment.
- Friendship and social connections.
- Music and movement.
- An opportunity to try something different.
- An activity people can enjoy together.
- A welcoming community.
- The satisfaction of learning something new.

Avoid leading with lengthy descriptions of the lesson curriculum, the number of calls, or the amount of time required to complete the program.

Those details have their place. They just shouldn't be the first thing a prospective dancer sees.



Make It Easy to Say Yes

Consider the obstacles a potential dancer might face before attending a lesson.

A club can have a wonderful program, but if getting started feels complicated, people may never show up.

Make the first experience easy to access.

- Offer free introductory opportunities.
- Provide a clear date, time, location, and directions.
- Make registration simple.
- Explain what to wear.
- Clearly state whether a partner is needed.
- Explain that no previous experience is necessary.

Make the first experience welcoming.

- Have someone greet newcomers at the door.
- Introduce them to other participants.
- Avoid overwhelming them with too much information.
- Don't make them feel like outsiders watching an established club.
- Let them experience the fun before explaining all the rules.

Make continuing easy.

- Explain the next step before participants leave.
- Provide a clear schedule of upcoming sessions.
- Communicate between lessons.
- Make it easy to ask questions.
- Have a plan for helping people catch up if they miss a session.

Every unnecessary obstacle is another reason someone might decide not to return.

Keep People Engaged Throughout the 19 Lessons

Getting people through the door is only the beginning.
Clubs need to give participants reasons to keep coming back.

Don't assume that because someone signed up,
they are automatically committed to finishing.

People need to see progress, feel successful, and develop connections.

Consider these strategies:

- Celebrate progress. Recognize what participants have learned. Don't wait until graduation to acknowledge their accomplishments.
- Make learning enjoyable. Avoid turning lessons into repetitive drills or making newcomers feel embarrassed when they make mistakes. Learning takes practice, and mistakes are part of the process.
- Create social connections. Encourage experienced dancers to welcome and support newcomers.
- Communicate regularly. Send reminders, encouragement, and information about upcoming activities. Make participants feel that their attendance matters.
- Explain the purpose of continuing. Help people understand that each lesson builds on previous learning and contributes to their ability to dance Mainstream successfully.
- Make the destination visible. Talk about the opportunities awaiting them when they complete the program. Show them that they are becoming part of a larger dancing community.

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Clubs Must Be Willing to Change How They Deliver Lessons

A different marketing approach won't accomplish much if the club keeps delivering lessons exactly as it always has.

If we're going to invite people into the program through smaller entry points, we need to make sure the organization can support that approach.

Clubs should consider:

- Offering introductory opportunities more than once a year.
- Developing a consistent introductory experience that can be repeated.
- Establishing a clear process for moving participants from introductory sessions into the continuing Mainstream program.
- Providing reasonable opportunities for participants to catch up when they miss a lesson.
- Making sure callers and club volunteers understand the importance of welcoming newcomers.
- Incorporating social activities into the learning experience.
- Tracking how many people attend introductory events, how many continue, and how many complete the Mainstream program.

Clubs should also be realistic about their resources. A three-session introductory experience requires planning, caller availability, welcoming volunteers, and a clear pathway to continue.

The objective is not to create more complicated programs. It is to create a more effective way of bringing people into the program we already need to deliver.

Be Honest About the Commitment — At the Right Time

There is an important distinction between hiding the length of the learning program and not making it the centerpiece of the initial invitation.

We should be transparent with people about what it takes to become competent Mainstream dancers.

When someone expresses interest in continuing after an introductory experience, explain the learning pathway, the expected schedule, and the importance of consistent attendance.

Help them understand why the full program matters.
But allow them to experience square dancing
before asking them to make that commitment.

Think of it this way:

1. **First, invite them to try it.**
2. **Then give them a reason to keep going.**
3. **Finally, help them commit to becoming competent dancers.**

That is a much more inviting progression than asking someone to commit to five months of lessons before they have ever danced.

How Do You Know If It's Working?

Clubs should evaluate more than the number of people who register for lessons.

Track the entire journey:

Measure	What It Tells You
Introductory event attendance	Are we attracting interest?
First-to-third-session retention	Are people enjoying the experience enough to return?
Continuation into the full program	Are we successfully converting interest into commitment?
Attendance throughout the program	Are people staying engaged?
Mainstream competency	Are participants achieving the intended learning outcome?
Participation after graduation	Are we building long-term dancers and club members?

This information will help clubs identify where people are dropping out and where changes might improve results.

For example, a club might discover that attracting people isn't the problem.
Perhaps people attend the introductory sessions but don't continue.
That suggests the club needs to examine the experience,
the transition into the full program, or
the way it communicates the value of continuing.

Marketing and lesson delivery must work together.

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The Bottom Line: Don't Change the Destination. Change the Journey.

We need people to learn enough to become competent Mainstream dancers. That requires a structured learning process, time, practice, and commitment.

But we don't have to make that entire commitment the price of admission.

Today's potential dancers are accustomed to trying new things, exploring opportunities, and making decisions as they go. We need to recognize that reality and adapt how we introduce them to square dancing.

A five-month learning program doesn't have to mean a five-month commitment before someone starts.

We can create easy entry points, enjoyable introductory experiences, achievable milestones, and opportunities to develop friendships along the way. Each step can lead naturally to the next, ultimately accomplishing the same educational goal.

The challenge isn't to convince more people to sign up for 19 lessons. It's to give more people a reason to take the first lesson — and enough reasons to keep coming back until they become competent dancers.

Let's stop making the length of our learning program the first thing people have to overcome. Let's start by giving them an experience they'll want to repeat.

